

Continuous dialogue with students as a form of academic development

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“The work in this module is too theoretical. I do not know how to apply it in practice”

“We read a lot of academic articles and discuss them in class but I feel like we are not given enough in terms of how to do certain things like setting appropriate science practical investigations”

I am a novice science teacher educator at a South African University continuously concerned with my practice and how I can improve it for the advancement of my students' learning. For this aim, I use self-reflexive methodologies like self-study. Two weeks into my Biology methodology course, I requested my students to reflect on me and my teaching, and the above quotations are some of the words they expressed. I could not respond to the questions on the spot because I did not expect this kind of feedback – I was expecting ‘something positive’. At first, their feedback was unsettling for me. My fear was also that I could become defensive. I was expecting them to say positive things about how I teach. This goes against what I claim to be doing as a self-study scholar, doesn't it? How can I be claiming to be a self-reflexive individual yet I want people to say only good things about what I do. I realised that student feedback would not only be for me to look at how best I can teach, but also to learn about my students and how they learn. I then began to make it a habit that after every two lectures, I ask students to write a reflection on my teaching and their learning. I wanted to use the reflections to continuously improve my teaching and the way I interact with them. Most students wrote the reflections and they were quite substantive. At the end of the module, the students confirmed that there has been an improvement in how I teach and interact with them.

One of the major things I came to realise was that it is advisable to focus on all the feedback given by the students so that a valid interpretation can be done. I critically reflected on the students' feedback on a continuous basis to improve my practice. I realised that only getting this feedback at the end of the teaching course, which is what is normally done in many institutions for rating purposes, would improve my practice for the upcoming cohort of students but not the students who gave feedback themselves. Asking the students to write a piece of reflection after every week or every lecture has made me to continually reflect on my practice and improve it on an on-going basis to better students learning. For example, when I reflected on their feedback as depicted in the above quotations, I began to use case studies' and concrete examples to teach how to teach science. This teaching approach helped students to imagine their future teaching contexts.

Although according to Flodén (2017), a dialogue with students through getting their feedback and reflections helps instructors to validate their interpretations of practice, it also helps one to immediately improve practice. I, therefore, came to realise that this is what academic development means to me as a novice teacher educator in my context. It means continuously being in dialogue with students to understand their concerns, their perceptions of what they

learn and how they learn. However, it goes beyond this. Academic development is also about the instructor's self-introspection in the light of this continuous dialogue with students.

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Reference

- Flodén, J. (2017). The impact of student feedback on teaching in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(7), 1054–1068. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1224997>