

# **Are tutors and students on the same page in the learning space?**

## **Introduction**

A learning space within higher education can be physical, virtual, or hybrid (Christou *et al.*, 2023; Leijon *et al.*, 2022), where forces converge and create impact. Berman (2020) argued that higher education is under increasing scrutiny, driven essentially by the ascendancy of neoliberalism with a greater focus on funding, outcomes, and value for money within a climate of data and metrics collected by the Office for Students using the National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellent Framework (2023). In this context, teaching and learning continually attract significant interest; one theme prominent in the teaching and learning literature is the constant call for more student-active learning (Børte *et al.*, 2024; Ellis & Goodyear, 2016). Tutors and students occupy the same learning space but adopt different positions informed by personal constructs, and this enables them to consider their experiences and behaviours or, as Willey & Gardner (2011:454) argued, '*Getting tutors on the same page*' this study responded to this challenge.

## **Theoretical base**

The seminal work of Kelly (1955) on personal constructs is summarised by Bell (2018), arguing that individuals perceive their environment by the way they interpret what they perceive in terms of their mental structures and, therefore, how they behave towards it (Bell, 2018; Taber, 2020). Personal construct theory focuses on how people understand and navigate their social worlds (Neimeyer, 1985); this point is critical as constructs form the building blocks of our mind and, as such, come in various shapes and sizes (Fransella, 2005; Pope & Denicolo, 2001). A corollary of literature on personal constructs between tutors and students focuses on different aspects of the pedagogical relationship (Pancratz & Diethelm, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt, 1987; Deny & Potts, 1998). This paper adds to the discussion; however, we take a different approach by using pre-determined constructs and concentrating on the relationship between tutors and students from different phases of the learning journey through a module. In addition, we wanted to be radical by using a different approach to capture the constructs and method of analysis based on prior, during and at the end of teaching a module; we believe this is a different approach from previous studies.

## **Research purpose and research questions**

This study aimed to identify if there were any connections between the personal constructs of tutors and students regarding teaching and learning. Three research questions framed this project:

*Research Question 1.* What are tutors' preferences regarding planning, organising and delivering the teaching content?

*Research Question 2.* What preferences do students have regarding the organising and delivery of teaching content?

*Research Question 3.* What factors support getting tutors and students on the same page?

The module used in this study was a standard management module offered in the second year; it included seminars on the broader concepts of SHRD.

## **Methods**

The classic approach to understanding personal constructs involves interviewing informants; however, we took a different approach, using a pre-designed self-administered questionnaire and an adopted repertory grid to capture the responses of tutors and students (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987; Jankowicz, 2004).

We collected quantitated data from tutors (n10) and students (n69) in the second year of their undergraduate degree. We developed a questionnaire based on Zinn's (1983) inventory of the philosophy of adult education (cited in Galbraith (1990)). Data was collected on the third week of the module to allow students time to experience teaching and learning before collecting data.

### **Key findings**

Early analysis using descriptive statistics suggests that there appears to be a consensus between tutors and students across some constructs and that they are on the same page. Using an adapted repertory grid enabled us to identify the relationship between constructs in terms of polar adjectives (Bell, 2018:593). However, we deduced that tutors and students might not know each other's positions based on personal constructs; this view is supported by Jankowicz (2004:149), who argues that using one's own constructs to characterise the other's constructs requires one to elicit and understand the other's persons constructs as far as possible, which is the first step towards effective knowledge transfer. A more in-depth analysis of the data will be presented at the conference.

### **Implications for teaching HRD**

We offer this initial advice for those academics who teach HRD in a world of increased scrutiny.

#### **Practitioner Notes**

The following guidance is offered to HRD teaching practitioners who wish to consider how personal constructs can improve their students' teaching and learning experiences.

- Time must be made available before teaching, starting with considering how students prefer to be taught. If this is not possible, the tutors must employ different teaching methods during the class to cater to differing learning styles.
- Paradoxically, consideration is needed when employing a deductive or inductive approach to teaching materials (Merriënboer, 1997).
- Cultural bias is a concern as personal construct theory was developed in the West; therefore, we must be mindful of the results when teaching international students.
- Evaluation should not just be undertaken at the end of the module; a more proactive approach is to collect 'real-time' data several times during the module. With advances in technology, this could even be collected at the end of each seminar, and by doing so, the tutor reacts to the needs of learners in real-time.
- In designing the HRD curriculum, a holistic overview should be undertaken with students at the end of delivery to identify lessons learnt, usually outside the remit of end-of-module student surveys.

## Conclusions

This paper should interest delegates as there are many pressures regarding data, metrics, and accountability in teaching and learning via TEF. However, the focus must remain on our professional practice in the classroom to create a positive learning experience. By considering personal constructs, tutors and students can benefit from cooperation within the learning space by understanding their preferences regarding teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Personal Constructs, Repertory grid, Teaching and Learning, Higher Education

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