Title: Reflections of a novice sports science lecturer: Perceptions of the challenges and sources of support.

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to highlight perceptions of the main demands and challenges placed on a novice sports science university lecturer and consider sources of support available during the early stages of their career. A lecturer is typically required to perform the roles of administrator, teacher, personal tutor, researcher and consultant. Discussion is given to the challenges a novice lecturer is likely to face within each of these roles and possible ways to overcome these challenges. Finally, a number of sources of support are identified to ensure a novice lecturer maintains the focus of their work and continues their professional development.

KEY WORDS: novice lecturer, reflection, perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

The role of a lecturer in sport and exercise science can involve many responsibilities including improving the education and therefore knowledge of students, undertaking research to improve our understanding of scientific phenomena or providing quality scientific support for clients. For a novice university lecturer, it may be difficult to fully understand the main focus of their job, which may differ from one institution to the next. The aim of this article is to discuss the likely challenges and demands placed on a novice university lecturer and consider sources of support that will help them through the early stages of their career. This paper is a reflective article that is based on my personal experiences, as well as discussions I have had with colleagues and students during my initial lecturing career. The process of reflective practice has been used widely in previous educational research (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009). Throughout the article, I will consider my initial perceptions of the challenges I faced, followed by consideration of previous research relevant to these challenges. I will then reflect on how my practices have changed and developed as a result of these experiences and knowledge of the previous research.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I started out in my career as a sports science lecturer, my initial perception was that it seemed a daunting job due to the many roles I was being required to fulfil and slight lack of clarity over the priorities of my work. However, this diversity makes it an extremely challenging, stimulating and rewarding job where you have options available to you and have some choice in your main

focus and direction of your career. Consistent with previous research, I found the task of balancing the time demands of these various roles can be difficult and has lead to the availability of time being seem as a major obstacle for academic career progression (Halpern, 2008; Mayrath, 2008) that highlights the need for effective time management. Some methods proposed to help create time and maximise efficiency include limiting classroom preparation time, setting meeting boundaries, conducting group advising sessions, trying to integrate teaching and research, removing any distractions, planning daily writing time and creating deadlines for yourself (Mayrath, 2008; McCormack & Barnes, 2008). It is also necessary to say 'no' at times (Kiewra, 2008) since you can be asked to fulfil many commitments but have limited time to complete them all in and your attention can become diluted to the point where you have many goals but don't get round to achieving them.

As well as the challenges you are likely to face, it is also important to be aware that university lecturers can be exposed to high levels of work-related stress (Altbach, 1996; Seldin, 1987). If these stressors are not managed adequately, they can result in reduced quality, productivity, moral and creativity as well as having a negative impact on health and well being (Everly, 1990; Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987; Nowack, 1989; Terry, Tonge, & Callan, 1995). Common sources of stress include work overload, role clarity, lack of promotion or recognition, poor management, inadequate resources, pressure to secure research funding and negative student interaction (Daniels & Guppy, 1994; Devonport, Biscomb, & Lane, 2008; Harrison, 1997; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001). To address the potential negative effects associated with work-related stress, a

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number of coping strategies have been identified including mental rehearsal, effective planning, positive self-talk, putting in perspective, relaxation techniques, support from colleagues, recognition and achievement, good morale and a flexible work environment (Devonport et al., 2008; Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001).

RESPONSIBILITIES AND ROLES

The job of a lecturer in sport and exercise science often involves many commitments that can usually be categorised under the general roles of an administrator, a teacher, a personal tutor, a researcher and a consultant. The relative importance and time demands of each of these roles is likely to vary from one institution to the next. Whilst in many cases, teaching is the only aspect that is specified in terms of time commitments in your contract, career progression and academic respect is often more related to research and consultancy performance. This can lead to many lecturers seeing teaching as the weak relation to research (Dewar, 2002). However, Warrior (2002) highlights the individual responsibility of a lecturer to provide a professional service in all aspects of their role. There are many sources of support available to assist in meeting the demands of the job, but these can be difficult to identify. The following sections provide a reflection of the main issues I faced within my various roles, as well as the sources of support I relied upon to overcome these issues.

An administrator

Whatever you consider to be your main focus, there is likely to be administration commitments associated with it that can be time consuming. This may take the form of booking rooms, writing module guides, filling in forms or responding to emails. As a novice lecturer, I quickly realised the importance of maintaining organisation to ensure I stayed on top of administration tasks so that they did not have a detrimental effect on other aspects of the job. The main initial problem I faced was knowing who to contact for what I needed. To get through this, I usually relied on colleagues who had worked at my institution for a long time since using any staff directory I was provided with often sent me to the wrong people.

You might be required to attend departmental meetings, in my case, around once a month. As a new member of staff it seemed like I had little input or relevance to a lot of what is being discussed but these meetings are an important chance for the department to discuss important issues and a chance to learn from the other more experienced staff various procedures that you need to know to effectively perform your job. Over time you may develop more responsibility and will then be called upon to give information and express views. You may also be required to attend academic boards of various forms. These include module boards, where grades for each module are confirmed, and programme or progression boards, where grades for each student are confirmed and progression to the next year or degree classification awarded is determined. Again, initially my input seemed minimal but it can be a good opportunity to monitor students overall performance and learn the many academic procedures relating to the awarding of degrees. You may also be

required to be involved in recruitment and admission of students, such as taking open day talks, interviewing students and providing assistance to the admissions tutor during clearing.

<u>A teacher</u>

Teaching is usually the role you spend the majority of your time conducting during the initial stages of your lecturing career, therefore receives the majority of discussion in this paper. Many skills have been outlined as being desired traits for good teaching, including empathy, accessibility, good communication, enthusiasm, supportiveness, fairness, love and knowledge of the subject, friendliness, humour, punctuality, organisation, open mindedness, adaptability and confidence (Adams, 1970; Avent, 1931; Dewar, 2002; Roy, 1987). A good teacher may not need to have all the traits outlined, but rather possess a good mix that are appropriate for a given learning environment (Dewar, 2002). Therefore, it is important to consider your skills and try to focus your teaching style on your strengths as well as attempting to develop the skills you feel you lack.

In preparing for teaching, my perception was that the most appropriate first step would be to identify the topics needed to be covered and the most suitable resources that were available to cover those topics. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) provides very comprehensive resources guides for all disciplines in sport and exercise science (available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources/guides/guides_sport). The next stage I considered was the methods of delivery of the session. Research suggests that novice lecturers typically adopt teaching strategies they

experienced during their own education regardless of its appropriateness for the students or subject being taught (Gidman, Humphreys, & Andrews, 2000; Prosser, Ramsden, Trigwell, & Martin, 2003). In addition, many novice lecturers focus on covering all the course content in detail (Young & Diekelmann, 2002) to avoid the problem of students saying 'we haven't covered that in the lectures' or they may feel pressured by students who have an expectation that the lecturer will provide them with all the answers so that they are required to perform little personal discovery (Clynes, 2009). On reflection, when I started teaching I feel I provided students with too much information that caused some students to rely on me to provide all the answers and therefore limit their self-discovery. This can lead to lecturers 'spoon feeding' students which is not usually the most effective way of getting students to develop a deeper understanding of the subject being taught (Ramsden, 2003) since they are denied autonomy and therefore do not have the opportunity to thoroughly engage in the subject matter and take responsibility for their own learning (Clynes, 2009). This has since lead me to try to incorporate greater personal discovery and discussion into my teaching to try to foster a deeper understanding in students. That said, it is important to provide students with sufficient clear guidance to ensure they understand what is expected of them effectively complete an assessment. Curzon (2004) suggests that the students, the subject matter, resources and constraints should all be considered before preparing a formal teaching session. Where possible, the subject being taught should relate to the experiences, interests and expectations of the students since this allows them to better understand the practical implications of the

theories being taught and enhances student enthusiasm (Dewar, 2002; Lane, Hall, & Lane, 2004). Teaching strategies that encourage discussion are often more effective in fostering retention and transfer of knowledge to problem solving situations (Horgan, 1999). Such strategies, typically called problem based learning, have been proposed to allow students to build on previous knowledge, apply knowledge to solve problems and facilitate a team learning environment (Camp, 1996), that in turn improves student autonomy, critical thinking, communication and time management (Duncan & Al-Nakeeb, 2006; Duncan, Lyons, & Al-Nakeeb, 2007). Lane and Whyte (2006) highlight the need to ensure students are exposed to a sufficient amount of the practical aspects of sports science during their development. Providing this can be a challenge for a university lecturer, particularly with large class sizes.

As a novice lecturer, I found the first teaching session a daunting prospect of facing a large group of students with the task of maintaining their attention for the next one or two hours. Factors contributing to effective lecture presentation include being organised, providing variation and including appropriate examples or stories of personal experiences to maintain class interest (Adams, 1970; Dewar, 2002). To ensure you communicate effectively consider your voice, volume, gesture, humour, timing and self-confidence (Dewar, 2002). After each teaching session, I found it useful to spend time reflecting on the session to identify strengths and weaknesses. After teaching a new topic, there were very few sessions that I was fully satisfied with the first time through and I usually felt there were aspects I should change. The extent of the changes usually depended on the time I had available to prepare the session and my knowledge

of the topic. Also, I found it difficult to gage whether an activity was going to work effectively or last the desired time until I had tried it out. This made my teaching a gradual process of improvement where changes are made and lecture materials evolve through using different resources that are discovered.

The ability the ask and answer questions effectively during lectures has been highlighted as an important quality of a good lecturer (Nicholl & Tracey, 2007), since it is a good way to establish students initial knowledge, regain class attention and confirm learning has taken place (Curzon, 2004). As a novice lecturer, I felt at times I avoided situations where students could ask a difficult question that I would not know the answer to and therefore allow students to think I lacked knowledge. However, one should accept that it takes time to develop a broad knowledge base and should encourage situations where students can discuss the subject (Clynes, 2009). To manage difficult questions you can open the question up to the whole class, ask the student to consider the answer themselves or even come back to the question when you have had time to find out the answer. Establishing an appropriate level at which to ask questions can be difficult for a novice lecturer (Clynes, 2009). In addition, asking students' questions in front of classmates typically will induce a negative response, since nobody likes being put in a situation where they may show a lack of knowledge (Bligh, 1998). To avoid this, I found initially asking questions that are related to opinions and personal experiences more effective. Novice lecturers may also benefit from preparing a number of questions to ask before the lecture, that cover knowledge, comprehension and application of what is being taught at various levels (Clynes, 2009).

Assessments are at the core of students' experience of higher education and it is therefore important that learning outcomes are clearly linked to assessments (Maher, 2004). As a result, I found the process of ensuring appropriate, challenging and fair assessments that are designed to encourage creativity and included good marking criteria which ensured consistency in grading was time consuming but very important. As well as grading assessments, a lecturer needs to provide students with effective feedback which is vital for effective student learning so that students clearly appreciate what they need to do in order to improve (Lawrence, 2005). Using an effective feedback sheet will ensure students gain a good understanding of how there grade was awarded and may reduce the time demands placed on lecturers as a result of increasing cohort sizes (Lindsay, 2002). When developing my assessments, I was encouraged by colleagues to consider a variety of methods, such as a practical assessment, exam, presentations or written reports. I found that each had its own benefits and suited the assessment of certain learning outcomes more easily than others but attempted to ensure students were exposed to a variety of assessment methods.

At the end of teaching a module you may be required to complete module evaluation forms, where you reflect on the success or failure of a particular module and consider changes you may make the next time you run the module. In addition to your own reflections, you may be required to ask students to complete feedback questionnaires to gain students opinions of the effectiveness of module and your teaching methods. I found these processes, along with consideration of student grades and peer review, provide useful feedback

(Dewar, 2002), particularly for a novice lecturer, as it allowed me to identify any areas of strengths and weaknesses in my teaching and generate ideas to improve.

<u>A personal tutor</u>

One role of a lecturer that is often not considered is the importance to provide pastoral care for students. Starting university can be a daunting time for students who experience many stressors relating to studying, examinations, transition and finance (Robotham, 2008). My belief was that the first step as a personal tutor should be to ensure I developed a good student rapport. To do this, I made an effort to learn student names, found out about their backgrounds and made efforts to show I was taking an interest in their development. Other methods proposed by Dewar (2002) to ensure students feel you are approachable, include clearly providing them with your contact details, responding to students in a timely, friendly and non-judgemental manner, adopting an open door policy and being available with regular office hours to provide students with more opportunities to communicate with lecturers. However, before adopting these policies, it is important to consider their impact on other aspects of the job. For example, an open door policy can mean many students will call in requiring your assistance, disrupting your ability to complete other tasks which you had scheduled. This particularly can be a problem when adopting a teaching style which encourages student self discovery. This, in turn, can influence the amount of work-related stress placed on a lecturer. Therefore, limiting student contact time to regular scheduled hours will ensure time to complete other tasks and encourages students to organise themselves more

effectively. When discussing their studies, it is important to consider the expectations and motivations of your students, which are likely to vary greatly. I found it useful to try to remember what it's like to be a student and how stressful it can be. For example, I posed questions to myself such as "when I was a student and a lecturer didn't give me the help I needed or didn't reply to an important email how did that make me feel?"

<u>A researcher</u>

At the start of my lecturing career, I felt there were many factors to overcome before getting my research started, including getting to grips with the various regulations that apply, filling in all the forms, doing the background research using new university systems, going through a new ethics procedure, being trained to use new equipment as well as completing your other commitments. This, at times, made me feel disheartened when trying to get my research ideas into practice. However, whist waiting to get your research ideas going, there are still many things proposed to allow development as a researcher (Kiewra, 2008). These include trying to develop collaborative research links within your department, as well as external links, to allow you to work within a research team which often plays an important role in publication success (Mayrath, 2008; McCormack & Barnes, 2008). One can meet potential collaborators through meetings, courses, conferences and through actively seeking a mentor. One can also work on developing your research skills (Kiewra, 2008), such as improving research methods, testing techniques, statistical methods and writing style, that in the long run will be very beneficial. To ensure you maintain research development whilst you have lots of other commitments, Mayrath

(2008) recommends scheduling regular time specifically for research. One final way to maintain research output is through attendance at research seminars and conferences that allow you to present preliminary reports and such events often stimulate ideas.

The role of lecturer also offers the opportunity to supervise research students. This seemed daunting to me at first, knowing the level of supervision I received and all I learnt from my supervisor. However, I found that starting as a second supervisor allowed me to learn the role and means that some of the pressure is shared within the supervisory team. It is worth noting, however, that supervision often involves more of an administration and support role that can be time consuming, since you spend a lot of time filling in forms and offering ideas or feedback. Therefore, conducting regular timetabled group sessions has been proposed as a useful way to save time, allow students to support each other through exchanging their experiences and maintain your enthusiasm and involvement in the projects (McCormack & Barnes, 2008).

<u>A consultant</u>

In some universities, there is a strong emphasis on generating income through consultancy. This might be running short courses in a particular specialism or offering scientific support to sports clubs or athletes. The main barriers I perceived were thinking of ideas for a short course that enough people would be interested in attending and thinking of scientific support to offer that clubs and athletes would be interested having you provide. In addition, having lost contacts that were gained during previous work it can be difficult to build those up again. To overcome these problems, offer your services to find out what

scientific support coaches and athletes would be interested in and build on links that your colleagues have developed. Then, having developed the links, it is vital you provide a professional service.

DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Maintaining professional development is vital for a sports science lecturer, whereby competencies are improved through re-skilling and learning new methods of practice through attending regular training courses and conferences (Hoyle, 1985). Brown, Bucklow and Clark (2002) suggests that lecturers are usually good at keeping up to date with their subject knowledge, but not so good when it comes to matters of pedagogic practice. However, novice university lecturers are now required to complete some form of teaching training course, typically a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert). Many novice lecturers question the value of completing such a course and perceive it as an unnecessary extra demand on an already full workload. Whilst on some occasions I found myself considering whether my time could be spent more effectively and that there seemed to be little practical advice offered for things such as maintaining class attention and techniques to prepare good lectures or practical sessions, there were also many positive things to be gained from such a course. These include understanding what makes a good teacher, appreciating different student learning styles, identifying effective teaching and assessment methods, forming links with other departments within your university, gaining a formal qualification in teaching and allowing an opportunity to discuss experiences with fellow new lecturers. In addition, many of these teaching courses are accredited by the HEA, which

means that successful completion makes you eligible to become a Fellow of the HEA. In general, I would suggest that completing a PGCert is well worth it and I truly feel it has allowed me to develop considerably as a university lecturer.

To ensure development and career progression, there are often many opportunities to take on new roles and responsibilities, such as year tutors and joining committee's within the university. In addition, attending suitable training courses and conferences offer the opportunity to learn new skills and meet with other people who are in the same position as you. At the end of the academic year, it may seem like you have a long time until your next teaching commitments, but in my experience this time seems to pass very quickly. It can be useful to formally construct a plan highlighting goals to achieve (McCormack & Barnes, 2008; Warrior, 2002). Some universities offer appraisals that involve discussing your development with a more experienced colleague. This process should highlight achievements as well as weaknesses to be addressed and allow you to indentify areas that you would like to develop so that the university can support you in achieving those aims. I found this process helpful to maintain my focus and not leave me wondering where the summer went once the students were back.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights the main demands placed on a novice university lecturer, within the roles of administrator, teacher, personal tutor, researcher and consultant. Due to the wide range of roles, effective time management is vital to balance the commitments a lecturer is required to fulfil. Developing competence in any of the roles takes time and involves many factors that all need to be

considered. Therefore, consider your skills and focus your efforts around the skills you consider strengths as well as developing the skills you may lack. To do this, support is available through colleagues, training courses and conferences. Finally, to ensure continuous professional development, reflect on your practice and formally construct goals to achieve.

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