The shifting sands of tertiary individual consultation

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Abstract

Tertiary individual consultation entails teaching and learning at its most personally situated: two people engage in tailor-made learning. The closed-door practices of supervision have had an airing recently, yet the closed-door practice of general individual consultation remains for the most part just that, highly individual, with decisions about pedagogical practice occurring on the spot. A 2007 survey of Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ) provided some evidence of current individual appointment work practice and opinions. A follow-up survey in 2009 revisited opinion on some of the issues that emerged both from the earlier survey and my own reflection on the issues that it surfaced. Under the shifting sands of changing practice, guidelines might firm pedagogy. This paper teases out the ethical issues of individual consultation from a TLA perspective. It proposes that narrative therapy questioning practice can be useful in tertiary consultation. The TLA survey and discussion about individual consultation is framed as addressing an area that can be problematic for all academics: individual appointments and the ethics that underpin practice.

Background

Some would argue that individual teaching in office hours barely warrants pedagogical theorising because individual appointments are simply that, highly individual. Academics can choose their own stance as to how they handle the ethical issues of confidentiality, equity, and the level of assistance they provide. Yet personal contact is underpinned by the need to maintain professionalism regarding how much help is offered, to whom, how often and in what form. Anecdotes from academics suggest that individual teaching can be fraught, perhaps extremely so, for example, with the student concluding 'Can I drop this course?' (Fish, 2008, p. 6), or the teacher thinking 'I hope I never see her in class again' (Lang, 2005, p. 125). For Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) professionalism is a pressing concern. TLAs are vulnerable to institutional change, a vulnerability that makes us a little like canaries at the mine face. We are also especially attuned to academic practice because this is what we teach: "Academic development is thus a doubly academic practice: it is an academic practice

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about academic practices" (Rowland, 2006, p. 75). If there is danger here amongst the ethical issues of individual consultation (and I believe there are some tensions), we are most likely to be sensitive to it. This article opens the office door on the practice of individual consultation.

Open doors can inspire best practice; supervision gained attention (amongst others, from Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 1998; Denholm, 2007; Leder, 1998; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007) because good supervision is crucial to postgraduate and doctoral output, and research output is prized in what is perceived to be a knowledge economy (Barnett & Griffin, 1997; Rowland, 2006). Individual teaching outside of supervision remains, however, a relatively insignificant adjunct to classroom teaching and research. A brief discussion suggested that academics should commit to individual teaching and focus on students (Moore, Walsh & Risquez, 2007, p. 55). A recent guide illuminates some of the issues around good practice for supervising, coaching, mentoring and personal tutoring (Wisker, Exley, Antoniou & Ridley, 2008). Writing centre guides to tutors testify to concern about ethical behaviour without unpacking the complexity of some of the issues (a good example is that of Montreat College, 2002). Chanock (1995) perceptively opens the discussion from a TLA position ('academic skills advisor' in her terms), locating the ambivalences that cause TLAs to recoil from association with counselling because it seems counter to their own academic identities, yet showing how counselling's interest in the whole patient, or in our, case, the whole student, can contribute usefully to the pedagogy of individual appointments. Following on from Chanock's anatomisation, I further investigate individual appointments.

This article first establishes TLA credentials for pedagogical critique of individual consultation, then reports on a 2007 survey of TLAs regarding individual appointments. A focus group was part of this survey. Then a second survey two years later gauged response to a set of four statements that emerged as relevant from the first survey, and a fifth that came from our Centre's adaptation of the theory from narrative therapy. Next, given the negative ATLAANZ response to narrative therapy methods of questioning, the article explains how these might be useful in individual appointments. The article concludes with a summary of issues highly relevant to TLAs who teach individual students.

The Tertiary Learning Advisor perspective

The area of expertise of TLAs is the facilitation of learning. Yet arguably our place within the university is trivialised (Alexander, 2005), our discipline almost non-existent (Mitchell, 2006), and our sense of identity uncertain (Rowland, 2006). Homi Bhabha's 'cultural displacement' theory and the term 'refugee' have been applied to academic developer identity (Manathunga, 2007, pp. 26-27). Our very existence at times seems predicated on shifting institutional values (S. Rothblatt, lecture, March 13, 2008; Van Rij-Heyligers, 2005). We may feel subject to institutional scrutiny. Within the restrictions of what at times feels like a Foucaltian panopticon, that sense of being

constantly audited (Foucault, 1995), TLAs nonetheless have the exciting task of teaching learning. Department-based academics also work hard to facilitate student learning, but their central business lies in delivering the curriculum *content* of their papers; that of the TLAs is to look at the *processing* that makes any material meaningful (Biggs, 1988), to explicate the covert codes of academic practice that students may not have recognised, and to overtly equip students with strategies that will enable to them to make sense of their topics and to join their academic discourses. We do this through workshops and through the provision of material, but also through individual consultations, where teaching is made-to-measure.

Although we should not define ourselves by what we do *not* do, namely teach within departments, our individual consultation is one situation when what we do not do is highly pertinent: we do not edit and proof students' work for them. Many students wish we did. But none of us want to be a botcher, a repairer of second hand goods, in this case, bad prose. We also do not want to be unacknowledged quasi-supervisors. Nor, as Chanock (1995) wittily notes, are we there to "'cure' some 'deficiency'" with the word 'remedial' from medical intervention now applying to literary constipation when writing is "all in there – I just can't get it out" (p. 33). However, while individual consultation means we sometimes have to fend off expectations of such services, some rich 'eureka' moments occur in individual consultations. Individual consultation is where many theories of learning are more likely to be found in practice (for example, a teacher or advisor might more readily make use of Kolb's (1986) individual learning styles, locate Vygotsky's (1978) proximal zone of learning and enable Meyer and Land's (2006) threshold transformation). For some, tailor-made is the only pedagogy that fits.

Survey of TLA practice: methods

Hoping to glimpse current practice, I surveyed the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ) members on how they defined their boundaries when it came to individual consultation. The question was part of a questionnaire sent in 2007 to the ATLAANZ members list. ATLAANZ membership at the time was approximately 170. Participants were asked to identify whether they worked for a university or a polytechnic since it seemed possible that these specific environments may involve different working practices. Nine university workers responded and eight from polytechnics, a total of seventeen from the ATLAANZ membership. I raised the same questions in my paper at the 2007 ATLAANZ conference, where, rather than giving answers, I asked for responses to questions about TLA teaching, and the issues were discussed in groups.

Although discussion in person was vigorous and engaged, the response (approximately 10%) to the 2007 survey was disappointing given that the participants are a group that research shows have anxiety about their professional identity. Perhaps, however, this is telling in itself, and signals the difficulty of articulating teaching experience and practice. Seeking to "capture the multilayered complexity of what it feels like to

teach," Brookfield (2006, p. 1) suggests a list of contradictory nouns: "passion, hope, doubt, fear, exhilaration, weariness, colleagueship, loneliness, glorious defeats, hollow victories, and, above all, the certainties of surprise and ambiguity" (Brookfield, 2006, p. 1). Discomfort about discussing something as *personally situated* as individual consultation practice is understandable. Nonetheless those who did respond gave some indication of current practice across New Zealand in 2007.

Survey results and discussion

The small survey described the scope of individual appointments. One participant noted that individual consultations "facilitate learning for the student that may not be possible in group situations." Another defined their working practice as "not merely proof-reading – teaching to identify patterns of errors"; those patterns can only be found individually and not in group sessions. Yet there were challenges identified with individual consultation.

Diplomacy and liaison skills were noted as being essential. One participant raised the fact that we needed to show "collegiality and respect for lecturers [and] must not undermine faculty." An important ethical issue was confidentiality, mentioned by seven participants, with "privacy" also cited and in a way that suggests confidentiality: "students may feel that their privacy is compromised by the data we keep or that they will be labelled 'remedial' by attending workshops and consultations." These concerns reflect the ethics of counselling. Chanock (1995) acknowledges TLA unease about the relationship between counselling and learning advising: participants here signalled some of the same reservations about the overlap that she identifies (TLAs trained as academics feeling uncomfortable when they were used as though they were counsellors), endorsing her observations. There was acknowledgement that TLAs set boundaries when "out of my depth—knowledge and skill"; "at boundaries like content, area of expertise e.g refer to counsellor; doctor; budget; disability coordinator/tutor; Whakarangimarie [a Māori support] service"); "out of my professional expertise, e.g. disabilities assessment or academic knowledge" or "once discussion becomes more of a pastoral than academic nature." Thus although TLAs are likely to get more counselling moments than staff within disciplines since they are seen as a source of help, those who replied showed that they were aware of boundaries.

An even more important ethical issue than confidentiality was the issue of ghost writing, or helping too much. One participant admitted to becoming "extremely anxious when students with very poor English need so much help that my input is giving them an unfair advantage." Most academics want to avoid allowing students to be passive recipients of knowledge-out-of-context (Applebee, 1996) and want active learning, but TLAs are particularly aware that they must not give content to passive recipients who will then be dishonest in claiming the reward of a good grade for what is not their own thinking. TLAs were highly sensitive to the ethics of integrity concerning the ownership of work. One participant spelt out:

> We do not help with take-home tests or work for a course that is about writing. We do not help with CVs and reserve the right not to help with articles for publication. We felt it would be unethical to help there. We do not advise about content, but we do point out contradictions and faulty logic and unsupported assertions. Students are expected to learn from our advice and become self-editing.

Concerns with "how much help is given" and "number of appointments per students" were also cited. Even though universities should be fertile places where ideas are shared, TLAs were aware that fairness is compromised if they contribute content.

There is evidence that the tension between the meritocracy of a liberal democracy, and the positive discrimination of a social democracy (giving more time to traditionally under-represented groups) is as contentious in individual appointment practice as it is elsewhere (S. Rothblatt, lecture, March 13, 2008). TLAs are often able to provide access into the conventions of academia for historically under-represented cohorts. A desire to ensure that, at a larger institution, "the needs of all students are addressed" was declared by a participant who felt that time should not be spent "primarily with international students." Another participant affirmed awareness of "social/Te Tiriti" responsibilities (see too Smith, 1993), referring to the Treaty of Waitangi between Māori and the British Crown, a problematic and variously contested document establishing the rights and responsibilities of both parties and underpinning New Zealand society at every level. The principles of the Treaty are embodied in educational policy in New Zealand, so that providing access to education for Māori is a responsibility that tertiary institutions are obliged to take seriously. Another expressed the need to be "receptive to students channelled via Māori and Pasifika liaison." Social democracy's desire for a level playing field underpins support for Māori and Pacific people (Kerr, 2006; McKenzie, 2005); our institution has stated goals of fostering Māori and Pacific Islander achievement and need their success. So although TLAs are highly sensitive to boundaries, these also need to be flexible.

The survey also asked participants if they had boundaries at which they stopped helping individually, and if so, what they were. All participants showed awareness of tensions around setting boundaries and many cited their strategies for delineation. Students were generally not given unlimited access to help: one boundary was time. Time was viewed through not just a quantitative but also a qualitative lens: time had to represent improvement by the student. For example, "If a student continues to come back with the same problem, appropriate questions are asked of the student to source their confusion; the student will be asked to demonstrate their approach to the problem and approaches will be taken from that point." Another TLA stated that "we explicitly wean students from higher usage in first year to less in subsequent years."

Inherent in these limits is the sense that we should stop helping "when students are not prepared to make the necessary effort." It was reiterated that "our aim is independent learning." One TLA seemed rather too generous compared with others in refusing to

see anyone "over one assignment more than three times." Another participant explained, "I personally cease to point out areas which I've explained repeatedly in the past e.g 'You know all about topic sentences, so you know what to do here, don't you?' Or move on to something different." The word 'personally' is a reminder that TLAs continually evaluate when they are being used, 'attend[ing] to the instinctive analyses and responses that immediately suggest themselves as relevant' (Brookfield, 2006, p. 7). Despite pedagogic theory and guidelines, a significant part of teaching involves those instinctive skills we apply to all personal relationships.

The ATLAANZ 2007 conference focus group comments on individual consultations reiterated the points above and additionally suggested that documentation provided some security: "agreements" and "work logs" could provide statistics and cover permission.

Revisiting the key points

In 2009 I surveyed ATLAANZ membership again to revisit their ideas on some of the issues that emerged from the earlier study. Establishing the criteria of how strongly they felt (1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = indifferent, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree), I asked how strongly they felt about the following in the context of individual consultation, i.e. one-to-one appointments:

1. Tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) should preserve confidentiality about their professional consultation with students.
2. Students should have their access to individual appointments with TLAs limited by time, for example, to only one appointment per week.
3. Students should have their access to individual appointments with TLAs limited by productivity; for example, they cannot keep coming back with the same difficulties.
4. A set of guidelines for students to clarify the purpose of individual consultation, and the expectation that what is learned will be taken into their future work is essential for good practice.
5. Tertiary learning advisors should avoid giving students help with content by asking leading questions.

Response rate was considerably better, with 51 respondents from a membership that has dropped slightly to approximately 155 in 2009 (J. Marshall, consultation, August 21, 2009). Almost one third of the membership responded to the short snappy questionnaire. I later wished that I had not chosen 'indifferent' as the middle term since this word does not allow for the sense I got that when respondents were in between agreement and disagreement, they were not indifferent. They simply felt that the issue was more complex and nuanced than my statement allowed.

The least strongly endorsed statement was 5) above, scoring an average level of importance of 3, a response of indifference, with comments suggesting that content

was "always a contentious issue," and that there were too many variables to make this simple. I am grateful to a reviewer for pointing out that this question is ambiguous: it could be read as inferring that leading questions are to be avoided, rather than that leading questions enable the avoidance of content supply. My hunch, like the reviewer's, is that TLAs do use questions and that the response reflects a poorly designed question. Questioning was seen as "difficult in practice," of some benefit but with the proviso that "it depends on the content and what the learning advisor is there for." Clearly colleagues felt that there was more complexity than the simple and ambiguous statement allowed for. The mode for this statement was also 3, which shows that neutrality was the most common response. Perhaps the shortness of the questionnaire failed to allow for complexity: below I present a clearer case for the usefulness of this strategy.

Also sitting only just on the positive side of indifference were statement 2) above with an average endorsement of 3.1 and statement 3) just a little more positive at 3.5. Comments here suggested that TLAs continue to feel protective of students who have particular backgrounds (Māori and Pasifika, special needs groups, and "mature students who may come with bad habits that are difficult for them to unlearn"), and feel some specific needs justify more flexibility than to suggest that student appointments should be limited by time or as a result of student failure to progress. The modes for both statement 2) and 3) were 4, which shows that agreement was most common and that the average masked endorsement of the earlier survey's findings that TLAs were concerned to limit individual appointments according to both time and student improvement.

TLAs generally agreed with statement 1) that confidentiality should be preserved. The average rating was 4.0, with comments varying from a strong "always!" to acknowledgement that the room layout of several TLAs consulting in one room prohibited confidentiality, and also that discussing students with colleagues could be a professional approach for ensuring that support was cohesive. The mode for statement 1) was 5, showing stronger endorsement than the average of the need to preserve confidentiality.

The most strongly endorsed statement was 4) above for which average endorsement lay between agree and strongly agree at 4.3 and with a mode of 5. A guideline for students, 4), was thus most strongly endorsed as necessary for best practice in the context of individual appointments. Since this article began, I have been involved with colleagues in producing a guide for students using our centre that emphasises their responsibilities. We agree that such a guide is helpful and one is posted on our website. Our guide to students can be found at: http://www.cad.auckland.ac.nz/content/files/slc/individual_consultations_guidelines.pdf

Narrative therapy

The idea that TLAs should avoid giving students help with content by asking leading questions, comes out of narrative therapy theory. Just as counselling's holistic theory can be useful to TLAs as Chanock (1995) shows, I propose that so too can the theory behind narrative therapy.

Currently at our institution TLAs are admonished not to supply content, but to work strictly with learning and linguistic issues. Sometimes, though, the problem is that, like an empty envelope, an essay fails to deliver content. A steady barrage of questions might allow a TLA to draw content from the student: "But surely this question takes you to the issue of X; what did the lectures cover in terms of this issue; what material on your reading list raises this issue? How do you feel about X; tell me, do you think X is right or wrong? Or, what are the contradictions and tensions of X?" The questioning methodology of narrative therapy (White, 1988) allows questions to direct students to answers. The broad principle of narrative therapy is that if the therapist asks a string of questions, with each answer to one question directing the therapist's next question, eventually they will lead the patient to the solution to their own problem. The patient themselves should articulate their solution, led to it by questions. The extensive narrative therapy literature that describes the process of helping through asking (Abels & Abels, 2001; Morgan & Centre, 2000; Payne, 2006) has helped me to let go of the desire to explain when I can see the solution so clearly. Chanock's (1995) adaptation of Rogers' (1942; 1989) counselling theory to learning advising use is similar to my adaptation of White (1988) here; I agree with her that despite TLA ambivalence about their overlap with counselling, counselling theory is useful. So despite the low level of TLA endorsement in my 2009 survey, I find that the method of asking is useful. Indeed, I believe that it is somewhat inevitable for TLAs if they are to avoid providing content when student work is superficial.

Evaluation: Limitations

I do not address teaching via email here. The role of e-learning offers new varieties of snakes and ladders, with challenges both ethical and technical, yet with great opportunities too (Ribble & Bailey, 2004; Shelley, Thrane, Shulman, Lang, Belsser & Larson, 2004). Email is another venue for individual consultation, a helpful one for distance learners, but one that intensifies the risk of ghost writing if documents are attached and then written into by a tutor.

Another concern that remains unanswered is that we have little beyond student thanks to demonstrate the effectiveness of our work in individual consultations. Sometimes student acknowledgement that they have had threshold learning moments as a result of being personally shown something assures TLAs that the work is valuable, but how can we show this with more rigour? Measurement of teaching and learning is not easy (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). Some interesting attempts have recently come from ATLAANZ (Manalo, Marshall & Fraser, 2009) inviting thought to be given to this difficult and highly charged activity.

Conclusion

Opinion about the value of individual appointments varies. Individual appointments are time consuming. To some extent they remain always unique: an exchange each time between two individuals in which teachers need to negotiate afresh the ethical as well as the pedagogical issues. Chanock (1995) wonders "what else the various theories of counselling might have to offer us in academic skills teaching" (p. 38); my response is to add in the questioning practice of narrative therapy.

Tighter fiscal restraints are likely to mean that this work is always monitored for its effectiveness. Yet if students are retained who might otherwise give up, if traditionally under-represented students are fostered to completion, and if student progress is speeded up earlier through their tertiary education making it more likely that they might go on to research degrees, then it is worthwhile thinking about how we can retain individual work where it matters. Because some real threshold moments occur in individual appointments, enquiry into practice is worthwhile.

Acknowledgements

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