# DEVELOPING + SHARING

## BEST PRACTICE: some key issues and principles

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Having agreed to make the keynote presentation at MMU's (Cheshire) Learning and Teaching Conference this year, I was faced with the task of fashioning an effective way of disseminating my ideas about the topic. It was not easy. As a educational practitioner I am constantly considering, albeit often sub-consciously, how I might be a more effective teacher for students and for staff and, as an educational researcher, I am fascinated by the different responses to learning challenges faced by staff and students. The presentation began to take shape during a workshop tour of China and the Philippines in which I was very aware of the effect of different cultures on definitions of best practice and ways in which this might be shared. Almost inevitably I came back to thinking about, and presenting, some of the key principles and issues that I feel underpin decisions about what is best practice, how it can be shared and, importantly, how it can be implemented. I use two examples from my experience as illustration.

## Developing best practice

Most of us have a sense of what is good practice in learning and teaching, based on centuries of educational practice and research. Best practice remains, however, elusive and dependent on contextual factors, understood by individuals differently depending on their individual perspectives. Our knowledge is also often implicit and we tend to rely on intuition rather than systematic enquiry to develop best practice. When asked to **share** our best practice the challenge is to bring the rationale and method to a communicable, explicit level which, whenever possible, is presented in a form that is perceived as achievable to the receiving teacher. In this article, when considering how to become more effective as a teacher, I suggest that there are some key principles that should be applied to the process.

### Situational analysis

The first is that a situational analysis is a necessary pre-requisite for a decision to change. Teachers must have identified a need for adjustment to their existing practice and know why that change makes sense, for all those involved, within their context. I have worked with teachers who have decided to change their mode of assessment from a literature review or essay to a computer-marked multiple choice questionnaire (MCQ). The rationale made for this change might be that a formal examination reduces the likelihood of students plagiarising and cuts down the staff marking load from several days to, in this case, no time at all. However, in one discussion the member of staff was unaware of how long it takes to construct (each year) an MCQ that effectively assesses critical and analytical learning outcomes and was unwilling to apply effort into the process. In another case the member of staff was committed to putting considerable effort into ensuring that a very challenging MCQ, with several excellent features, was developed. Best practice in this case was not the MCQ versus the literature review but the context within which the change was made – a context which includes the teacher and the students as well as the physical environment.

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### Relevant theory and research

The second point that I want to make is that best practice can only be developed through a consideration of relevant theory and research. Good practice might emerge from practice but if it is to become best practice there needs to be a theory and, or, research base to inform the creation. For most of us, educational theory and research provide a useful starting point, but often publications in our particular discipline are also a framework for our thinking. That is easy for me as my discipline is psychology which is, of course, concerned with the why and how of people's behaviour, but there are many examples in the literature of ways in which teachers have applied disciplinary perspectives to their practice. As teachers in Higher Education we are all in a research-oriented culture and have systematic research skills which we should apply to our educational practice.

### Experience

Thirdly, our decisions to change our teaching should also be informed and reinforced by experience. Those of us who have been around for a long time often underestimate the extent to which we use our experience-based understanding to adjust our practices - understandings not always available to new teachers. Whilst experience cannot replace theory and research, often it is the powerful combination of these knowledge sources that enable us to develop best practice and, importantly, avoid painful and long-winded trial and error attempts. By using our experiences of teaching and of our own learning we can ensure that we are not creating what McLaughlin (1999) described as 'lethal mutations' – changes to our practices that have negative and important consequences for us or for the students. Indeed Trowler, Saunders, and Knight (2003) recommend that small, incremental changes are preferable to more sweeping attempts to improve practice. Minor adjustments, whilst not earth-shattering in their outcomes, are often more successful than bigger changes and serve as the building blocks for greater innovation. When engaging with staff in discussions about their annual review of teaching, I often suggest that an incremental approach to change is advisable, particularly where the adjustments to be made are complex, require considerable skill on the part of the teacher or are likely to affect the outcomes of students learning at a crucial point. For instance, I encourage teachers to take particular care over the design and extent of innovations when teaching final year students as these students are often very anxious about their marks and their opportunities to maximise these. For final year students any perceived unfairness of learning method or assessment is of far more importance than in previous levels.

### Reflective practice

Finally, in this section, I highlight the importance of reflective practice which is an essential component of all teaching and all learning. For most of us, engaging in a review of our activities is habitual and often not systematic but, when changes are being planned, the process needs to be more explicit and structured. I will return to this in a later section.

## Sharing best practice

The process of communicating best practice is one with which we are all engaged and each of us will have a preference for a particular mode. I prefer to watch someone, not necessarily an expert, demonstrating new ways of approaching teaching, and seeing the responses of learners to these approaches. As an observer (at Bangor we all take part in a peer observation of teaching scheme) I often feel that I learn as much about best practice as does the observed teacher and strongly recommend this activity for both participants. In my University the aim of the scheme is to encourage peer-supported review, the outcomes of which are used by the individual teacher to inform personal development. It is not used as a management tool to monitor performance. Team teaching has a similar effect, providing an opportunity for staff to discuss with, or observe, the teaching of a peer or the issues associated with a module. This powerful effect of modelling and vicarious learning is well-established in the literature with Bandura's Social Learning Theory providing a theoretical base (see, for instance, Bandura, 1997). A similar dissemination of ideas occurs whenever staff discuss issues and practices. This may occur during a more formal meeting between a teaching mentor and a new member of staff (at Bangor the annual review of modules provides such a forum) or in the less formal 'corridor discussions'. It often occurs when staff identify problems to be solved and seek out others with whom ideas can be shared. I find that a reliance on written documents that describe and encourage best practice in teaching is less satisfactory than seeing it in practice although, as a peer reviewer for some

journals I have absorbed some interesting ideas from reviewed papers. Policies and guidelines can be used to help us think through issues and the existence of 'how to do..' books on our shelves allows us to ensure that we are not re-inventing well-honed practices. Indeed, having developed an idea about change, it is sensible to refer to published information to find out how it can help us.

## Implementing best practice

In this section my discussion is very much influenced by my research discipline – that of psychology – and by thirty years of teaching experience across different sectors. It is a very personal view of the factors which affect the implementation of best practice and I do not pretend that it is the only view. As important as having the documents and models that indicate how we might enhance our practice, is the work climate that enables and encourages us to change.

### Shared values & intentions

Teachers in a Higher Education society, as in other learning contexts, are part of a much larger, value-laden culture which affects intentions and behaviours. Bronfenbrenner's (1998) Ecological Systems Theory depicts this as a layered structure like an onion with some layers in close contact with each other and others creating an influence from the outside inwards. Our culture wraps us in a particular set of implicit and explicit values and expectations such as the extent to which study in Higher Education is important and at what life-stage it should occur. These values are transmitted and adapted through levels of political and society structures which might control education through funding and resources as well as values. Society's values, intentions and expectations are reflected by Universities which, whether they are public or private institutions, are reliant on external funding. For both the individual student and University teacher, at the centre of the model, contact with politicians and with the University managers, is limited, although their influence is often strongly felt through the structure of the learning environment. Understanding of the values and intentions of the University is disseminated through the attitudes and behaviours of other staff and other students. The extent to which there is an 'upward' flow of influence to staff and, through them to University managers, might depend on the sensitivity of higher levels to student and teacher opinion.

Whilst definitions of best practice are clearly affected by the shared values and intentions of the people with whom we work closely they are also affected by those with whom we have no direct contact but who determine the wider society's values and purposes. For instance, in a School or Department in which high value is placed on small group teaching, a University decision to require all staff to be research-active, for Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) purposes, might create a challenge to the School's values and intentions and to what, in future, is defined as best practice.

This notion of value is an important feature of theories of motivation. For hard-pressed academics to enthusiastically commit themselves to a search for the constantly-changing 'best practice', I argue that motivation must have a strong and internalised value-base. Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory emphasises the need for motivation at the intrinsic end of the motivational continuum if we are to persist when situations become difficult. Intrinsic motivation is defined by the extent to which reasons for choosing to behave in a particular way are valued personally. A strong internalisation of motivation leads to strength of purpose, willingness to accept challenge and a high expectation of success. At the extreme end of the extrinsic motivational continuum, external regulation is characterised by the recognition that we need to do something but hat it is not something that we personally value. When the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) began its Subject Review inspections, we complied because we had no choice and so the behaviour regulation was external. Most of us, having lived through the process, now accept some of the required activities as valuable and are more intrinsically motivated to do them. Higher student recruitment, at a national level, is not what most of us would have freely chosen to do and so initially it was externally motivated by the Funding Councils and the Government. We have adjusted our procedures and teaching to accommodate higher numbers of often less-well qualified students. Although we might not choose to do this we are motivated to act because we are required to and because funding of our activities relies on it. Similarly, our Universities make demands on us that, as their employees, we are bound to meet and these, to some extent, determine Departmental policy and practice. Where we have the opportunity to choose how we work, our personal values will take precedence over the values of others. Despite a sense that autonomy in higher

education context has been eroded, I believe that most of us still experience a considerable amount of control within the classroom and are able to appropriately develop our practice to enhance learning if this is important to us.

### Professional awareness

Radio 4 listeners will probably remember the Donald Rumsfeld soundbites that were eagerly awaited each week. In one famous speech he confusingly and elaborately expressed what is, in fact, quite a profound notion – that of the difference between 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns' (as I write you can access the actual recording on the BBC, Radio 4 website by searching 'Rumsfeld'). In my presentation, I suggested that one of the characteristics of professionals is that they are aware that they do not know everything about their profession and its practice but are aware that other possibilities for practice exist (i.e. Rumsfeld's known unknowns). This is professional awareness which might be considered a necessary starting point for developing best practice. Having identified the need to enhance practice, the professional individual must perceive him or herself as being competent to implement the necessary changes and be sufficiently intrinsically motivated and committed to investigate possible ways forward.

### Support and reinforcement

As with any learners, there must be sufficient support for change to occur. The support and reinforcement may be from a number of sources. Internal evaluations such as perceptions of competence (e.g. Harter, 1990) enable us to decide for ourselves whether we possess the skills and abilities that will enable us to succeed. Sometimes we need reinforcement from others to encourage us if we are uncertain about our competence, reinforcement which can be explicit (e.g. social persuasion) or implicit, as in vicarious learning (e.g. Bandura, 1997). The reinforcement also has to be developmentally appropriate and credible. For instance, there is no point in me trying to persuade beginning teachers that they will be able to apply peer assessment techniques as effectively as I do with students as I have had many more years of experience than they. I can, however, help them to develop peer assessment processes that are achievable at their level of expertise and provide them with the support to try them. Having had an initial attempt at an innovation, the support from a mentor continues with a review of the effectiveness of the process and

another, adjusted implementation. The importance of practice with feedback, for all learners, is an essential element in the development of best practice.

For teaching staff, developing, implementing and sharing best practice takes time. Although some of it is an inherent part of the teaching role, the weight of a normal teaching load during term time and the research imperative during student vacations, can severely limit the time available to stop and think. Time that creates opportunity has to be factored into the equation, together with incentive, preferably personal but also explicitly reinforced by the Department and University. This, of course, comes back to the our value set and that of our environment. Most Schools at Bangor now plan at least two Away Days for staff each year and use these to create the space for important planning as a team.

## Two examples

### The peer guide scheme at Bangor

This scheme is an example of how best practice was implemented across the University of Wales at Bangor. Although it took nine years for it to develop from an idea to a QAA acknowledged 'exemplary practice', I provide only highlights of the most significant events that affected its progress. Briefly, the peer guide scheme trains existing students to support new students at University. The scheme utilises the expertise and accessibility of students, as students, to provide advice and guidance to first years at the beginning (and later) of their studies.

At first it was a small idea, developed in response to increasing student numbers which were perceived, within the School of Sport, Health and Exercise Sciences, as affecting the extent to which we could offer support for new students. Although a pilot scheme began in 1993, it was in 1994 that a substantial research and development grant from the then Department of Education provided the resources to take the scheme to other departments. For two years, this funding enabled cross-University activity, widening the base of operations to all departments. In 1996 students from all departments had volunteered to participate and the scheme had been substantially piloted for two years. At the end of the funding period, the University Staff Development Unit provided resources, for a further three years, to maintain the training. Subsequently the Career Development Unit has

provided support and developed a taught module for peer guide training.

As is so often the case, it required champions or change agents at the department level to instigate the scheme. At first reluctant and not feeling sufficiently competent to effectively train peer guides, many staff stood back and watched. There were three main catalysts for change. The first was the formation of a Senior Tutors' group, with a representative from each department. This met to discuss ways of enhancing the academic and personal support systems for students. This was an action at the University level. At the departmental level, the second catalyst was a demonstration, by a small number of departments, of the efficacy of the scheme. At the student level, those students involved in the pilot scheme and whose departments were not engaging, put pressure on their departments to implement the scheme. The University, centrally, offered no support until an evaluation of recruitment procedures revealed that some school pupils had applied to Bangor partly because they had seen that we had a peer guide scheme operating. Some support, to enable the scheme to be sustained centrally, was then provided.

There are several features of the scheme which will make it sustainable and which made it more accessible to some departments. Firstly, the idea was always presented as a guideline for practice which did not require conformity in its detail and, in fact, encouraged adaptability in and relevance to different contexts. This also provided a sense of ownership at the departmental level. Another feature was that, on the advice of students, peer guides are not paid for their activities. Students who are involved in the scheme say that their motivation is primarily personal interest, 'wanting to give something back' or CV enhancement and that financial inducements are not required. They do enjoy being given a peer guide t-shirt however!

## Intervention at module level

Part of my research (Fazey, 1999), and research by others (e.g. , indicated that students' deep approach to study and intrinsic motivation declined from the beginning to the end of Level 1 study, started higher again at the beginning of Level 2 and dropped significantly again by the end of that year. Given the powerful association between positive learning behaviours and both a deep approach to study and intrinsic motivation (behaviours such as interest, persistence and challenge-seeking) this situation was of concern.

A colleague and I decided to find out if changing teaching methodology to try to increase, or at least maintain, initial levels of deep approach to study and intrinsic motivation in a Level 3 class, would be effective (Fazey & Lawson, 2001). The class had 37 Sport Science students, data from 34 of whom was finally used. The module was entitled 'Individual Differences in Achievement' and it considered a number of psychological variables which interact to affect achievement. The intended learning outcomes for the module included a critical understanding of the theoretical bases of three different psychological factors that affect achievement, their interactions and effects on achievement in individuals. Students had to be able to demonstrate their depth of understanding by their ability to apply knowledge to an analysis of case studies.

Based on theory and on teaching experience, the learning environment was structured to implicitly and explicitly persuade the students that understanding and critical analysis and not rote learning were required. Implicit messages were delivered through the structure of the sessions and assessment methods, and through the constant reinforcement, by the teachers, of any attempt by students to construct or reconstruct their understanding. Key to these messages were the assessment methods. The main summative assessment was a viva voce examination which took place after the end of the teaching period and was a 30 minute, tape-recorded, individual conversation with one member of staff. Students were required to bring with them an A4 sheet of paper on which they had represented their understanding and knowledge, including key references. They were strongly advised to do this in the form of a cognitive map but some chose to represent their knowledge in sequential text. Students could use the paper to aid them in their discussion and it, together with the tape-recording, provided the material for cross-moderation and External examiner scrutiny. A mid-semester summative assignment was used to provide practice for the cognitive mapping, sessions were taught about cognitive mapping and a practice viva was offered to all students. Most sessions had included mapping practice and analysis of practical scenarios. Emphasis throughout was put on the importance of analysing situations from a number of interacting perspectives with active construction of alternative propositions and solutions.

Measurements of motivation (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blaise, Brière, Senécal, & Valliéres, 1992) and

approach to study (Entwistle & Tait, 1994) were taken at the very beginning of the module and after the viva voce examination. The results indicated that there was a non-significant increase in both intrinsic motivation and deep approach to study from pre- to post-test. We concluded that, even with a final year group of students, who are particularly focused on the marks they are gaining in each module, it is possible to maintain initial levels of intrinsic motivation and deep approaches to study. The relative simplicity of the method, which requires some understanding of learning and a commitment to careful planning and organisation but no extra resources, has meant that it is achievable by most competent teachers. I continue to use similar techniques in my teaching and a number of other staff have also adopted (and adapted) some of these teaching methods to good effect.

## Reflective practice = best practice

The notion of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983; 1987) has been around for a long time. At Bangor it is used to good effect in the University's Teaching in Higher Education (tHE) Scheme which is a requirement for all beginning teachers (Fazey, J., 2004). Based on Schön's (1983) principles of action learning cycles, it incorporates the notion of repeated attempts that are adjusted following feedback, with larger action loops incorporating within them smaller action loops. As a research activity, in this case into learning and teaching, this is a familiar skill for teachers in university. The principle of breaking down complex skills into more manageable chunks, each of which is practised and adjusted following feedback, is well-established within the teaching of not just physical but also cognitive skills and understanding. Being reflective – deliberately and consistently applying review processes to practice in order to enhance performance – is an essential and distinguishing feature of being a professional and of the development of best practice. It is perhaps particularly important in the current climate of audit and accountability when we must work hard to maintain our own values as well as those of our employers. Fazey, J. (1996; p. 205) used an evocative metaphor to highlight the importance of being skilled in managing the 'convergence of successive waves of change' in higher education:

'A general strategy is to help people learn not just how to ride the waves (of change) in a passive, hang-on-to-the-lifebelt style, but to help them become skilful surfers. They need the expertise that allows them to spot waves coming, the confidence to select good ones to ride and the skill to adjust their angle as they hang on to an exhilarating ride to where they want to go. Skilful, flexible performance presupposes that we know where we want to go and that, given particular circumstances, we can decide to wait, try for it, give it up, get ready again and ride the wave we choose. It is about flexibly adjusting tactics and strategies in the face of apparent instability by learning the features of the system that allow us to predict with sufficient certainty the short-term future so that we can influence longer term outcomes.'

Effective use of reflective practices, supported by the time and opportunity to engage in regular review activities and reinforced by managers who value such activity, is a key to quality enhancement at all levels.

I finished my talk with two more quotations which, I hope, provide some thoughts about the need to recognise that we cannot do everything we would like to do and that not all we do is successful the first time (or subsequent times) we do it, but that does not mean we should give up. The flexibility required to successfully negotiate the waves is emphasised in the following:

'Humans have two inherent limitations…The first limitation is the failure-proneness of human behavior. The second limitation results from the inherent need to be selective in the goals pursued.' (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995, p.286).

'..change involves change: initial plans and visions themselves change as they are implemented and adopted.' (Trowler, Saunders & Knight, 2003, p.2.)

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