



From conceptions of effective teachers to styles of teaching: Implications for higher education[☆]

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Received 15 May 2007; received in revised form 11 December 2007; accepted 24 January 2008

Abstract

The present study investigates the predictive power of conceptions of effective teachers for teaching styles. Ninety-three academic staff from two large comprehensive universities in the People's Republic of China responded to The Effective Teacher Inventory [Zhang, L.F. (2003). The effective teacher inventory. Unpublished test, The University of Hong Kong: Hong Kong.] and to the Thinking Styles in Teaching Inventory [Grigorenko, E.L., & Sternberg, R.J. (1993). Thinking styles in teaching inventory. Unpublished test, Yale University.]. Results suggested that teachers who considered being superior in research-related activities as a more important attribute of an effective university teacher reported that they taught more conservatively, whereas teachers who perceived teaching-related activities as being more critical functions of an effective teacher reported that they taught more creatively. Implications of this finding for university teachers and administrators are discussed.

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Keywords: Conceptions of effective teachers; Teaching styles

1. Introduction

Since the late 1960s, much work has been documented on both effective school teachers (Crawford & Bradshaw, 1968; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, & Witcher, 2002) and effective university teachers (Feldman, 1989; Marsh & Roche, 1993). This research has yielded a wide variety of attributes that an effective teacher should possess, ranging from strong cognitive skills to desirable personal characteristics, and from knowledge of pedagogy and subject to adept classroom operation.

No doubt, results from existing studies are instrumental in understanding the characteristics of effective teachers and in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. However, none of these studies has examined the effects of teachers' conceptions of an effective teacher upon such general teaching behaviors as teaching styles. Theoretically, teachers' concep-

tions about what characteristics an effective teacher ought to possess should influence their instructional pedagogy (Richardson, 1996). The present study tests this hypothesis.

1.1. Dimensions of effective teachers

A thorough search on the PsycInfo database revealed six widely investigated dimensions concerning people's conceptions of effective teachers (Weinerman, 1998; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001). These are 1) academic qualification and publication, 2) preparedness and subject knowledge, 3) personality trait and personal style, 4) connectedness with students, 5) motivation and enthusiasm, and 6) classroom operation. This study examines these dimensions against teaching styles.

1.2. Teaching styles

Teaching styles are measured by the Thinking Styles in Teaching Inventory (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1993) based on Sternberg's (1988, 1997) theory of mental self-government. Sternberg contended that just as there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways that people use their abilities (i.e., thinking styles).

[☆] Research for this project was supported by the Committee on Research and Conference Grants as administered by The University of Hong Kong. My sincere thanks go to the all the teacher participants.

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According to Sternberg, there are 13 thinking styles that fall along five dimensions: functions, forms, levels, scopes, and leanings. Based on empirical data, Zhang and Sternberg (2005) re-conceptualized the 13 styles into three types. Type I thinking styles tend to be more creativity-generating and they denote higher levels of cognitive complexity, including the legislative (being creative), judicial (evaluative of other people or products), hierarchical (prioritizing one's tasks), global (focusing on the wholistic picture), and liberal (taking a new approach to tasks) styles. Type II styles suggest a norm-favoring tendency and they denote lower levels of cognitive complexity, including the executive (implementing tasks with specific instructions), local (focusing on details), monarchic (working on one task at a time), and conservative (using traditional approaches to tasks) styles. Type III (including internal, external, oligarchic, and anarchic) styles can manifest the characteristics of either Type I or Type II styles, depending on the stylistic demands of specific tasks (Zhang & Sternberg, 2005). When thinking styles are applied to the teaching context, they are known as teaching styles (Kabadayi, 2007). This study focuses on Types I and II teaching styles because they were anticipated to be more directly related to conceptions of effective teachers.

Much empirical evidence has supported the validity of the theory (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1997; Kaufman, 2001). The two most frequently used inventories, the Thinking Styles Inventory (TSI, Sternberg & Wagner, 1992) and the Thinking Styles in Teaching Inventory (TSTI, Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1993), have been proven to be reliable and valid.

Among the existing works, three studies concern teaching styles based on Sternberg's theory. A first study (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1995) indicated that teachers' teaching styles were consistent with their school ideology. A second study (Zhang, 2001) suggested that teaching styles were related to teaching approaches. A third study (Zhang & Sternberg, 2002) revealed that teachers' teaching styles varied as a function of their personal characteristics. These studies, however, were conducted among school teachers. The present study tests the TSTI among university teachers. Moreover, this study investigates the power of university teachers' conceptions of effective teachers for predicting teaching styles.

1.3. Research hypothesis

It was hypothesized that teachers' conceptions of what constitutes the attributes of an effective teacher could statistically predict their teaching styles. Specifically, teachers who considered teaching-related activities as being more important for an effective university teacher would tend to use Type I teaching styles and that teachers who considered research-related activities as being more important for an effective university teacher would tend to use Type II teaching styles. This prediction was mainly based on the reality of time pressure, one of the most common challenges faced by almost all academics worldwide (McKeachie, 1997). Thus, it is possible that teachers who perceive research as more important would spend more time on research, without much time left for conceiving innovative ways of teaching. Instead, they stay with

their old ways of teaching by using Type II teaching styles. Meanwhile, teachers who consider teaching as more important would try all possible means to enhance their teaching by using Type I teaching styles, without much time left for pursuing their academic publications.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 93 academic staff members (60 males and 33 females) from two universities in Shanghai, China. These two universities are able to provide a robust setting for the predicted relationship because both universities are among the top ones in China that put emphasis not only on teaching, but also on research. They also have similar characteristics regarding study body, funding, and research activities. With an average of 41 years, the participants' ages ranged from 25 to 60 years. Among them, 77 teachers were teaching courses in social sciences and humanities and 16 teachers in natural sciences. Thirty-six participants held a Ph.D. degree, 36 Master's degree, and 21 Bachelor's degree.

2.2. Measures

Apart from providing the demographic information above, the participants responded to two self-report inventories: the

Table 1
Thinking styles in teaching inventory and effective teacher inventory

Scale	Sample item
<i>Thinking styles in teaching inventory</i>	
Legislative	I frequently assign students independent projects.
Executive	I think that guidelines for teaching should contain step-by-step strategies for implementing lessons.
Judicial	Teachers should give continual feedback on students' progress.
Global	I think teachers must increase the conceptual as opposed to the factual content of their lessons.
Local	A teacher must give his/her students a lot of concrete and detailed information about the subject being taught.
Liberal	Teachers must pose problems, raise questions, and intervene with paradoxes, dilemmas, and discrepancies that students try to resolve.
Conservative	I prefer teaching the same subject and same class level every year.
<i>Effective teacher inventory</i>	
Academic qualification and publication	Excellent academic publishing record.
Preparedness and subject knowledge	Well-prepared and well-organized.
Personality trait and personal style	Good sense of humor.
Connectedness with students	Know their students and their characteristics.
Motivation and enthusiasm	Enthusiastic about teaching.
Classroom operation	Ability to stimulate questions from students.

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