What students value as inspirational and transformative teaching

BRADLEY, Sally, KIRBY, Emma and MADRIAGA, Manuel <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2725-1718>

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Sally Bradley, Emma Kirby & Manuel Madriaga[*]

Quality Enhancement and Student Success, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom

Postal address for correspondence: Manuel Madriaga, Quality Enhancement and Student Success, Sheffield Hallam University, Oneleven Building, City Campus, Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB, UK. (tel) +44 (0)114 225 4022;

Evidence presented here stems from an analysis of student comments derived from a student-nominated inspirational teaching awards scheme at a large university in the United Kingdom (UK). There is a plethora of literature on teaching excellence and the scholarship of teaching, frequently based upon portfolios or personal claims of excellence, and often related to monetary reward or promotion. However there is a paucity of research into student-nominated awards and the student perception of inspirational and transformative teaching despite a growing number of student-led schemes in the UK. This article seeks to address this gap in knowledge at the same time presenting some of the challenges in managing a student-nominated teaching awards scheme.

Keywords: higher education; inspirational teaching; student perception; transformative teaching

Context and background

There is a substantial body of literature on university teaching awards. There is evidence of discussions relating to student judgment of academic staff as far back as 1924 (Aleamoni, 1999), and Cashin (1988) even having referred to more than 1300 articles relating to student rating of teaching in the US.

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[*] Corresponding author. Email: m.madriaga@shu.ac.uk

However, review of the literature reveals that many teaching awards have been based on teaching portfolios or self-nomination (Centra, 1993). Many of these schemes fall under the category of teaching excellence and individual claims or nominations of excellence, such as the distinguished teachers awards in the US (Elton, 1998), and National Teaching Fellowships in the UK (Skelton, 2007). There is little research on student perceptions of the quality of teaching (Hill, Lomas, & MacGregor 2003). Moreover, there is a paucity of literature on student-nominated awards and what students value beyond course and module evaluations which are sometimes used as a measure of teaching excellence and used as promotion criteria in some instances (Carusetta, 2001). With this in mind, the notion of 'teaching excellence' is a highly contested concept (Skelton, 2009), and potentially divisive (Gibbs, 2007).

In the UK, teaching quality and raising the status of teaching has been a topic of discussion in the national Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997), Macfarlane (2011), Browne Review (2011) and the Government White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). But this raises questions. Who judges the 'quality'? Who knows what happens over the academic year or semester in the lecture theatre, laboratory or seminar? Each of these teaching *instances* is not peer-reviewed but observed and experienced by student cohorts. Frequently, module evaluations or student evaluations of teaching (SET) are used as measures to inform course and module design (Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths, 2000). Moreover, UK key performance indicators of 'student experience' such as the results from the National Student Survey, which is not too dissimilar to the National Student Engagement Survey in the USA and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, do not necessarily encourage positive affirmation of individuals

who deliver inspiring teaching or intellectual excitement (Lowman & Mathie, 1993). These evaluations focus on course or module organisation and administration.

Reviews of teaching awards are predominantly based on national awards schemes (Gibbs, Habeshaw & Yorke, 2000), despite the growth in student-led teaching awards. This most recent development in the UK has culminated in the Higher Education Academy taking a lead role, in conjunction with the National Union of Students, on Student-Led Teaching Awards (http://www.studentledteachingawards.org.uk). When the literature refers to institutional teaching awards, it is frequently based on research-intensive institutions. In these instances, teaching and the scholarship of teaching struggle to receive recognition (Carusetta, 2001). However, the literature primarily relates to scholarship of teaching, not the actual practice (Chalmers, 2011; Kreber, 2002; Palmer & Collins, 2006). This links to an individual submitting a portfolio demonstrating her/his own teaching quality or excellence.

There is extensive debate in the literature about teaching expertise, teaching excellence and scholarship of teaching. In many instances these concepts are merged into one. However, the work presented here is unique in that it examines teaching excellence as perceived by students.

This paper presents findings from an analysis of student comments taken from a student-nominated inspirational teaching awards scheme at a large university in the UK that has 35500 students. Student nominations and comments were gathered through an internal survey, which is conducted annually at the end of semester one of the academic year. The survey is emailed to all students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. The analysis sought to discover what students perceived as being inspirational or

transformative in relation to their student experience, within the lecture theatre, seminar room and/or laboratory, as well as outside the taught experience.

The scheme was introduced in the institution in 2011. Previously an internal student experience survey had identified a few hundred members of staff who students had named in a free-text comment box. However, there was no formal mechanism within the survey to encourage students to explain how their staff nominee made a transformative or inspirational impact on their student experience. The ethos behind the introduction of the student-nominated inspirational teaching awards was based on positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), whereby celebrating and recognising contribution raises the bar and recognises individuals who would not have been noticed or identified through the annual, sector-wide National Student Survey and course-specific module evaluations. This echoes the sentiments expressed by Chism and Szabo (1997, p. 183) in that teaching awards are there to 'affirm individuals and assure them that the energy and effort they invest in teaching is recognized and valued', to encourage teaching excellence and 'to promote the value of teaching as an academic activity at the institution'.

The introduction of specific questions about staff who made a transformative impact was two-fold: (1) encouraging engagement in the survey in a positive and affirming way, rather than as a measure of satisfaction; and (2) enabling the institution to get a deeper understanding of what students valued. Over 2300 students took the opportunity to name one or more members of staff in the 2012 awards. Each student explained in 200-words or less how her or his student experience had been transformed by inspirational teaching and by exemplary learning support. There were a total of 3500 staff names and comments.

More than 1000 individual members of staff were nominated across the four faculties, central directorates and staff associated with the students' union. With the focus on teaching and student support, each faculty was then asked to shortlist up to 15 nominees from internal student survey nominations, which could include student support staff and technicians. The faculty selection panels included a student representative thus retaining student engagement within the faculty selection process. The 'inspirational teachers', selected by the faculties, ranged from associate lecturers and part-time staff to professoriate.

The selection for university student-nominated awards was based solely on student comments, with names and subjects redacted, and judged on the impact the nominees have had upon their students. The selection panel was advised to bear in mind that some staff may only teach on one or two modules so will not have contact with the same number of students. Therefore numbers of nominations were not judged as a measure of impact. Fundamentally, this was not a popularity contest or an award for being 'a nice person'. The awards were about the impact made in inspiring students.

Methodology

In order to know what students value about teaching, we sought the opportunity to insert two open-ended questions in the annual institution-wide internal student survey. This electronic survey was sent to all students at all levels and analysed by an external consultant. However, analysis of the open-ended questions contained in the survey was reserved for the Innovation and Professional Development (IPD) team within the quality enhancement portfolio of the institution. These questions, written in an appreciative way, were essential in gathering the student voice for staff nominees for the inspirational teaching awards. As indicated earlier, student participants were asked to name their nomination and explain how this individual has made a difference in their

experience. Of course, they were given the opportunity to consent to the use of their anonymous responses to the open-ended questions to be used for research purposes, allowing for wider dissemination among the academic community.

To ensure an authentic student voice for the evidenced-informed teaching awards scheme, a student researcher part-time post was advertised through the institution's student career network to work within the IPD Team with the specific task to analyse all anonymous student comments. Through a competitive process, a student researcher, Emma Kirby, was appointed. The project lead, Sally Bradley, anonymised all student comments beforehand in order to ensure that student respondents could not be identified in analysis. Moreover, Sally Bradley made sure that the names of all staff nominees were anonymised before passing data, which was on a spreadsheet, to student researcher, Emma Kirby, for analysis. In short, there was a separation of tasks for each research project member to ensure research integrity and maintain anonymity of all student respondents and staff nominees.

The student researcher was trained in using Nvivo software to analyse all student comments. This required importing a spreadsheet of survey comments from Microsoft Excel into Nvivo. The researchers took a grounded theory-informed approach towards analysing the data. This entailed identifying commonalities which emanated from the diversity of 3500 student responses. These commonalities then informed sixteen themes as indicated in Figure 1. Reflecting on these themes, the research team observed three discrete areas which are sectioned in the findings below: student engagement, rapport with students and vocation.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Findings

Student engagement with learning

Good teaching style: Someone who keeps students engaged in seminars or lectures, some who makes students feel they have learned something new:

> 'I find [name of staff member] a really interesting and engaging seminar tutor and lecturer… he is by far the most interesting and explains topics effectively, giving relevant examples.'

> 'Her lectures are really fun and she puts complex topics over in a simple way, which has aided my understanding.'

Encourages: Someone who helps students stay on track with their studies:

> 'This tutor is always smiling and telling us not to be scared to give things a go. He definitely gives a confidence boost to the students and is very enthusiastic about the course. His positivity makes the course a lot more enjoyable.'

Passion for subject area: Someone who enjoys teaching their subject:

> 'She is so inspiring and energetic. It makes students like me want to work hard to match her achievements. She is very supportive and understanding and a pleasure to be taught by.'

Challenges students to succeed: Someone who pushes students the extra mile as they know they can do better:

> '…believed in my abilities and supported me throughout… He challenges common misconceptions and traditional beliefs in an empowering and positive way.'

> '… will go out of his way to make sure you understand. He makes the effort to get to know his students personally which is a nice change because it shows he cares and wants them to succeed.'

'Really driven me to make more of myself and made me realise that I have the ability to create outstanding pieces of work. He has also actively gone out to find work placements which we can take part in and constantly stretches us.'

'Had a meeting with her during the first semester of my second year because of my low grades and poor attendance, that meeting really helped me to turn around my year and I ended up achieving a 2:1 overall… Now I'm in my final year I am predicting myself to get a 2:1 again.'

Enthusiastic: Someone who shows eagerness and enjoyment when teaching their subject and also shows interest in student opinions:

'He is supportive and excited about what he teaches and is enthusiastic and genuinely pleased for you when things go well.'

'This guy is completely passionate about his study. Even subjects that aren't related to his core teaching, he often knows more about it than the actual teachers of that module do. His teaching methods put subjects like quantum mechanics, molecular biotechnology totally into perspective; not only making them comprehendible but also how we can apply this knowledge for situations. THE BOSS of Beta 2 M and Mass spectrometry.'

Up-to-date in research: Someone who uses sources which are recent, applicable and useful to students:

'Demonstrates how research can make a genuine difference to real people's lives.'

'…very passionate and enthusiastic about his area of research and this shows in the lectures, it is inspirational and gets the students more interested in the topic.'

Motivational: Someone who gives students a positive attitude about their studies:

'Creative and motivational. His feedback is brilliant and personal, and his lessons are relevant to what we want to do.'

'Always supportive. Always had time for everyone, including students who were not in his tutor group. Truly learnt a great deal from [him]. He is up-to-date in practise, motivational, and great at what he does. Lessons were never dull.'

Reliable: Someone who is consistent in everything they do. Someone who is trustworthy:

'Throughout [the] second and third year he has helped support not only his coursework but offered help with other lecturers' work.'

'Goes above and beyond supporting us as students academically and with our employment skills. She is always happy to help and encourages your potential.'

Entertaining: Someone who provides amusement or enjoyment to students whilst learning:

'Due to his witty and down-to-earth personality students actually listen to what he has to say.'

'…he brings fun and real-life situations during seminar sessions and he is very approachable.'

Students want to enjoy learning and staff having a sense of humour is powerful especially when the students find the subject material difficult or dull. This is not to say they want a comedian in the lecture theatre but they want someone who can create awe and wonder in their subject. As Ory (2001, p. 4) stated, 'neither the stand-up comic with no content expertise nor the cold-fish expert with only content expertise receives the highest ratings consistently' from students.

Rapport with students

Supportive: Providing encouragement for students who have difficulties in their personal life or with their studies:

> 'I can say she is my role model who stood by me, encouraged me all along until today. Refilled me with confidence... she motivated and changed my life to be colourful when I was all alone crying for help… Just knows that students just need support and encouragement to reach their goals we expect nothing more than that!'

> 'She was very supportive of me at a time when I was particularly worried about my health, she gave me a lot of help and support in deciding how we could manage my Uni work around health problems if they were to worsen.'

Beyond the classroom: Someone who helps or supports students with problems that are outside the university. Someone who goes beyond their job description:

> 'If I was worried about any aspect of university or needed help or guidance about jobs and careers paths after, he'd be the first I'd go to. He does so much extra work to help all the students who try in his seminars, and will often email an information sheet after the seminar that he has compiled to help us!'

> '…has helped me on countless occasions outside the classroom. While studying his [module name] he would often stay after class to help with queries and respond to emails outside working hours. He did the same when it came to constructing CV's and applying for employment. He also provided me with the contacts needed to start my own company. He rang me on his lunch breaks and spoke to staff outside working hours for me. He is a very inspirational person and I hope one day I have his work ethic!'

Approachable: Someone who you feel at ease with and would go to that person for help or advice and feel comfortable:

'I was worried about my grade when I started the subject, but he helped outline ideas and equations in a way that I could understand and I ended up with a grade that pleasantly surprised me.'

'During the first few weeks many of us were unsure about a piece of work and were feeling down after a particularly negative lecture, but the moment we voiced our concerns to him he spoke to us about how much he loved his job and how good the course was, and it really put a smile on all our faces… he knows how to relate to students and is a role model to many of us on the course.'

Rapport with students also appeared as a theme in student perceptions of quality in higher education, as students valued lecturers who were 'encouraging, positive and transmitted enthusiasm for their subject' (Hill et al., 2003, p. 17). This relates closely to the discussion and aspects of the scholarship of teaching. Knowledge of the discipline is not sufficient, knowing how to construct and convey knowledge is key to the linkage between research and teaching (Kreber, 2002). Bringing together discipline knowledge and theoretical knowledge of learning develops pedagogical content knowledge (Paulsen, 2001; Shulman, 1987).

Vocational

Influence on practice: Someone who is a role model to students in terms of employment:

'Taught discipline and professionalism to students when many of us come to university thinking it would be an easy ride.'

'Encouraging and a great role model of what you could be if you put more time into your studies.'

Professional: Has an interest and desire to do their job well and holding a positive attitude:

'We talked at one of the open days and he has been nothing but supportive since. His teaching style is fantastic, he engages with students like no other teacher I have ever had can.'

'…he has given me a massive amount of knowledge into what the industry is about and what we as students should think about whilst at university. I feel that he has contributed a great deal to how prepared I will be when I graduate and start looking for work.'

Good organisation: Someone who produces structured seminars and lectures. Someone who is on time and prepared:

'In the first few weeks of lectures he made a lecture informative, interesting and fun. This enabled me to concentrate more as I could relate to him and therefore I feel like I learned more.'

'He is prompt in his response to all queries and problems and is prepared to get involved at every level. He is organised and open-minded to what the students have to say. He gives students a voice!"

Discussion

Staff did not perform extraordinarily because of the potential for extrinsic reward, promotion or additional pay. The experience students received was based on an intrinsic motivation to achieve. Their motivation was the belief that their efforts will be successful and this was conveyed to students through their practice (Kreber, 2000).

Students want staff who are enthusiastic about their subject area, academically stimulating with up-to-date, knowledge of their field, yet who care for them as

individuals who recognise their potential as well as their weaknesses. This desire is consistent with earlier studies (Brown & Atkins, 1993; Hill et al., 2003; Lowman & Mathie, 1993).

Student perceptions of inspirational and transformative teaching were intertwined with both academic and student support. Cheng (2011, p. 6) reported that staff in receipt of teaching awards for practice shared the view that good teaching would 'give students skills that could be useful and appreciated in the future career and allow students to flourish creatively and to develop enquiring minds and cognitive ability.'

Is effective teaching sufficient? Are these inspirational teachers - expert teachers or excellent teachers? According to Kreber (2002, p. 13), 'the difference is that experts are excellent teachers, but excellent teachers are not necessarily experts', nor are they necessarily scholars of teaching. The qualities identified through student comments map on to many of the qualities of good teaching expressed by Ramsden, Margetson, Martin and Clarke (1995) and cited by Trigwell (2001):

- Enthusiasm for subject and desire to share with students;

- Modifying teaching to suit the students, subject matter and environment;

- Encourage learning for understanding and concern about the development of students' critical thinking;

- Ability to transform and extend knowledge;

- Show respect for their students, interest in professional and personal growth with sustained high expectations.

A detailed analysis of the final University Award recipient comments identifies a close correlation to the above qualities.

Insert Figure 2 here.

It is evident from the analysis of student comments that students want to be taught by staff who are enthusiastic about their subject, empathetic and hold a desire for students to develop their full potential. This award scheme does not offer monetary remuneration or promotion rather it recognises staff who are valued by their students whose individual contribution would go unnoticed in other measures.

The introduction of a student-nominated inspirational teaching awards scheme was not without challenges. In this institution, it was the first time such awards had been promoted and how it was implemented was a cause for concern. Staff had not been informed that the internal student survey would include inspirational teaching nominations for fear that this would become a popularity contest with staff polling students (Aleamoni, 1999). Likewise the criteria for selection was not made explicit as at the time the selection panels did not know what students would perceive as being inspirational or transformative. The initial faculty-based selection panels were asked to provide nominations which were based on more than being a 'nice' person or someone who responded to emails at the weekend. The tension caused by the selection procedures and criteria was to be anticipated.

However, the analysis of the student comments provided a baseline for future selection criteria. As the awards scheme has become mainstreamed within institution, the process has become more transparent. Selection panellists, particularly teaching staff in charge of promoting innovative teaching and learning practices within their faculties, have become more knowledgeable in selecting colleagues for University Awards.

One of the myths and scepticism of teaching awards is that it is a popularity contest (Aleamoni, 1999), and misconceptions are rife relating to student rating of

teaching (Ory, 2001). The comments above do not refer to students having an easy time or dumbing down of difficult concepts rather staff were able to lead students over threshold concepts to enable them to develop in their field (Meyer & Land, 2005). Students valued being challenged to achieve their full potential, recognising that this was done through hard work as demonstrated by their academic role models.

The introduction of student-nominated awards is part of the cultural change within the institution which can be seen with some suspicion. Other measures, such as the National Student Survey results, are more likely to be used to judge teaching quality by an institution than a local award scheme (Browne Review, 2010; Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Mahoney, 2012). However, if student comments in the internal survey are deemed to be an unreliable measure on which to base student-nominated teaching awards, then questions of reliability about student comments in module evaluations or the National Student Survey can be made.

Concluding thought

Excellence in teaching or teaching excellence? This teaching awards scheme is not a measure of teaching effectiveness or scholarship of teaching. The awards are about student perceptions of inspirational teaching. Effectiveness and scholarship require different criteria and supporting evidence, such as student attainment, peer review as well as student evaluation (Centra, 1993). There was no mention of teaching qualifications or how staff demonstrated their theoretical models of learning and teaching within the student comments. Students commented on practice which they experienced. How is excellence identified? It is more than just about knowing how to

teach. Performance was perceived as successful or effective by those who experienced it (Kreber, 2002), in this case, from the students themselves.

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Notes on contributors

Sally Bradley, Principal Lecturer, Professional Recognition Adviser, Innovation and Professional Development

Emma Kirby, Faculty of Development and Society Student Representative. She is currently in her final-year as an undergraduate in English Studies and was responsible for undertaking the analysis of 3500 student comments in institutional survey. She also has presented preliminary findings of this work at the 2012 Higher Education Academy Annual Conference in the United Kingdom.

Manuel Madriaga, Senior Lecturer in Research and Evaluation, Innovation and Professional Development

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