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The role of self-confidence in learning to teach in higher education.

Ian Sadler

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, York St John University, York, UK.

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, York St John University, Lord Major's Walk,
York, England, YO31 7EX. 01904 876826. i.sadler@yorksj.ac.uk.

Ian Sadler is the Senior Teaching Fellow for the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. He has contributed to academic development programmes at a range of Universities and is currently involved in research into development of academics conceptions of assessment.

The role of self-confidence in learning to teach in higher education.

The paper considers teacher self-confidence, which emerged as a theme within a wider study into the influences upon new academics' development as teachers over time. Three interviews took place, over a two-year period, with eleven new teachers from a range of higher education institutions and discipline areas. The first phase of analysis was the creation of detailed cases studies for three of the participants, of which one is reported in the current paper to illustrate the role of self-confidence in teacher development. The second phase used a thematic analysis of all interview transcripts. The new teachers' self-confidence appeared as a key influence in the use of teaching strategies that actively involved the students. Content knowledge and teaching skills were related to feelings of self-confidence, with *experience* being a key factor in the teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and skills. The findings hold implications for managers to ensure new staff have as familiar and stable teaching schedule as possible and teacher developers to encourage dialogue and reflection in relation to the self-confidence and content knowledge of new teachers.

Keywords: confidence; content knowledge; teacher development; approaches to teaching; new teachers.

Introduction

There are only a handful of longitudinal studies that have considered how new academics develop as teachers over time. These studies have focussed on changes in conceptions and approaches to teaching (McKenzie 2002; Martin and Ramsden 1992) or the impact of Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in higher education programmes (Light and Calkins, 2008, Posteroff, 2007, Gibbs and Coffey 2004 and Ho et al. 2001). More recently, Smith (2010) reported findings of a longitudinal study, which investigated the formation of identities in a group of new academics. However, this was focussed upon academic socialisation of probationary lecturers more broadly. Despite these studies there has been little attention on the key influences upon a new academics approach to teaching and the day-to-day experiences of developing as a teacher in higher education.

An area where there appears to be growth in the teaching in higher education literature is in relation to the potentially important role of emotions. A small number of studies within the higher education context have alluded to the emotional dimension of teaching (Martin & Lueckenhausen, 2005; Trigwell, 2009). In their study of thirty-one lecturers over a semester, Martin and Lueckenhausen concluded that teaching was by no means ‘an emotion free zone’ (p410) and that the teachers were particularly affected when they were challenged in front of their students. The emotional dimension of teaching may hold important implications for academic development in higher education. Recently, Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) found that teachers characterised as holding more learning-focused views of teaching had most positively charged emotions and high levels of self-confidence in relation to teaching. In addition, confusion characterised those who were in a developmental phase in their teaching. However, as the study was based on single interviews with teachers who had experience ranging from a few months to 30 years, the interplay between emotions and confidence and the teacher’s development could not be unpicked.

Emotions are far reaching, not easily defined and contain a variety of different types of emotions. Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) considered emotions, along with motivation and cognition, as the fundamental elements in human mental operations. Sutton and Wheatley (2003) indicate that most common positive emotions in relation to teaching include joy, satisfaction and pleasure. Negative emotions described by teachers are frustration, anger and anxiety. Although related, self-confidence appears as separate dimension to emotions. Pintrich & McKeachie (2000; as cited in Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2006) consider confidence not as a generic concept but a reflection of the person’s perception of their capacity to achieve a particular goal in a

specific situation. Therefore the particular teaching context is likely to be central to an individual's level of self-confidence.

Some studies do provide insight into the relevance of self-confidence for teaching and teacher development. In one study, two teachers, who were given the lowest rating by students in a law school, were interviewed and observed before and after a programme for improving instruction (Hativa, 2000). Low self-confidence in teaching ability was outlined as a key trait of one of the teachers in the study. As the teachers altered their teaching behaviour, such as speaking more slowly and improving the clarity of the organization of the lesson, self-confidence appeared to improve. However, the findings can only be considered as being preliminary due to the use of only two participants from the same subject area and teaching context. In a study of academics' conceptions of their own development as a teacher, Åkerlind (2003) identified one way that development was experienced was as an increase in comfort, confidence and ease of teaching. This way of experiencing development was considered to be entirely self-focused, however it did relate to both teacher and student-focused understandings of teaching. This provides a slightly different perspective on the role of confidence in teaching, but it does indicate that confidence is an important dimension for development regardless of an individual's conception and approach to teaching. Therefore the aim of the current study is to consider the role of self-confidence upon the approach to teaching and development as a teacher for a group of new academics.

Research design and methods

Interviews

Eleven new academics (6 females, 5 males) were interviewed on three occasions over a

two-year period. All participants had less than two years experience of teaching in either a part or full-time role and were from a range of higher education institutions and settings. The teachers were from the subject areas of Sport, Physiotherapy, Psychology and History. The institutions within which they taught included traditional research-intensive universities, new universities and a further education college that delivered higher education qualifications. The majority of the participants (all but two) were from what would be classified as teaching- as opposed to research-led institutions. All of the participants were engaged in their institution's postgraduate teaching programme at some point throughout the data collection period.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage the participants to describe their everyday teaching experiences. Therefore the questions were deigned to encourage the participants to describe concrete, real experiences. None of the questions specifically asked the teachers to consider issues in relation to emotion or confidence in their teaching. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. For the two follow-up interviews the participants received a copy of the transcript to remind them of particular topics explored in the previous interview. This process also acted as one of the quality checks to ensure the trustworthiness of the data by checking it with the original source.

Analysis

The analysis was based upon the principles of building theories from case study research (Eisenhardt, 2002). This was an inductive process that required a focus upon the participants' accounts of experiences of phenomena and the social world, in the context of being a teacher in higher education. Emerging themes were checked with interviews at different points for the same individual and with other participants. The

data analysis required constant movement between the data and the literature in order to support the creation of theory. This theory-creation process in the current investigation contained two main phases.

The first phase was the development of case studies to provide rich, in-depth insights into the nature of the academics' development as teachers over time. Full case studies were created for three out of the eleven participants. In order to make this selection there was partial case analysis of all eleven participants, with single-interview case notes being developed for all participants from the first interview. This process was repeated for the second and third interviews, however on these occasions progressive case selection was undertaken. Participants were selected based on the extent to which they were judged to be either representative of, or provided most variation from the sample. For example, the case of Alice is used in the findings of the current article, as she was considered representative of the majority of the participants. Additionally, her rich descriptions were particularly useful for offering a detailed insight into the role of confidence in teacher development.

The last stage of the case study development was an iterative process whereby the case notes from separate interviews for each participant had to be integrated to capture their descriptions of teaching and their development across all three interviews. There was continual cross checking within participants at this stage which was extremely important for identifying development, but also acted as a form of authentication by checking descriptions across interviews. In addition, another quality check on the developing analysis was scrutiny of the case studies and transcripts by two independent researchers.

The second phase of the analysis involved returning back to the transcripts of all

interviews for all of the eleven participants. A thematic analysis involved constant checking between participants to search for cross-case patterns with the aim being to identify common trends in relation to the teachers' development. For a relatively small sample there was a broad consistency of the themes, of which one was teacher self-confidence. Such consistency would indicate that some level of application to new teachers in higher education outside of the sample is warranted.

Results: Phase one analysis

A case study describing the role of confidence in teacher development.

The following section examines the role of confidence in teaching and development from the perspective of a single new teacher. This case has been selected out of the three developed in the wider study as it offers an insight into teacher confidence that is representative of the rest of the sample, while also illustrating some idiosyncratic and context specific issues the new teacher faces. At the time of the first interview, Alice had been employed as a teaching assistant in psychology for one year and three months. By the time of the second interview, eight months later, Alice had completed a postgraduate teaching qualification and had been appointed as a full-time lecturer in Psychology.

Alice referred to confidence extensively throughout all three interviews. What is clear from the analysis of her descriptions is that firstly, confidence appeared to significantly influence the way that Alice went about teaching, and secondly, as a result of experience and interaction with students her confidence appeared to grow. Therefore if greater confidence helped Alice to use more interactive teaching approaches, these experiences were more likely to have provided her with feedback that may have increased her confidence further. Hence, exploring the snowballing nature of the

interrelationship between confidence and experience provides an important insight into Alice's development as a teacher.

Alice's lack of confidence, when she first started teaching, appeared to have been one of the critical influences upon her initial approach to teaching. In the first interview, her descriptions were orientated towards teaching as being about the delivery of information. The following extract outlines how her development of extensive and well organised information to transmit to the students was an important source of confidence prior to the session.

I think it's a confidence thing you know so you don't forget anything. So you have it all on there, I think part for the students and part for you, so you don't forget it all. Once I get more confident, I'm hoping that I'll just have like one or two key words. The lecture notes I had were taken from the recommended text that I'd ordered in for the library.

Similarly, the next two extracts provide an insight into how the transmission approach helped her to avoid interactions with students. Alice seemed to have a fear of being asked questions that she did not know the answer to and this seemed to stem from a lack of confidence in her personal content knowledge.

I was very well prepared. I sat there and I thought, right, let me try and think of every possible question they can ask me and then hope for the best, because that's the bit that makes you really nervous, is that you get stuck and they'll ask you this really awkward question and you won't know the answer, that's my worst fear.

I think you get the confidence to do them [student tasks] as well. There's something comfortable about just standing and talking, cos they can't ask you any questions because you don't give them time to. But if you did tasks and things they're a bit more enjoyable, you seem to get interaction, so that's changed.

The second extract above does indicate some change or development in Alice's

approach to teaching towards the introduction of student activities and tasks. This increased level of interaction with students provided Alice with some positive experiences, which in turn appeared to increase her confidence and enjoyment of teaching. However, it was not simply a linear increase in confidence over time as the particular context within which Alice taught had a key influence.

By the third interview, many of Alice's descriptions suggested an increase in her self-confidence and the use of approaches to teaching that were more student-centred in nature. However, these descriptions were predominantly in relation to modules she had taught the previous academic year. Therefore familiarity, from repetition of specific sessions, appeared to be important for enhancing her confidence, content knowledge and willingness to interact with students. However, when Alice was presented with a new subject area or group of students, she described a regression in her confidence, which often reduced the amount of interaction with students in sessions. Even though she had been teaching for nearly three years the confidence and knowledge she had developed from various experiences with students seemed to be of little consequence when faced with something new. The following extracts indicate that how a new group of students or a new topic area impacted upon her self-confidence.

If you've never taught them before you don't know how they're going to react to your teaching style, because I like to do a lot of hands on exercises...And that sort of makes you a bit nervous as to whether that's going to work. But once you've taught them, they get a feel for you, you get a feel for them, then that makes you more confident in teaching them.

I think, as you've done it once, again you sort of have an idea of the key players in the area. If I was picking up a completely new subject again, then I'd be nervous about it and unsure about, you know, where I was going, just because you dread that question where you don't know the answer.

In addition to this context specific variation in self-confidence, Alice did seem to describe an underlying growth in confidence about what it was to be a teacher in higher education. She seemed to develop a clearer understanding of her role as a teacher. When Alice was a teaching assistant she described a number of impromptu, ‘corridor-based’ interactions with students where she was often unsure about the level of support she should give them. However, the increasing experience of interactions with students seemed to provide her with new insights into her role, which in turn gave her the confidence to not always be ‘doing it for them’. She described being more comfortable with sending the students away with a strategy by which they could help themselves.

This case has aimed to provide an insight into the powerful influence of confidence upon Alice’s approach to teaching and her development. Her experience of teaching and interacting with the students appeared to play a role in the growth of her confidence. However, new situations and perceived content knowledge tended to be prevailing factors in relation to Alice’s feelings of confidence.

Results: Phase two analysis

The interaction between teacher knowledge, confidence and approach to teaching

The main finding to emerge from the thematic analysis, with all the participants, was a picture of a self-perpetuating cycle of teacher development (Figure 1). In a similar way to the case of Alice described above, this model illustrates that the teacher’s perception of their content knowledge appeared to act as a catalyst upon their self-confidence. In turn this influenced the way in which they approached their teaching and therefore the type of feedback they gained from these teaching instances.

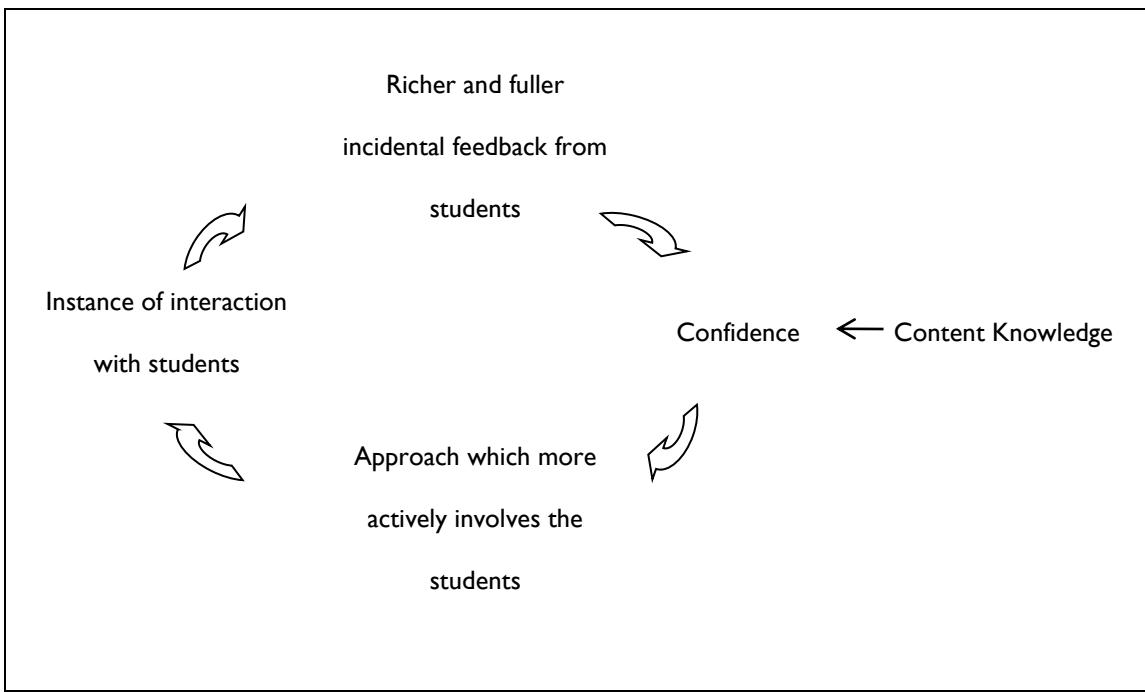


Figure 1. The cyclic influence of content knowledge and confidence upon teacher development

The new teachers regularly reported feelings of anxiety when they perceived their content knowledge to be low in the area within which they were teaching. One of their main concerns was whether or not their knowledge of the subject area was sufficient to teach it. The following extract provides an example of the relationship between knowledge and confidence.

There's one seminar that I particularly didn't enjoy as a graduate teaching assistant with a group of second year undergraduates and the simple fact is that I didn't know enough about the subject area. So I wasn't confident in teaching it and I think that must have come across to the students and they were asking quite a lot of questions that I really just couldn't answer! (Ben, psychology, first interview).

In addition to this association between confidence and content knowledge, what also emerged from the analysis was that the impact these feelings had upon the way in which the participants taught. Generally, the teachers described more student-centred approaches alongside feelings of self-confidence and a perception that they had a good

knowledge of the subject they were teaching. The extract below provides one of many examples where the new teachers identified the connection between knowledge, confidence and the amount of student interaction.

The more familiar subjects, I spend less time at the side of the laptop to flick over onto the next slide, more confident to wander up and down and ask questions if it's a subject that I've got an in-depth knowledge about. I'm probably more interactive with the more knowledge that I have. I try to be interactive with every subject that I teach but obviously with more confidence in what you know you can afford to be more interactive. (Gary, physiotherapy, first interview).

Gaining of experience and teacher development

By the time of the second and third interviews, descriptions of a lack of confidence were less frequent and there appeared to be a reduction in the teachers concern for their content knowledge of the subjects they were teaching. There appeared to be two quite different reasons for this reduction in concern for content knowledge. The first reason, which is apparent in the extract below, relates to increased experience of teaching and familiarity with the content or material being taught.

The delivery certainly feels easier but I'm not sure whether or not that's anything to do with the content and more to do with my own confidence as a teacher growing really. I do feel more comfortable in a lecture situation, it doesn't sort of cause me great anxiety any more. So yes, perhaps a little bit of both, familiarity with the material and sort of confidence from experience. (Ben, psychology, third interview).

As also suggested in the case study of Alice above, an important dimension to the teachers' development of confidence was the repetition of teaching a module on consecutive years. The following extract demonstrates how this increased confidence from gaining experience also encouraged the new teachers to modify and experiment with their strategies.

It was very structured, and now as I've become more confident I'm prepared to take more risks. I'm trying to find my own style, I've gone on another learning curve and that will probably plateau in about a year's time. But yeah, I genuinely just think that at the minute I'm going through a little phase where I'm prepared to take risks. (Anne, sports science, third interview).

A second reason for a reduction in the teachers concern for content knowledge and an increase in their self-confidence was due to a shift in how they saw teaching. Some individuals indicated that, as a teacher, they no longer felt a need to know it all. For example, in the following extract, Lucy indicated that she was more confident in seeing her role as encouraging students to answer their own questions in order to develop their own understanding of the subject.

I think it's more about confidence as well, knowing that if somebody asks you a question, a group, that you can find a way of them solving it without you answering it. (Lucy, sports studies, third interview).

Discussion

Confidence was regularly described in relation to an individual's perceived content and pedagogical knowledge, however, often it was content knowledge that appeared to predominate. If the teachers perceived that they had a good level of content knowledge, confidence tended to be high. The main influence of this greater level of confidence upon development was that it was often described in conjunction with taking risks and trying out new ways of teaching. Therefore, although conceptual change has previously been considered as an important pre-requisite for a change in approach (Kember & Kwan, 2000), the current study suggests that it might be more complex than this. There were instances in the data from the current investigation, where individuals reported taking quite teacher-centred approaches in a particular setting if they perceived their

content knowledge and confidence to be low. Use of more teacher-centred approaches often occurred despite a teacher appearing to hold more learning-orientated conception of teaching. This offers support for the suggestion that teacher self-confidence may override the conception of teaching in determining the approach to teaching taken in a particular instance.

An important aspect of self-confidence, which is evident in the current investigation, is the critical role that the teaching context plays. Previous research has indicated variation in self-efficacy between teachers from different disciplines, however there was no indication of variation in the same individual in different contexts (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006). Data from the current participants suggests that in different contexts the teachers selected quite different approaches and this often appeared to be related to their confidence. If the teachers were in an unfamiliar setting and perceived their content knowledge of the topic to be relatively low, confidence was also described as being low. In such contexts they described opting for more teacher-centred approaches to teaching. The additional unease that actively involving the students created meant that confidence in the other aspects of the teaching and learning context had to be high before the teachers would contemplate increasing opportunities for interacting with students. Particularly in the first interviews, when many of their experiences were new, the majority of the teachers spoke about the fear of being asked a question that they would not know the answer to. A ‘fear of taking risks’ is a factor, which has been identified in previous research, as one reason why teachers are unable to reflect (McAlpine, Weston, Beauchamp, Wiseman, & Beauchamp, 1999). This fear means they do not put themselves in new or challenging situations and therefore fail to gain different experiences upon which they can reflect and develop knowledge. Alice, in the case study provided above, avoided such a scenario and it appeared to be

her developing self-confidence that played a central role in supporting her continued development as a teacher.

Previous models of development identify that at an early stage of teaching individuals often hold a ‘concern about one’s own adequacy: subject matter and class control’ (Fuller, 1970; as cited in Eraut, 1994). This type of model suggests that issues of confidence might be confined to more junior teachers operating more teacher-centred approaches. Although the current investigation contained junior teachers they often described approaches that could be considered student-centred. Despite a greater concern for the student, self-confidence still played a key role in the way in which these individuals taught and developed as teachers. In other words, concern for self and concern for the students were not separate constructs. More recently, conceptions of teacher development that focussed upon comfort and confidence have been associated with teacher-focused view of teaching and student-relations- and student-engagement-focused conception of teaching (Åkerlind, 2003). In addition, the participants’ level of experience in Åkerlind’s investigation ranged from a few months to 35 years. These findings suggest that confidence may be more than just a temporary concern for new teachers and it is not only a factor for teachers with teacher-focussed views of teaching. Combining the data from Åkerlind and the current investigation it would appear that self-confidence of academics may be far a more important and complex construct than has previously been identified.

Summary and Implications

Confidence emerged as one of the dominant themes in a wider longitudinal study, which investigated the influences upon new teachers’ development in higher education. The current paper has aimed to illustrate the different ways in which confidence

manifests itself in the participants' experience of developing as a new teacher. The findings indicate a number of interrelationships between: confidence and content knowledge; confidence and approach to teaching; and experience and confidence. What was also apparent in the relationship between confidence and approach to teaching was the importance of richer and fuller incidental feedback from students, as a result of the use of more interactive approaches, upon an individuals' confidence. In addition, development of the way in which the teacher thought about teaching appeared to be associated with a change in the perceived importance of personal content knowledge and self-confidence.

Such findings offer some important implications for teacher development in higher education. Currently, the majority of teacher development programmes in the UK are focussed upon encouraging an approach to teaching that is learning-centred and an ethos of reflective practice. The current study would suggest that confidence and perceived content knowledge are inherent in an individual's decision to teach in a particular way and the reflection that takes place. This would indicate a need for teacher development programmes to be sensitive and supportive of confidence and the content knowledge of new teachers. This might include more specific discussion of and reflection upon the emotional dimension of learning to teach with mentors and academic developers. Finally managers of new teachers in higher education also need to be aware of the implications of self-confidence upon teaching and to where possible provide a stable environment in which new staff have the opportunity to teach in their specialist area of study.

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