

Developing Capacity for the Academic Staff of Niger Delta University through Ethical Understanding And Practice

¹John C. Buseri and ²Allen A. Agih

¹Department of Teacher Education,
Faculty of Education,

²Department of Educational Foundations,
Faculty of Education, Niger Delta University,
Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: John C. Buseri

Abstract

This study was on developing capacity for the academic staff of Niger Delta University through ethical understanding and practice. The need for the study arose because of issues of professional misconduct that were observed among some category of staff. The study adopted the descriptive survey design with a population of all the academic staff of the University. This gave the total figure of 767. A sample of 326 was drawn using the purposive sampling technique. A questionnaire titled: Level of Ethical Understanding and Practice Assessment Questionnaire (LEUPAQ) was used to elicit data for the study. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected. Findings revealed that the lower category of academic staff in the University have poor understanding and practice of the ethics guiding teaching in the institution. However, the senior category exhibit better understanding and practice of ethics in teaching. Based on the findings, some recommendations were made to build capacity of academic staff and improve the understanding and practice of ethical principles as they relate to teaching in the University.

Keywords: developing capacity, academic staff, university teaching, ethical, understanding and practice

INTRODUCTION

Virtually all interest groups of education have come to agree that teaching is a profession in Nigeria. This understanding came as a result of the establishment of the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) Act No. 31 of 1993. Accordingly, before 1993 teaching was an all-comers job in Nigeria. This was because there was no regulatory agency for membership and practice as the Legal Council does for Lawyers, Council for the Regulation of Engineers (COREN) for engineers and the Nigerian Medical Association for Medical Doctors. This development was brought about by a rapid transformation of the teaching profession to the highest standard possible. This is particularly with respect to the quality of teacher education programmes, registration and licensing, professional conduct and the overall status of teachers at all levels of the education system.

Fostering ethical understanding and practice in teaching is an integral aspect of the teaching profession, especially at the tertiary level. The Association for Educational Communication and Technology (AECT, 1977) has one of the characteristics of the teaching profession as, a series of standard and statement of ethics which is enforced, amongst others. From the foregoing, it is expected that the teaching profession must be guided by certain ethical principles as required by law. Ethical

principles or code of ethics are conceptualized here as general guidelines, ideals or expectations that need to be taken into account, along with other relevant conditions and circumstances, in the design and analysis of teaching. They contain detailed provisions for preventing one teacher from undermining another and for preventing conflicts among them. It also contains areas of conflicts between teachers and students. The goal is to promote mutual beneficial relationship among teachers and between the teachers and students, and for the development of the profession.

BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Given the professional status of the teaching profession, the TRCN (2005) has developed a Teachers' Code of Conduct to guide members. The document has the following objectives:

- (a) To re-awaken the sense of self-esteem, quality, honour, selfless service and moral rectitude in the teacher.
- (b) Protect the teacher's age long position of nobility and leadership in the social, moral and intellectual world.
- (c) Build a strong moral foundation for the actualization of an educational system that can compete favourably in the global community; amongst others.

Similarly, there are ethical principles in University teaching as developed by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and endorsed by the winners of the National 3M Teaching Award (Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson, 2002). Consequently, the teaching profession in the university system has its dos and don'ts; general guidelines to guide professional conduct of members. These guidelines are basically ethical principles that define the professional responsibilities of University Lecturers in their roles as teachers.

Accordingly, the first principle as contained in the document is content competence. A university teacher maintains a high level of subject matter and ensures that course content is current, accurate, representative and appropriate to the position of the course within the students' programme of studies. This principle means that a teacher is responsible for maintaining (or acquiring) subject matter competence not only in areas of personal interest but in all areas relevant to course goals or objectives. Achievement of content competence requires that the teacher takes active steps to be up-to-date in content areas relevant to his or her courses; to be informed of the content of prerequisite courses and of courses for which the teacher's course is prerequisite and to provide adequate representation of important topic areas and points of view (Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson, 2002)..

It is for this reason that Awotua-Efebo (1999), Nwifo (2004), Oluwo and Abraham (2006) remarked that teachers should be adequately trained to gain sufficient competency in their various disciplines. In the opinion of most educationists, a teacher without adequate competent knowledge should not be allowed to teach for whatever reason.

Pedagogical Competence: According to Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson (2002), a pedagogically competent teacher communicates the objectives of the course to students, is aware of alternative instructional methods or strategies, and selects methods of instruction that, according to research evidence (including personal or self-reflective research), are effective in helping students to achieve the course objectives. Accordingly, to Awotua-Efebo (1999), a teacher is only effective when he/she has pedagogical competence. Also, if learning styles differ significantly for different students or groups of students, the teacher is aware of these differences and if feasible vary his or her style of teaching accordingly (Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson, 2002).

Dealing with Sensitive Topics: In the opinion of the authors, topics that students are likely to find sensitive or discomfoting are dealt with in an open honest and positive way. Among other things, these

principles mean that the teacher acknowledges from the outset that a particular topic is sensitive and explains why it is necessary to include it in the course content.

Student Development: The ethical principles in university teaching philosophy believes that the overriding responsibility of the teacher is to contribute to the intellectual development of the student, at least in the context of the teacher's own area of expertise, and to avoid actions such as exploitation and discrimination that detract from student development. According to this principle, the teacher's most basic responsibility is to design instruction that facilitates learning and encourages autonomy and independent thinking in students, to treat students with respect and dignity, and to avoid actions that detract unjustifiably from student development. Failure to take responsibility for student development occurs when a teacher comes to class under-prepared, fails to design effective instruction, coerces students to adopt a particular value or point of view or fails to discuss alternative theoretical interpretations.

Dual Relationships with Students: Any relationship other than for the purposes of teaching and learning is to be avoided. The reason is avoid conflict of interest, favouritism and poor student development. This principles means that it is the responsibility of the teacher to keep relationships with students focused on pedagogical goals and academic requirements. The most obvious examples of a dual relationship that is likely to impair teacher objectivity and/or detract from student development is any form of sexual or close personal relationship with a current student. The Socratic Oath as modified by Stewart (1966) and cited by Awotua-Efebo (1999), TRCN (1993), COREN and other regulatory agencies all caution their members against all these acts of misconduct in their various professions.

Confidentiality: This principle holds that, for effective student development, student grades, attendance records and private communications are treated as confidential materials and are released only with student consent, or for legitimate academic purposes, or if there are reasonable grounds for believing that releasing such information will be beneficial to the student or will prevent harm to others. This principle suggests that students are entitled to the same level of confidentiality in their relationships with teachers as would exist in a lawyer-client or doctor-patient relationship. Violation of confidentiality in the teacher-student relationship can cause students to distrust teachers and to show decreased academic motivation. Whatever rules or policies are followed with respect to confidentiality of student records, these should be disclosed in full to students at the beginning of the

academic term (Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson, 2002).

In the opinions of Igwe (1990) and Okeke (2006), students respect and value teachers who are able to obey this professional rule. Again, those teachers without regard for students' confidential matters are a misnomer for the profession.

Respect for Colleagues: It is expedient for university teachers to cultivate and practice exemplary cordial relationships in the work place. According to Okeke (2006), respect for oneself and others is a sign of maturity and discipline, which are both needed for professional growth. A university teacher respects the dignity of her or his colleagues and works cooperatively with colleagues in the interest of fostering student development. This principle means that in interactions among colleagues with respect to teaching, the overriding concern is the development of students. Disagreement between colleagues relating to teaching are settled privately, if a teacher suspects that a colleague has shown incompetence or ethical violations in teaching, the teacher takes responsibility for investigating the matter thoroughly and consulting privately with the colleague before taking further action.

Valid Assessment of Students: Student assessment is used for grading and promotion, hence the importance of assessment of student performance in university system cannot be overemphasized. Accordingly, assessment must be objective, valid, open and fair. This principle means that the teacher is aware of research (including personal or self reflective research) on the advantages and disadvantages of alternative methods of assessment and based on this knowledge, the teacher selects assessment techniques that are consistent with the objectives of the course and valid.

Awotua-Efebo (1999) and Igwe (1990) asserted that valid assessment of students' class and examination performances are crucial to the academic development of the students. They advised that all the conditions for assessing students' academic and extra-curricular activities be met while evaluating students.

Respect for Institution: This last principle is key for the overall development of the students, institution and advancement of staff. Thus, according to Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson (2002), it is in the interest of student development that a university teacher should be aware of, and respect the educational goals, policies and standard of the institution in which he or she teaches. This principle implies that a teacher shares a collective responsibility to work for the good of the university as a whole to uphold the educational goals and

standards of the university, and to abide by university policies and regulations pertaining to the education of students.

Igwe (1990), Ukeje (1992) and Okeke (2006) have all observed that the conduct of most teachers in the education system does not conform to this principle. This raises questions on their compliance to ethical issues in the profession. However, this assumption and those of others made in the review lack factual findings. It is this gap that this study was designed to fill.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In the Niger Delta University, issues of professional misconduct have been observed among certain category of staff. This study was therefore conducted to find out the extent of University Lecturers' understanding and practice of the ethical principles in University Teaching as developed by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education with particular reference to the nine principles as contained in the document. The assessment/ethical principles are: Content competence; pedagogical competence; dealing with sensitive topics; student development; dual relationship with students; confidentiality; respect for colleagues; valid assessment of students; and respect for institution.

The need to build capacity for staff to develop the required ethical principles and values is critical if there are observed lapses in the system. This will instill the required fundamental change in the competence, values, ideals, orientation and practices as required by the teaching profession to engender the desired transformation of higher education in the society and country in general.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What are the ethical principles for the academic staff in the Niger Delta University?
2. How familiar are the Lecturers with the ethical principles in University teaching?
3. How well do the lecturers practice the ethical principles in University teaching?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive survey. This method enabled the study to examine the level of Lecturers' understanding and practice of the ethics of the teaching profession as it is applicable in the Niger Delta University. The population of the study consisted of all the 93 Professors, 24 Readers (Associate Professors), 126 Senior Lecturers, 176 Lecturers I, 189 Lecturers II, 98 Assistant Lecturers and 61 Graduate Assistant Lecturers in the University (Academic Planning Unit, 2015). The total

population was therefore 767. Out of this number, 326 participants were sampled for the study. This was made up of 24 Readers (Associate Professors), 126 Senior Lecturers and 176 Lecturers 1 in the University. The method that was adopted was the purposive sampling technique. A modified instrument of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and endorsed by the winners of the National 3M teaching award as developed by Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer and Robinson (2002) on the nine ethical principles of university teaching titled, “Level of Ethical Understanding and Practice Assessment Questionnaire (LEUPAQ)” was used to obtain data from the respondents. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS OF FINDINGS

Research Question One:

What are the ethical principles for the academic staff in the Niger Delta University?

The nine ethical principles of teaching in the University as developed by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and used for this study are: Content competence; pedagogical competence; dealing with sensitive topics; student development; dual relationship with students; confidentiality; respect for colleagues; valid assessment of students and respect for institution as listed in Table 1. The principles are the same ethical issues guiding teaching in the Niger Delta University

Research Question Two:

How familiar are the Lecturers with the ethical principles in university teaching?

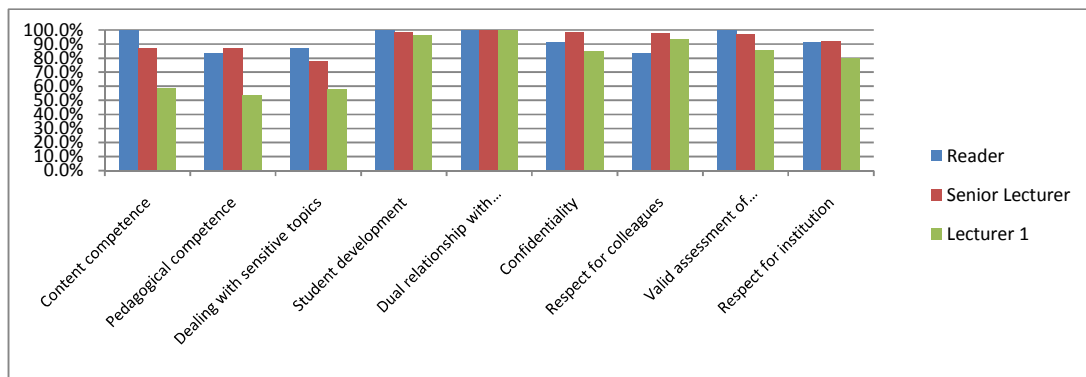


Figure 1: Percentage Responses on Level of Familiarity/ Understanding of Ethical Principles by University Lecturers

Data analyzed and presented in Table 1 and figure 1 indicate that Readers (Associate Professors) in the University displayed 93% familiarity with the ethical principles guiding teaching in the institution. The Senior Lecturers responses indicated 94% familiarity with the ethical principles, while Lecturers 1 responses revealed 81% familiarity with the ethical principles.

Table 1 and figure 1 as presented below illustrate the level of familiarity with the ethical principles by the various Lecturers involved in the study.

Table 1: Level of Familiarity and Understanding of Ethical Principles of Teaching in the University

S/N	Ethical Principles Indicators	Level of Familiarity/ Understanding (No. & %)					
		Reader (Ass. Prof)		Senior Lecturer		Lecturer 1	
		No	%	No	%	No.	%
1.	Content competence	24	100	120	95.2	150	85.2
2.	Pedagogical competence	20	83.3	110	87.3	94	53.4
3.	Dealing with sensitive topics	21	87.5	98	77.8	102	58.0
4.	Student development	24	100	124	98.4	170	96.6
5.	Dual relationship with students	24	100	126	100	176	100
6.	Confidentiality	22	91.7	124	98.4	150	85.2
7.	Respect for colleagues	20	83.3	123	97.6	164	93.1
8.	Valid assessment of students	24	100	122	96.8	151	85.8
9.	Respect for institution	22	91.7	116	92.1	141	80.1

Research Question Three

How well do the Lecturers practice the ethical principles in university teaching?

Table 2 and figure 2 as presented below illustrate the level University Lecturers’ practice the ethics of the profession

Table 2: Level of Practice of Ethical Principles of Teaching in the University

S/N	Ethical Principles Indicators	Level of Compliance/ Practice (No. & %)					
		Reader (Ass. Prof)		Senior Lecturer		Lecturer 1	
		No	%	No	%	No.	%
1.	Content competence	24	100	110	87.3	105	59.7
2.	Pedagogical competence	19	79.2	96	76.2	94	53.4
3.	Dealing with sensitive topics	22	91.7	97	77.0	82	46.6
4.	Student development	22	91.7	121	96.0	99	56.3
5.	Dual relationship with students	18	75.0	52	41.3	45	25.6
6.	Confidentiality	20	83.3	47	37.3	52	30.0
7.	Respect for colleagues	20	83.3	52	41.3	48	27.3
8.	Valid assessment of students	21	87.5	100	79.4	73	41.5
9.	Respect for institution	19	79.2	102	57.9	68	38.6

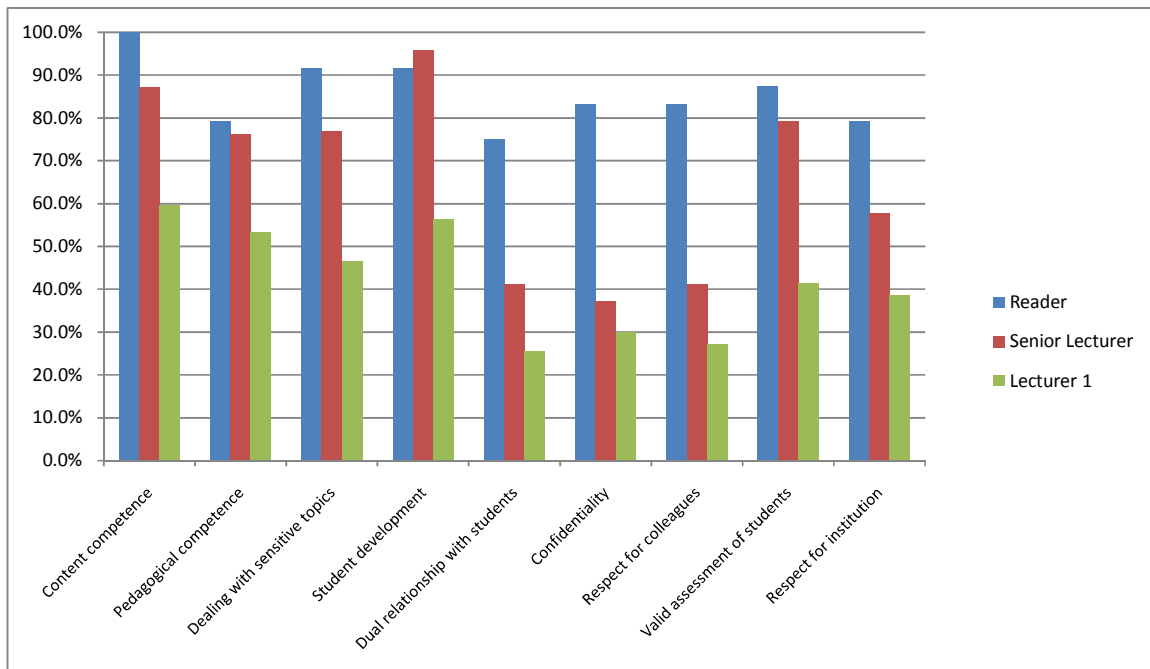


Figure 2: Percentage Responses on Level of Practice of Ethical Principles by University Lecturers

Table 2 and figure 2 indicate the compliance level of the three categories of staff studied. Lecturers of the rank of Readers (Associate Professors) exhibited 85% level of practice or compliance with the ethical principles guiding teaching in the institution. Senior Lecturers have 65% compliance level, and Lecturers 1 showed dismal compliance with only 41% with the ethics of the profession.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Ethical Principles in University Teaching

The study found that there exist certain ethical principles (code of conduct) that govern teaching in the university, just like those in other professions such as Engineering, Law, Medical Science and others. The reason for this is simply that teaching, whether in the university or lower levels of education is a profession. AECT (1977), Anderson (1989), Clark (1995) and Awotua-Efebo (1999) have all

recognized teaching as a profession in most of their expositions.

Similarly, the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) has clearly recognized teaching as a profession.

From the foregoing, it is expected that the teaching profession must be guided by certain ethical principles as required by law. In university education, the nine ethical principles as developed by the society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education have been recognized as the dos and don'ts (code of conduct) of the profession.

The second research question sought to find out whether Lecturers in the university were familiar with and understand the ethical principles. The study revealed that Readers (Associate Professors) and

Senior Lecturers were quite familiar with the ethical principles with 94% and 93% responses respectively. Lecturers 1 displayed 81% familiarity with the ethics of the profession.

The reasons for these findings are quite obvious. The Readers (Associate Professors) and Senior Lecturers have been in the teaching profession for quite some time. It is expected that through experience, they must have acquired the necessary skills of the profession. However, the Lecturers 1 have not gained sufficient experience in the area of teaching and learning. They may not have spent the same amount of time teaching like their counterparts.

The finding supports Nwifo (2004), Oluwo and Abraham (2006), where they observed that content and pedagogical competence are a function of experience in teaching. Accordingly, the Readers (Associate Professors) and Senior Lecturers are more familiar and understand the ethical issues guiding the profession as a result of the period they have been teaching. It is expected that Lecturers 1 may equally gain similar level of familiarity and understanding with experience.

The last research question was designed to find out the level of compliance with the ethics of the profession by Lecturers in the university. Findings revealed that the Readers (Associate Professors) showed significant compliance with 85%; Senior Lecturers with 65% and Lecturers 1 with a dismal 41% compliance level.

Similar reasons given for the findings to research question two may apply here. Naturally, as one matures in a particular profession, he/she gains more experience in that trade and performs better. The Readers (Associate Professors) and Senior Lecturers are aspiring to the peak of the profession after being in service for some considerable number of years. The same may not be true for the Lecturers 1 who are new entrants with less exposure and experience.

This finding corroborates with Okeke (2006), Clark (1995) and Anderson (1994). Experience, according to them has shown that practice makes perfect, especially in teaching and learning. Consequently, the senior academics like the Readers (Associate Professors) and the Senior Lecturers have gained sufficient experiences, and are not wanting in any of the ethical issues. However, the same is not true for those in Lecturers 1 category. This may explain the poor manner they handle students' matters, especially with regard to dual relationship with students.

Similarly, most staff in this category have been linked with unethical conduct such as sale of text books, handouts and other reading materials which were found to be exploitative for students. It is

equally possible that this category of staff may not have the competence in developing students, keeping students' information confidential and effective handling of sensitive matters in class instruction. This may also account for the poor quality of the graduates of the system.

The findings of this study equally go to show that the moral character of most university lecturers is quite low. This is a truism because ethical principles are basically moral guides for professional conduct. With such low moral standards, it is difficult for the students of the system to behave differently. Ironically, graduates are supposed to be found worthy in character before learning.

CONCLUSION

The literature and findings of this study revealed that academic staff of the Niger Delta University are familiar and comply with ethics of the teaching profession. However, most lecturers, especially the junior cadre do not comply with most of the ethical principles of the profession. This has been explained to have serious implications for institutional, student and character development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are hereby made to help build capacity to improve the system:

1. The University should as a matter of necessity widely publicize the ethical principles guiding the conduct of the various professions through their designated bodies. This will improve understanding and practice by the teaching staff in the institution.
2. Lecturers in the University should be encouraged to properly identify with their professional bodies as well as registration with TRCN.
3. Seminars and workshops on professional conduct and procedures in the university should be organized regularly to keep members abreast with current issues in their various professions.
4. University lecturers should endeavour to take responsibility and abide by the ethics of the teaching profession.

REFERENCES

- Academic Planning Unit. (2012). Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.
- Awotua-Efebo, E. B. (1999a). *Effective Teaching-Principles and Practice*. Port Harcourt: Paragraphics.
- Awotua-Efebo, E. B. (1999b). Reading Levels of Secondary School Students in Rivers State and the Readability Appraisal of their Science Textbooks. *Nigerian Journal of Professional Studies in Education*. 7 (1)34-43

AECT. (1977). Association for Educational Communication and Technology: A Glossary of Terms. Washington, D.C.AECT.

Anderson, I. (1994). A Sourcebook for Developmental Educators. New England: Learning Assistance Association.

Clark, M. C. (1995). Thoughtful Teaching. London: Cassell.

Dienye, N. E. & Awotua-Efebo, E. B. (1989). An Investigation into the Effects of Selected Teachers Characteristics on Teaching Practice Performance. The Progress of Education. 59(1) 5-12.

Igwe, S. O. (1990). Professional Handbook for Teachers. Owerri: New Africa Publishers.

Murray, H; Gillese, E; Lennon, M; Mercer, P & Robinson, M. (2002). Ethical Principles in University Teaching, New York University. New York: Society for Teaching and Training in Higher Education.

Nwufu, K. (2004). Contemporary Issues in Primary and Teacher Education. Nigerian Journal of Curriculum Studies. 11(2) 160-164.

Okeke, B. S. (2006). Educational Planning in Nigeria- A Social Process Approach. Awka: Doone Publisher.

Oluwo, S. O. & Abraham, N. (2006). Teacher Training and Development. Text of Paper Presented at a 3-Day UBE Management Capacity Building Workshop of Teacher Re-Engineering Skills for Ikwerre LGA: ICES.

Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (2005). Teachers' Code of Conduct. Abuja: TRCN.

Ukeje, B. O.(1992). Educational Administration-Theory and Practice. Owerri: Totan Publishers.