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**The challenges for new academics in adopting student-centred approaches to teaching**

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## **Abstract**

The current article provides a perspective on the day-to-day challenges that a group of new teachers experienced as they adopted more student-centred approaches to teaching. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted over two years with eleven new teachers from a range of higher education institutions and subject disciplines. The analysis used case studies, alongside a search for common themes, to provide fine-grained insights into the teachers' development. A main finding was that in using approaches that more actively involved the students, the teachers described challenges specific to their local contexts. In particular, the idiosyncrasy of the topic being taught was a key factor. The second finding was that regardless of the conception of teaching held, all teachers described challenges in translating this way of thinking into practice. Such data provide a useful resource for academic developers to open dialogue with new academics about the challenges they face in developing as teachers.

## Introduction

A large body of research in relation to teaching in higher education has focused upon teachers' conceptions of teaching (Gow and Kember 1990; Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor 1994; Samuelowicz and Bain 1992). In a review of the conceptions of teaching Kember (1997) found a high level of agreement between studies and as a consequence identified two main conceptual categories: teacher-centred/content-orientated and student-centred/learning-orientated. A teacher with a conception that is teacher-centred/content-orientated conceives of teaching as being about the imparting of information to the students. The student-centred/learning-orientated conception is related to the teacher seeing teaching as an attempt to change the students' world-view or way of thinking about the phenomena they are studying.

A key aspect to this area of research was the identification of a connection between teachers' conceptions and the way in which they approach their teaching (Trigwell and Prosser 1996), which in turn has been shown to impact upon students' approaches to studying (Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse 1999). Five approaches to teaching have been identified, all which contain a *strategy* and *intention* component (Trigwell and Prosser 1996). At one extreme there was an approach that had a teacher-focused strategy with the intention of transmitting information to students and at the other an approach with a student-focused strategy with the intent to change students' conceptions. An issue that becomes apparent from these category labels is that there is considerable overlap between the approaches and conceptions of teaching. In particular it is extremely unclear how the intentional element of the approach differentiates from the conception of teaching. For this reason the identification of a

relationship between teaching conceptions and teaching approaches is of little surprise. Kember and Kwan (2000) have raised concerns with regards to the validity of the suggested relationship and indicate that it should be considered cautiously.

Despite such criticism the conceptions and approaches to teaching literature provides an empirical framework within which to operate both in terms of research and teacher development in higher education. Some development programmes have focused upon conceptual change towards a student-centred/learning-orientated conception of teaching in order to improve teaching practice and students' learning (Ho, Watkins and Kelly 2001). In addition the conceptions and approaches to teaching literature provides an initial structure for research into teaching in higher education. For example, monitoring change in the conceptual categories provides one way of identifying and describing teacher development. However, alongside the questions raised above regarding the validity of the relationship between conceptions and approaches, there are further restrictions in the conceptions of teaching literature that it is important to be mindful of, as it may limit their use for analysing teacher development. The first of these restrictions is due to the categories providing a rather simplistic understanding of an extremely complex situation. The abstract categories of description present a picture of teaching that is often distant from everyday experiences. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the more immediate insights provided by teachers do not always coherently match with an underlying conception (Entwistle, McCune and Walker 2001). A second issue is that the conceptions of teaching categories were an outcome of research that used single interviews with different teachers. Therefore, empirically, the conceptions of teaching cannot be considered a developmental sequence whereby a teacher starts by transmitting

information to the students and over time progresses to seeing teaching as being about the changing students conceptions. In addition, there is evidence to indicate that novice teachers often hold student-centred, learning orientated conceptions of teaching (McLean and Bullard 2000). Finally, the language used in the literature tends to suggest that if a teacher thinks about teaching from a student-centred/learning orientated perspective they are absolute. For example, the types of descriptors used include 'superior' (Kember 1997), 'desirable' (McKenzie 1996), 'complete' (Prosser and Trigwell 1999) and 'sophisticated' (Entwistle and Walker 2000). Research would appear to be limited in understanding the challenges that a new and developing teacher who holds a student-centred/learning-oriented conception of teaching faces. A greater understanding of such a conception of teaching, using more fine-grained methods, may act to support teacher development by identifying some of the day-to-day difficulties of utilising associated approaches to teaching.

### **A student-centred, learning-oriented conception of teaching**

As the current study aims to provide an insight into the challenges for teachers in developing more student-centred teaching, consideration of the defining characteristics of a *student-centred, learning-oriented* conception of teaching is warranted. A student-centred, learning-oriented conception of teaching is one category or way of thinking about teaching. Several authors have defined the conceptual categories by consider the different ways in which teachers describe different dimensions of teaching (Kember 1997). The nature of knowledge is one such dimension. Teachers with a student-centred, learning-oriented conception would consider knowledge as something that is socially constructed and they would have a

commitment to facilitating students to hold a personal, reasoned interpretation of a phenomenon (Entwistle et al. 2000). In their work with science lecturers, Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor (1994) defined the most complex conception of teaching as being focused upon the development of the students' view of the world or conceptions of the subject matter. The following extract from a participant in their study illustrates how teaching from this perspective was based upon encouraging students to see how knowledge is constructed from a scientific perspective:

...to get people to make predictions about what's going to happen, and then when it doesn't happen, maybe they might backtrack and revise their ideas... What we're trying to achieve in learning physics, is for people to shift their view from the laypersons view, to what we would call a scientific/physicist's view...  
(Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor 1994, 225).

Other research has suggested that a student-centred, learning-orientated conception is indicative of an *expanded awareness* about teaching (Martin and Ramsden 1992). In other words teachers who hold a student-centred conception of teaching realise that there are alternative ways to consider teaching and better acknowledge the potential for variation in particular aspects of teaching and learning (Åkerlind 2003). A teacher with an expanded awareness would select an approach that is most appropriate for the particular learning task in hand. However, the alternative approaches remain in the background of their awareness and may draw upon at a different time within the existing learning task or when the context changes. Such a view of the conceptions of teaching is fitting with one the hierarchical relationship between the conceptions of teaching and therefore the situation whereby each conception subsumes the characteristics of those below it in the order.

What the studies into a student-centred, learning-orientated conception of teaching start to indicate is that it is complex and therefore the development of such a way of thinking about teaching is unlikely to be without significant challenges. Despite these potential difficulties for teachers coming to this view of teaching, there has been very little consideration of such issues in the literature. A study by Entwistle and Walker (2000) has provided some insight into the process of gaining an expanded awareness and developing a *sophisticated* conception of teaching. However this work was based on a single retrospective account of which there are obvious limitations. The larger sample and longitudinal design of the current investigation aims to provide further understanding of development towards a student-centred, learning orientated conception of teaching.

### **Design and methods**

The data presented in the current article emerged from a wider study into the development of new teachers in higher education. Eleven new teachers, all with less than two years experience, were interviewed on three occasions over a two-year period. The participants were teaching at a variety of institutional settings with which the researcher had some previous relationship. These included traditional universities, new universities and further education colleges delivering higher education programmes. All of the institutions were in the UK and at some point over the two-year period all participants were involved in the institution's postgraduate programme related to teaching in higher education. Considering the participants engagement in teaching development programmes and willingness to be involved with the interviews



for the current study, it is important to acknowledge that they were likely to be positively predisposed towards enhancing their teaching. Participants also varied in terms of the subject area they taught. Three of the participants were from arts related subjects and eight of the participants from science based disciplines. Out of the three teachers in the arts subjects, two were in the area of sport sociology/development and the other individual was from history. The science related disciplines were composed of three participants from sports science, three from psychology and two from physiotherapy. Semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage participants to describe: how they thought and went about teaching and the ways in which they developed over time; the major influences upon their teaching and development; and the extent to which their conceptions and approaches to teaching were influenced by the varying contexts within which they taught. An important principle in the design of the interview questions was that they initially encouraged the participant to describe concrete experiences of real, everyday instances. An example of a question aimed at achieving this was; ‘Can you think back to the last lesson you taught and tell me about what the students were doing?’. The intention behind these questions was to try to capture the participants’ theories-in-use and minimise their description of espoused theories (Argyris and Schön’s 1974). Considering some of the candid responses from the new teachers in terms of their failings and limitations, this strategy appeared to be relatively effective. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and full transcripts were subsequently produced.

Phenomenography is an approach that has been taken in a number of studies that provide the theoretical foundation for the current investigation (e.g. Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor 1994). The outcome of phenomenography is the identification of a limited

number of ways in which an individual experiences a phenomenon each of which forms a 'categories of description'. Although a fuller discussion of phenomenography is available elsewhere (Säljö 1997) there are some key aspects worth acknowledgement here. The first relates to the non-dualistic perspective of phenomenology. This perspective is based on the premise that the individual and the world in which the experience takes place are not separate. Such an assumption means that the different ways of experiencing, or 'categories of description', will be logically (hierarchically) related to one another (Åkerlind, 2006). The second aspect of phenomenography to note is that there is likely to be variation in an individual's experience based upon the situational change. Hence for the same individual in a different context, certain elements of an experience will be brought into the foreground and others will be pushed to the background of awareness (Prosser and Trigwell 1999).

Despite its value there have been a number of criticisms of the findings from research that has used phenomenography. For example, in relation to the conceptions of teaching, it has been suggested that the categories too conveniently map to other related existing frameworks (i.e. the approaches to learning) and therefore the outcomes may be heavily influenced by the pre-conceptions of the researcher (Richardson 1999). It has also been suggested that the abstract, decontextualised nature of the categories are limited in helping to understand complex phenomenon such as learning (McCune 2004). Additionally, although phenomenography has not been extensively used in longitudinal research designs, when it has, there have been suggestions that using categories of description to monitor change in an individuals' conception of a phenomenon can be problematic (McKenzie 1999). One of the

potential reasons for this is that the conceptual categories are only sensitive for relatively macro changes in thinking. For example, development could be picked up by the categories of description if an individual started to think of teaching as not simply being about the provision of well-structured information, but about helping students to come to their own understandings of the topic. However, it is likely that the conceptual categories would not be as effective at identifying more subtle, but no less important changes that may occur in teachers' thinking over a relatively short period of time. Considering such issues the current study used an alternative approach to analysis, which was based upon the principles of *building theories from case study research*, which was originally outlined by Eisenhardt (1989, cited in Eisenhardt 2002). This approach was an inductive process of which 'grounded theory' acts an important element (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In addition Eisenhardt stresses the importance of the interplay between the data and the researchers conceptions that have developed from the literature.

The first stage of the analysis was to build case studies of individual participants within the study, which aimed to provide richer in depth insights into the nature of their development over time. After reading and re-reading the transcripts from the first interviews, single-interview case notes were developed for each of the eleven participants. The case notes tended to maintain a focus upon two key aspects within the interview transcripts; a) the participants' understanding of teaching, and b) their descriptions of development and the associated influences upon development. This process was repeated after the second and third interviews, however at each stage a process of case selection was undertaken. Sufficient analysis had taken place for all of the participants at this stage to allow for a focus upon cases that were either

representative of, or provided most variation from the sample. For example, one of the participants, Kate, was chosen for inclusion in the full case analysis due to her 'sophisticated' descriptions about teaching. Hence the case of Kate forms part of the findings in the current article and offers a different perspective on the challenges of developing as a new teacher to that of the rest of the participants in the study. Such 'progressive focussing' or 'incremental' approach to case selection (Glaser and Strauss 1967) meant that a full set of case notes (three, one from each of the interviews over the two-year period) were available for three of the eleven participants. The final phase of the case analysis was that for each of the three participants a detailed case study was created that drew from the three single-interview case notes. There was a need to continually revisit case notes and transcripts of separate interviews but also extensive cross-referencing and checking *within* participants. At this stage in developing the analysis the case studies and transcripts were independently scrutinised by two additional researchers. This acted as an important quality criterion that helped to provide both fruitful dialogue and cross checking of emerging themes and sub-themes.

The second stage 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. The case studies developed in the first phase of the analysis provided a start-point for the thematic analysis, however it was important not to be overly influenced by the experience of these three individuals. A coding sheet was developed that helped the data to be grouped into themes and sub-themes for each participant across all interviews. This

aided the analysis as it allowed the researcher to see as much of the data in one place as possible (Miles and Huberman 1994). Being able to log similar themes across all three interviews became critical for the identification of development. There were a number of aspects inherent to the data analysis that can be used to assure its quality. For example the multiple levels of analysis utilised, the highly detailed accounts provided by the case studies, the independent scrutiny and the sensitivity to counter incidents and exceptions.

## **Main findings**

### ***Development of teaching strategies and intentions***

When the teachers explicitly spoke about their development since starting teaching and over the course of the three interviews, they tended to describe a greater proportion of their teaching in relation to the *active involvement of students*. This tended to be a shift towards an increase in student interaction in the sessions, both with the teacher and each other. The types of strategies described by the new teachers included activities such as setting up discussion groups, providing practical case studies and getting the student to contribute to the delivery of the session. A good example of this type of shift in strategy is provided in the following extract:

What I've found myself doing now is that the PowerPoints have either been cut right back or I have just gone away from them and gone more to [...] lots of interaction, a lot of probing questions, getting them to almost deliver the lesson. (Anne, sports science, third interview)

In the majority of instances this change in teaching strategies was accompanied by a shift in intentions that were more student-centred and learning-focused. Elsewhere in the interview, Anne used words such as ‘inspiring’ and ‘challenging’ the students in their learning. Some further examples of student-centred, learning-focused descriptions of teaching are apparent in other new teachers in the study. Dave, a psychology lecturer, described the importance of thinking more globally about the student experience rather than just one session or a module. Tom, who taught Sports Science, spoke about getting the students to think for themselves and helping them to connect the facts and ‘see the real meaning of it all’. A final example of a student-centred intention came from Claire, a lecturer in physiotherapy. She described the importance of creating a comfortable learning environment and the need to encourage the students ‘to behave like professionals’.

There was evidence of the development of a greater awareness of student-centred approaches to teaching in the participants over the course of the interviews. Often they described trying to balance the approaches or use what could be termed a *blended* approach to teaching. Such an approach refers to the teachers describing strategies to deliver information alongside those to actively involve the students. However, there were indications from some teachers of a lack of resolution with this approach and that such a shift was uncomfortable. At times this blending of strategies appeared to coincide with a lack of clarity in terms of the teachers’ intentions for their teaching. In the extracts below, both Dave and Ben are clearly aware of different strategies that actively involve the student, however they do indicate that they have some difficulties with their teaching at a conceptual level.

When I do practical things, group sessions and discussions and things within a session, it tends to run very well [...] but I do find it difficult to cope with it on a theoretical basis. So if I have a bunch of theory I need to get across that they need to start thinking about, I find it much easier to say, 'I'm going to describe that theory to you. Here's as many real world examples of that in action as I can think of to help you get to grips with it', but that's my initial reaction rather than throwing a problem at them, get them to brainstorm it and then pull out the theory that I already know exists (Dave, psychology, second interview).

I'm not quite sure what the ideal is, I've got on one hand this very strong sort of everything must be interactive, you must not stand and talk for any amount of time, they must constantly be doing things.... And part of me thinks, 'Yeh that's a really good idea' and I certainly do need to change.., and I have changed to a certain extent in that you know everything does need to be more involved and more interactive. But is that really the ideal, is that too far the other way? My feeling is that is too far the other way to a certain extent, so I'm not actually quite sure what the ideal is at the moment. (Ben, psychology, second interview)

Dave and Ben describe issues such as 'finding it difficult to cope with on a theoretical basis' and 'I'm not actually quite sure what the ideal is at the moment'. This may be associated with a lack of clarity in terms of selecting the most appropriate strategy for the particular learning task and context. Such a finding relates back to the concept of 'expanded awareness' (Martin and Ramsden 1992), where certain approaches are brought into the foreground or sent to the background depending upon the situation. However, what the data in the current study reveals is the challenge of making a transition to such a way of seeing teaching. In addition to these types of *internal* challenges the new teachers also described a number of external challenges that they encountered as they tried to put their ways of thinking about teaching into practice.

### *Challenges of the active involvement of the students*

Although the new teachers appeared to develop more learning-focused intentions the level of interaction with the students varied considerably in the strategies they adopted. The specific *context* within which the teacher was working appeared to be a primary factor in terms of the decision about which strategy to use and therefore the extent of the active involvement of the students. A key component of the context was the subject or topic being taught. Different topic areas varied the level of knowledge of what was being taught in both the students and teachers, which had an influence upon the teaching approach taken. The following section aims to illustrate some of these highly contextual challenges that the new teachers faced in introducing strategies that more actively involved the students.

A primary challenge for the new teachers in using strategies that more actively involved the students in sessions was the extent to which the topic being taught seemed suitable for this approach. The teachers tended to consider topics that ‘lent themselves’ to student interaction with the material and those that were better suited to the delivery of information. There were several examples where variation in strategy depending upon the topic being taught was evident in the participants’ descriptions. In the extract below, Simon indicated that the Acquisition of Skill module was well suited to the involvement of the students by drawing on their past experiences of how they learnt particular skills as children.

Now the Acquisition of Skill module I think is brilliant ‘cause, you know, you’re looking at how do we learn. There are so many examples that everybody can contribute with and it’s a bit mad



when you sort of say, “right so what’s the first thing you learn?” or, “how did you learn how to write?” And it’s something everyone can relate to. I find like all the parts of the syllabus, there are always experiences that everyone can draw on to try and support something and an understanding of the subject. (Simon, sports science, first interview)

In the topic that Anne was teaching there was a lot of ‘factual’ information that she perceived as suiting a didactic approach. However, what is also illustrated in the following extract is that she found that it was possible to get the students involved by drawing on their prior knowledge from another module.

It was really factual and it was quite scientific and it was quite heavy, and I just wanted to try and lighten it up a little bit. Now some of the content didn’t lend itself towards a different approach, it was very much it’s quite in depth and we are just gonna have to get the notes down. But the lesson, I was able to kind of change it towards the end...., it was stuff that they would have done prior in another module [...] so I wasn’t teaching them from scratch so they did have some prior knowledge. So I was thinking down that line as well that well we probably don’t have to then just deliver, I can facilitate, so I can maybe give them some tasks to do just to jog their memory and just get them talking. (Anne, sports science, second interview)

In this final extract, to illustrate how the topic being taught appears to influence the approach taken by the teachers, Ben describes how he wanted to avoid any discussion in his teaching. The reason he gives for this is that he perceived that the topic being taught was contentious and therefore he wanted to ‘keep a hold of it’.

I actually did an hour session on clinical psychology, so introduction to say things like schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. And that was... that was me just standing there and chatting for quite a while, and I actually said to them at the beginning, I said I’m going to talk to you for quite a little while now and I’m sorry for that, this is quite a... I

don't know, it's a quite contentious topic to introduce. I felt it was important that I introduced it rather than it being an opinion based discussion because they haven't had any prior knowledge of sort of the theory and understanding behind it, so I think on occasion that's the only way to do it really, to keep hold of, keep a hold of it (Ben, psychology, third interview)

A theme that is evident in all three of the extracts above, but was also apparent in the majority of the new teachers in the sample, is the importance of the students' pre-existing knowledge of the topic area. When the students' knowledge of a topic was perceived to be high, as in the case of Simon and Anne, the teacher appeared to use strategies that more actively involve the students in the session. However in the case of Ben, when prior knowledge was low, a strategy that delivered the information to the student was adopted.

There were a number of other challenges that the new teachers faced when they used strategies that more actively engaged the students. Several of the new teachers mentioned the increased demand that interactive approaches brought in terms of the required knowledge and experience. The challenges they reported centred upon a lack of knowledge or skills in a number of different aspects. These include aspects such as: how to ask questions to check the students' understanding; how to monitor and manage student interactions and behaviour; and how to designing tasks that achieves the aim of a specific session. In turn each of these issues become apparent in the three extracts below. The aim is to provide a more vivid insight into the challenges the teachers encountered when they described the use of more open, interactive approaches to teaching.

In Transferable Skills Development I just don't feel I can get anything from them.

There's a sea of blank faces and when I've finished they kind of wake themselves up and peel themselves off the desk, and possibly answer questions. But it's difficult to get that feedback, I think if I'm going through how to do an effective presentation what do I ask them at the end to check their understanding of it? (Ruth, sports studies, third interview)

They all interacted, they all took part in the activities and they all seemed to be interested. A couple of them were asking questions and questioning the theory I was talking about, which was great. But there was a slight problem to that particular session just because there seems to be some unease amongst the students themselves, and there's a small group of them who don't seem to get on with the rest and appear to be quite disruptive. So on top of all the teaching and learning, it's about trying to maintain some civilised behaviour. (Dave, psychology, second interview)

I sometimes feel that particularly with first years that they're just talking without any reference to psychological theory. What I ideally want is them to be generating opinions based on psychology theory and psychology evidence. So sometimes I'll look around the room and I'll think is this actually achieving much. For example on dyslexia they just give their general thoughts and feelings. So it's a case of trying to keep it linked with the theory, but it can be quite difficult particularly when it's subjects which they do find interesting which they just want to talk about (Ben, psychology, third interview)

An additional challenge to actively involving the students, for some teachers, was if they were required to teach a topic that they had not taught before and had a limited knowledge of. Such a lack of content knowledge of a topic area was closely associated with the use of strategies that transmitted information to the students. The teachers often described avoiding interaction with the students in such instances, as they felt unable to answer questions from the students or cope with the less

predictable nature of this approach to teaching. This comes through in the following description from Lucy.

When I feel more confident I try and engage them by giving them tasks and giving them things to do and then asking questions. I still think in areas I don't know that well I try to keep more control than perhaps I should, even in seminars I am a bit more closed than I would be if it was something that I knew well. (Lucy, sports studies, first interview)

Although some individual issues come through from the extracts above, such as the importance of confidence in Lucy's teaching, the common influence upon the teachers' approaches appears to be the idiosyncrasies of the topic or the student group. These examples aim to illustrate how instrumental specific contextual factors were in terms of the challenges these new teachers faced in more actively involving the students.

### ***Case illustration of a new teacher with a 'sophisticated' conception of teaching***

Kate was one of the participants in the wider study for which detailed case study analysis was undertaken. Compared to the other teachers she had a highly developed view of teaching and this acts to provide a slightly different perspective on some of the challenges of developing student-centred approaches to teaching. Although the other participants described development towards more student-centred views of teaching, with an intention to develop the students' understanding of the subject, Kate's descriptions did seem more advanced than this in that they related to the conceptual change and development of the students. Kate's descriptions about teaching had the hallmarks of a 'sophisticated' conception of teaching. She spoke

about use of approaches that supported students to change their conceptions about the discipline and the nature of knowledge itself.

Kate's area of expertise was early medieval continental history, although she tended to teach a much broader range within medieval history. The institution that Kate was at for the first interview was her first full-time teaching position. However, this was not a permanent contract. At the time of the first interview she had been teaching for six months and was undertaking a Postgraduate Teaching Certificate. Kate did have prior experience of teaching part-time in an associate college and also another University as a doctoral student. By the second interview, Kate had moved to a permanent position in a different University. The third and final interview took place nine months after the second and at this time Kate's position was the same. However, she felt that her responsibilities within the department had been increased both as a result of 'being given things' but also taking new roles on herself.

One of the main intentions within Kate's teaching was to enable the students to think like historians. An insight into such a view of learning is evident in the following extract from the second interview:

They didn't just learn kind of an isolated fact but they actually learned a way of thinking and a skill, which they can then apply to other things as well. They actually managed to learn something which they make their own. They didn't just kind of learn that the Vandals conquered North Africa, but they learned something about how you explore certain social processes of conquest and how you work with sources and what kind of questions you ask. And they then applied that to a completely different course.

Although Kate's intentions for her teaching appeared relatively stable she seemed to battle extensively with how to approach this. She often made comments such as 'I think I'm failing them as I always am because I haven't developed a way of teaching this to them and making them feel comfortable with it'. Throughout interviews the sheer volume of experimentation with and reflection upon different strategies was striking. A particular issue for Kate, in trying to get the students to think like historians, was how much it was necessary to focus upon the content and how much to develop the broader skills of the students such as debate and using sources of evidence. This tension is well captured in the following extract:

This letting go of the content, because I think this is much more important for them to have the other learning experiences. It doesn't matter if they don't all know the last tiny bit of what the implications of [the] concept of master narrative are. But I think I've designed this so that I feel happy to let that go and not focus on the contents learning so much as the just learning to discuss things. [...]. It's very hard because in history, most of the learning happens with students doing learning stuff in the library and writing essays. So I don't think I've even been about the transmission of information, but I think I'm much happier now. It's a difficult one, about you need to cover things so you can ask them exam questions, and you can't really ask them exam questions on things that you haven't discussed in class or lectured about. But I'm a bit better at letting go.

Another area of discomfort for Kate was that through interactions with students she often encountered instances that did not match with her expectations and aims as a teacher. To some extent, the origin of this disparity appeared to be based on Kate's understanding of what learning history should entail. Her aim was to engage the students in historical thinking and the use of source material, yet interaction and feedback from the students appeared to provide her with an insight into the very 'real'

barriers to enacting this approach to teaching. The following extracts provide two examples that illustrate this mismatch quite clearly.

Last semester there was a lot of kind of where they came up against my expectations, it was all very jarring because I expected second years to be able to do somethings that they couldn't. I actually asked, 'Do you have any idea what I'm why I keep banging on about primary sources?', and they had no idea. I expected these things and they all looked at me as if I was talking German. So I came and suddenly kind of I had to reassess what I was doing.

I was just kind of sitting there and taken aback because I had been aiming for the questions, you know; 'What is he trying to say? Why is he putting down Nero and Herod?' That was my expectation and actually it was like; 'Who's Nero and who's Herod?'. And then I readjust and that's why I feel that I'm a bit out of synch with them in this course because I'm still not understanding where they're coming from, often that's my feeling.

Despite a 'sophisticated' conception of teaching being considered the most complete, what came through extremely strongly from Kate was the lack of resolution that she felt on a number of levels. Firstly, although she had a very clear intention for her teaching, this did not automatically translate into a clear image of how it could be achieved. Secondly, her view of teaching encouraged her to strike a balance between developing the students' content knowledge and helping them to think like historians. Finally, the mismatch between Kate's way of thinking about teaching history and the students' ability to engage with the concepts was problematic. The case study above demonstrates some of the complexities and challenges of adopting student-centred

approaches to teaching and it is likely that these difficulties were intensified as a consequence of the teacher being a relative novice in higher education.

## **Discussion**

One of the key aspects of the new teachers' development was the increase in their concern for more actively involving the students. In a review of studies into teachers' conceptions of teaching Kember (1997) identified a transitional category. A key characteristic of this conception of teaching is the realisation of the importance of interactions between the teacher and students. Such a conception indicates that the individual has an awareness of the student's role in the learning process rather than the sole focus being upon them as the teacher. Since Kember's work there has been debate with regards to the existence of a transitional category based on the argument that it is the purpose and nature of interaction and not the interaction itself that is critical (Samuelowicz and Bain 2001). On the whole this would appear a logical argument and the majority of new teachers in the current investigation a shift towards more active strategies was associated with the description of more student-centred intentions. However an interesting observation from Kember (1997) in relation to the intermediary category was that a pre-cursor to making the transition would be a 'disorientating dilemma'. Since this observation, such a concept has not been well considered in the literature. A potential reason for this lack of consideration may be due to the lack of longitudinal data on which to make judgement about teachers' conceptual development. The data from the current study is better placed to consider development in the teachers' thinking. In some instances, difficulty and disorientation in shifting towards recognition of student understanding rather than the



lecturer's knowledge base was clear. This was particularly apparent in the *blending* of approaches and unrest that was identified for Dave and Ben. In these instances it would seem that the teachers had an awareness of strategies to more actively involve the students, but had not come to terms with the purpose of such strategies. Therefore the current article would argue that a shift towards more student-centred approaches to teaching is extremely challenging and that an initial shift in *strategy* may be a critical first step. Such experience of more interactive strategies may provide important instances upon which intentions for these strategies can be shaped and confirmed. This particular finding from the wider study has been reported in greater detail elsewhere (Sadler, in press).

In addition to the conceptual challenge of developing towards more student-centred approaches to teaching, the current study also has identified a number of challenges associated with the learning and teaching environment. There has been an indication in previous literature that both the specific contextual variation and underlying disciplinary differences are related to the approaches to teaching taken. Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2006) found that teachers from 'hard' disciplines were more likely to report teacher-focused approaches and those in 'soft' disciplines were more student-focused. In addition they found that the same teaching in a different context is likely to adopt a different approach. The data from the current study indicates that the particular topic being taught acted as a critical contextual factor and that this often appeared to take precedence over the broader disciplinary context. In addition, an important aspect of what it was about the topic that made an individual opt for a particular approach was not only the amount of factual, non-discursive information but also the perceived level of the student prior knowledge of the topic. Such data

appears to support the suggestion that teachers' approaches to teaching are more about 'contextually localised models of what students might do, than about evoking general conceptions of teaching' (Eley 2006, 191). In other words, the demands of teaching a specific topic to a particular group came through more strongly from the new teachers in the current study than the traditions and norms of the discipline area. Therefore in order to support new teachers in moving towards more student-centred approaches it is important that staff development activities are sensitive to the specific topics and student groups that the individual teaches.

Another finding from the analysis was that the new teachers' content knowledge of the topic or subject area being taught appeared to play a key role in terms of the approach that they adopted. Although a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the current article it is worth noting parallels here with other recent work with individuals new to teaching in higher education (Boyd and Harris 2010).

Analysis of data from the current study also indicates a relationship between teacher content knowledge and teacher confidence. Future research may consider the nature of this relationship and the implications for approach to teaching in more detail. More specifically, it is of interest whether having a good subject knowledge in an area simply provides the teacher with the confidence to have open discussion with students, or, that the depth of knowledge in a subject allows the teacher to better see the potential sticking points for the students' understanding and develop strategies to help them in overcoming these.

The case study of Kate aimed to provide a different perspective on the challenges of student-centred approaches to teaching. Within the findings from this case analysis

there are echoes from previous work with higher education teachers (Entwistle 2003). Entwistle suggests that simply because an individual holds a sophisticated conception of teaching, this does not provide an obvious blueprint for how this might translate into teaching approaches and methods. Despite Kate's relatively well developed conception of teaching and extensive content knowledge, the description of her lived experience of teaching was often far from being 'desirable', 'complete' or 'sophisticated'. She was constantly battling with how best to teach and was unresolved about how she could get the students to 'think like historians'. There is a parallel here with McLean and Bullard's (2000) findings that novice teachers often held student-centred, learning orientated conceptions of teaching, but, due to inexperience and local contextual issues, they often struggled to put this way of thinking into practice. Kate described extensive experimentation with different strategies, which may have been an attempt to bridge her well developed conception of teaching and extensive content knowledge, through the development of her pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987). This type of situation can be seen in Entwistle and Walker's description below of what a sophisticated conception of teaching requires. The words in italics are to emphasise the aspect of a sophisticated conception of teaching that Kate appeared to be coming to terms with.

A sophisticated conception of teaching stems from the teacher's own deep understanding of the subject, but depends on much more. It requires *an act of imagination through which the teacher first envisages the subject from the students' perspective, and then devises ways of helping the students across the initial gulf of incomprehension* which separates them from the discourse of the discipline or profession (Entwistle and Walker 2000, 343) (Emphasis added).

This in-depth analysis of Kate's experience provides an insight into the difficulties that a new teacher can face even when they appear to have a deep understanding of the subject and a sophisticated conception of teaching. It would appear that teachers such as Kate require support with 'devising ways to help students across the gulf of incomprehension', or in other words, identifying a range of strategies that can potentially align with their conception of teaching. Previous research, in an abstract way, has suggested a congruent relationship between conception, intention and strategy (Trigwell and Prosser 1996). However such research is limited in acknowledging the real difficulties that a teacher may face in aligning these aspects of teaching.

## **Conclusions**

The current article has aimed to illustrate some of the day-to-day challenges that new teachers in higher education face. The design of teacher development programmes in higher education is starting to move towards attempting to shift teachers towards more student-centred ways of thinking. However, simply making them aware of and discussing student-centred approaches is not sufficient. It would appear that new teachers require additional support on two levels. Firstly, at a conceptual level they need help with understanding the epistemological basis of student-centred approaches. This would specifically incorporate the development of theoretical understanding of how students learn and broadening the way teaching is envisaged in order that appropriate approaches are used for particular forms of learning. Throughout such developments it is important to acknowledge the potential 'disorientation' this may bring to a new teacher and to support them in such experiences. Secondly, on a more

pragmatic level, new teachers require support with how they might ‘imaginatively envisage the subject from the students perspective’ and guidance in devising strategies appropriate for the specific context within which they work. Such support requires dialogue with colleagues not just in the same faculty or department, but with individuals who have experiences of teaching the same subject and topic areas as the new teachers.

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