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Effective classroom teachers and the challenge of envisioning possibilities for online teaching

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The current higher education environment presents multiple challenges for academics. In their teaching, academics face larger classes, an ever-changing student cohort, and for many, institutional pressure to teach online. We address how this final challenge is tackled by reflective practitioners who are confident and skilled in classroom teaching. Our study focuses on academics as learners of teaching, rather than evaluating a particular program. We report here on one aspect of a full-year ethnographic investigation of 9 academics from various health and science disciplines at an Australian regional university to identify what and how they learn teaching. All the academics were engaged in unit level curriculum design as part of their teaching responsibilities. The data presented here comes from initial interviews with the academics that explored their conceptions of teaching and learning, how they became the teacher they are today, and their goals for the year ahead. Participants revealed limited vision and conceptions of learning design for online teaching, largely viewing their online space as a repository for recorded lectures and other resources. Universities therefore need to be aware that successful transition to the online learning environment will require complex and multi-faceted support for staff, beginning with developing a vision of effective curriculum and learning design for online teaching. Skills development alone will likely result in a simple translation of existing approaches to the online environment.

Keywords: online teaching, learning effective teaching, ethnography

Introduction

Are good teachers born that way? Many academics promulgate this view, yet our experience is that we ourselves, and the colleagues we support through our academic development work, can improve as teachers through formal learning, trialling new approaches, and reflection. In this paper we report on data collected through the PhD research of the first author into how academics in Australian higher education learn effective teaching. It focuses on one facet of their teaching practice – teaching online, either as a component of blended learning or completely online delivery. Written in the first person in the style of Helen Sword (2012, 2014), in this ‘unruly’ report “I” and “my” refers to the first author, Cathryn McCormack, and “we” and “our” to the authors as a group consisting of student and supervisors. Inspired by classic research such as that by Biggs and Tang (2007), Prosser and Trigwell (1999), and Ramsden (1992) into how students approach learning, we adapted this approach to investigate how academics learn effective teaching. This exposed us to questions like: What do academics learn? Where did they learn? How have they internalised their learning? How do they put that knowledge into practice?
How open are they to ongoing learning? And how does their professional context aid or hinder their development?

Academic self-reports of their teaching practice and learning of teaching are discussed using one of Lortie (1975)’s key findings, and subsequent consideration of Lortie’s work by Hargreaves (2010). Lortie’s research on schoolteachers was grounded in his interest in professional socialization, and was undertaken before teacher education in the United States was compulsory, a situation congruent with academics today. He identified that teachers engage in an "apprenticeship of observation" during which they, often tacitly, form their understandings of teaching and learning.

The learning context for academics

Academics share a desire for their students to learn. All the teachers in Åkerlind’s (2008) research into conceptions of teaching wanted their students to learn. The difference Åkerlind found was academics with lower level conceptions of teaching thought they could help students learn by improving their skills as a teacher; those with higher levels of conceptions thought more about student learning experiences. Effective teachers know it takes planning, practice, relationships with students, and reflection to maximise student learning.

As academic developers, we face many of the same frustrations and conundrums as academics who teach. We offer great programs and resources, but it seems that these learning opportunities are taken up by those who need them least, and ignored by those most who need them most. However unlike academics who teach, we lack the coercive power of assessment to force at least some level of engagement from the least motivated. Engagement with our discipline and our own reflective practice means we are confident our programs are relevant and useful, and feedback from those who do participate is almost invariably positive. However, busy academics hesitate to commit to programs with sufficient scope to be transformative, or lack time and opportunity to put what they have learned into practice. Indeed, we academic developers largely play catch-up, teaching academics who are themselves already teaching. Unlike teachers in primary and secondary education, staff teaching in higher education do not require a Bachelor degree in education, and may commence with as little as a one day introduction to teaching workshop or a short online course. While a well designed short course can have a significant impact on participants (Sword, 2014), they are at best a foundation for ongoing learning.

Academics can take advantage of professional support and learning opportunities for teaching from multiple providers. Possible providers include central teaching and learning units, schools or faculties, professional associations, disciplinary associations, and more recently MOOCs. Arguably more importantly, academics learn teaching through informal discussions with their peers (Thomson, 2013) or from interactions with colleagues more broadly at conferences. And as we would expect in the information age, a wide range of resources for teaching are available through university teaching and learning websites, books, journal articles, newsletters or the web. How, and indeed whether, academics take advantage of these opportunities is likely to be dependent to a certain extent on the culture of their local work environment and/or discipline (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Lortie and learning to teach online

Teaching, Lortie (1975) claimed, is a flat rather than staged career (with long periods of working life spent at the same level of seniority), entered abruptly and alone after college training, with a shock-laden entry into the job. The result, according to Lortie, is that teachers fall back on their own resources, especially the long “apprenticeship of observation” they undertook as students. Combined with a context of technical uncertainty and constrained by bureaucracy, the result is persisting conservatism in teaching approaches and little hope of innovation. In some ways there are little differences between the 1970s school teacher’s experience and that of the 2017 academic. For teaching/research academics, teaching is indeed a flat career, entered by many abruptly and often alone, exacerbated for academics without formal training in teaching. Today’s context presents great technical and policy uncertainty, described as “liquid times” by Bauman (2007), as well as bureaucratic constraints, albeit not of historical weight, but of governance and administrative requirements.
Added to these fundamental concepts, the current financial situation in Australian higher education means everyone must do more with less. Budget pressure, combined with the promise of technological advancement that facilitates and enables online teaching, leads university leaders to see online delivery, either alone or as part of blended learning, as the universal solution. Despite experts reiterating that effective teaching online costs the same as classroom delivery, academics face cuts to teaching contact hours for face to face activities, without an equivalent addition of time for their online counterparts. Staff unfamiliar with online teaching face the additional challenge of learning new skills and new principles of learning design. Lortie’s framework suggests promoting change in online teaching practice is a formidable challenge, yet at the same time it presents a pathway to success.

**Research method**

This research explores how academics approach their ongoing learning to teach, and makes an attempt to understand this within their academic cultural context. Ethnography was thus the ideal methodological choice as it provided a framework to consider the immediate questions within a broader context (Walford, 2008). To ensure frequent and extended contact across a full year with individuals who would form the central case studies, we collected data at a single regional Australian university. At this university most teaching takes place at one of three main campuses or online. The university’s academic structure consists of six Schools that report directly to Academic Board and the Vice Chancellor.

To enable data collection about each participating academic’s School culture we decided to focus on only two academic schools, Health and Sciences (generic names). Selection was based on several factors. Both demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting teaching and learning, organising discussions and activities in their own schools, and encouraging staff participation in university-wide teaching and learning events. Through these university-wide events, I already had good relationships with Learning Leaders (generic title for roles such as Associate Dean Teaching and Learning) and a number of staff, pointing to the likelihood of ongoing and productive access to the School. Within the university both Schools had a reputation for good leadership and management, indicating the case study academics would likely stay on the topic of learning teaching rather than digressing to complaints. Both represent disciplines common to almost every Australian university, and both have strong research profiles. Both have subjects that require practical skills development through face to face learning experiences in the laboratory or workshop environment, and both blend campus based experiences with online delivery. Their main points of difference are that Health courses are largely accredited while Science courses are largely unaccredited. Health subjects are generally delivered across multiple campuses, while Science subjects are restricted to one main and one branch campus contemporaneously with online delivery incorporating a residential experience. Unit sizes vary across disciplines, with first year core subjects enrolling up to 800 in Health, and about 200 in Sciences.

We investigated school culture through interviews with school leaders, observations of teaching and learning workshops, and review of relevant documents within the school. The Head of School and Learning Leader granted general access to the school for data collection, with specific permission obtained for each event observed. Within each School, we selected four or five academics as case studies, recruiting through personal networks. Existing contacts within the School, including the Learning Leader, were asked to suggest staff who may be interested in participating, noting that we sought staff with a range of levels of commitment to teaching. We then contacted these academics directly to discuss potential participation, providing them with details of the study and screening for two things. First, to minimise risk of withdrawing from the study, staff were required to be in a substantive position or long-term contract and expecting to remain in that position for the time period of the study. Second, to enhance comparability between participants, all were required to be responsible for at least one unit of study, but not for a whole course. All academics who were contacted were asked to suggest further participants.
We planned to interview each case study academic at least four times across the course of a year, and observe them in at least one teaching instance. A data collection schedule guided interview timing and topics, but in line with ethnographic methodology was not be used prescriptively. In the interviews related to this paper, the academics reported on their concepts of teaching and learning, formal and informal learning experiences, the people they talk to about teaching, the work pressure they experience, how they reflect, and their self-regulation as learners of teaching. Interviews were transcribed. Data collection and analysis is based on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), and this paper reports on preliminary data collection and analysis. Transcript sections relating to online teaching were limited and readily identified. These sections were compared and contrasted to identify participant achievements and challenges.

Case study academics

In total, five participants were recruited from Science and four from Health. They ranged from Academic levels A to D, with teaching experience between 6 and 30 years. All were in substantive positions, with 8 full-time and 1 fractional at 0.6. Four were teaching scholars, all of whom had completed a formal qualification such as a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (grad cert). The other five were teaching/research academics, none of whom had completed a formal qualification. Proportions of teaching, research and service varied substantially, with the most research intensive academic on 30% teaching, 60% research and 10% service, the most teaching intensive on 70% teaching, 20% SoTL research, 10% service, and the most service intensive on 20% teaching, 5% research, 75% service. While our goal was to recruit staff with a variety of levels of engagement with and commitment to teaching, it became clear after the first interview that those who had agreed to participate all demonstrated moderately to extremely high levels of engagement with and commitment to teaching.

To facilitate reading, participant pseudonyms start with the same letter as the School. From Health there are Hayley, Hollie, Helen and Hugh (3 female and 1 male), and from Sciences, Sonia, Susan, Sarah, Stuart, and Steve (3 female and 2 male). Table 1 below presents a brief profile of the participants. The Teaching Mode for campus based students always incorporates an online component, so is only listed where it is the sole mode of study for some or all students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Teaching Mode</th>
<th>Grad Cert HE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hayley</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Multi-campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollie</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Multi-campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Allied Health</td>
<td>Single campus + online</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>Allied Health</td>
<td>Single campus</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Single campus + online</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Single campus + online</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Single campus + online</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Single campus + online</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Single campus + online</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants as reflective practitioners

Our initial goal to recruit staff with a variety of levels of commitment to teaching proved unworkable in practice, with all those volunteering demonstrating a moderately high to high level. Using networks meant that referrals were frequently to academics with reputations for their interest in teaching. When recruiting for case studies, it is not possible to identify all the relevant details of a case prior to the study commencing (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Gobo, 2004), so it was not until each participant’s first interview that many salient details were revealed. In this interview I collected general information about each academic’s teaching practice encompassing their present practice, their history as a teacher and learner.
of teaching, and their plans for future practice and any planned learning that would help them achieve this.

One shared characteristic that emerged was that all participants reflected on their teaching practice. The question that elicited responses along these lines was “How good are you as a teacher and how do you know that?” Participants all rated themselves as good to very good, and went on to talk about evidence and how they used it. Hayley (nursing) told me that:

We’re lucky … that we work within a team … so there’s always someone to bounce ideas off or get feedback. They’re pretty quick to tell you if something … didn’t work for them. Student feedback is a big part, and certainly looking at the student learning. … And then personal reflection, what worked – what do I think worked, what’s changed in … clinical practice. … I hear about something and go, oh that’s a really good thing we’ll make sure we’re incorporating that.

Steve (basic science) said:

I definitely can improve … and in fact it’s one of my desires to improve. It’s about being the most effective teacher I can possibly be. And I’m very keen to get on with that journey and continue to develop it. … It’s something that you’re just constantly thinking about. Like, I can remember getting up one morning [with a good idea] so that the students would be less stressed for the exam. … From conception to implementation in less than 24 hours.

Hayley and Steve are typical of the academic case studies. Overall, the case studies represent academics confident with their classroom teaching, engaged in good teaching practice with a strong commitment to ongoing improvement and desire to help students learn. When teaching online, however, academics were not quite so assured. Participants’ online teaching comes in three basic formats: 1) online teaching as a component of blended delivery to a campus based cohort; 2) online teaching to a distance education cohort in parallel with blended delivery to a campus based cohort; and less commonly 3) online teaching to a distance education cohort, who may or may not attend campus for a residential experience. Holly, Sonia and Helen illustrate these approaches.

Context 1 – Online teaching as a component of blended delivery (Holly)

Holly (nursing) loves teaching and has ambitious goals for student learning. She wants to:

… set up a learning environment that encourages people to … critically think. To want to learn, to have their minds opened a bit. … To open up their eyes … to things they hadn’t thought about before … discuss things … make sense of … new knowledge.

She gets good student feedback and is in the process of learning how to effectively use the online environment for teaching. Her nursing unit is theoretical and with 400 students at three different campuses she coordinates casual tutors as well as managing the online environment in Blackboard. She says:

I like the class. I like the content. It’s really hard. It’s challenging running it across three campuses with casual staff and just juggling.

Lectures illustrate Holly’s reflective approach:

I’ve battled for years to run lectures, videolinked lectures … I’ve made them compulsory, made them not compulsory, recorded them, not recorded them. I’ve run them where I’ve visited each site so the students actually see someone. It’s too hard … they just don’t work.
She is pleased that the School is moving to Camtasia lecture recording as standard. Holly’s
recorded lectures are placed in her Blackboard unit along with unit information, links to required
readings, links to a relevant university resource, a discussion board, and details of assessment.

**Context 2 – Online teaching for campus based and distance students in parallel (Sonia)**

Sonia (environment) also loves teaching and has ambitious goals for student learning. She reflects on
her teaching, carefully reading and considering student feedback and collecting data about changes to
her curriculum or practice. She shares responsibility for two first year units, each enrolling about 200
students that are delivered to on campus based and distance students. Sonia gets excited as a teacher by:

> taking the students along on the journey … trying to take them from a position of knowing
> very little about something … to get them to increase their understanding and becoming
> involved with learning.

As a teacher in sciences she aims to develop curriculum and teach in way that will:

> … provide the appropriate guidance so … that students can meet the … learning objectives
> and assessment tasks … to help them navigate through that system and to learn … the way
> we do things in science, like how to write or … what some particular task is about.” She
> wants to help her students “open their eyes to a different way of looking at the world, and
> increase their understanding of those aspects.

Sonia uses Blackboard to support a flipped classroom approach, storing recorded lectures and study
guide, using the tutorials (for campus based students), and practical sessions for active learning. She
uses the online environment for two activities: quizzes to consolidate the lecture information and a
discussion board question before each tutorial asking “any suggestions of things you want covered?”

**Context 3 – Online teaching to distance students (Helen)**

Helen (allied health) aims to enhance student learning while they are on placement. She wants her
students to “be confident and competent with … all the different facets of what [our discipline]
encompasses” as well as the practicality of “making sure they’re ready for [placement]. … to be engaged
in their learning … because … they don’t get a whole lot out of … didactic teaching.” Her practice has
“evolved over time because of feedback from students, feedback from supervisors.” When receiving
feedback she asks herself “Is that just one person’s comment? Is that coming up a lot of times? If I
change it … who will it impact? Is it of benefit?” Student placements last several weeks, and to maximise
student learning during that time Helen asks students to post a weekly reflection using the journal tool
in Blackboard. The journal template prompts a number of questions including “What was the event?
What did you learn? What would you change for next time?” Helen regularly acknowledges and
responds to these questions to encourage ongoing student reflection.

**Blackboard as a repository**

Holly and Sonia are typical in that their main use of Blackboard is as a repository, rather than a site of
active learning, while Helen principally uses Blackboard to facilitate teacher-student communication.
Amongst the nine academics, only two used the discussion board in a structured way: Sonia invited
questions from students before tutorials, and Steve posted intriguing questions on weekly topics. For the
other seven academics, discussion boards were available for students to ask questions, and while they
posted answers to those questions, not one academic described regular monitoring of student postings
as part of their practice. Only one other active learning activity was described: Holly facilitated a topic
and key point revision and exam preparation activity using a Blackboard wiki. When asked about future
plans, the academics described improved resources, such as more complex and detailed case studies.
Sarah for example, had purchased a drone to film geography, flora and fauna for enriched environmental
case studies that would form the foundation of individual project assignments. Similarly, Holly aimed
to create multi-media nursing case studies that would be used to stimulate discussion in the classroom.
Learning to teach online

As with Lortie’s (1975) teachers, the academics in this study fell back on their own experience as a learner when planning their teaching. Susan, a young early career academic, explicitly raised this without prompting when asked how she developed her ideas about teaching and learning:

I’ve been a student since I was 5 … you go to kindy and you work your way up … so you see a lot. And I have friends … and so you talk, ‘Gee, that teacher was really boring today. Gee, that teacher is the best teacher, why are they the best teacher? … And at university even more so. We figured out which electives we were taking based on the teacher. … I’ve reflected a lot on what I like and what I don’t like and … critically reflecting on things. I remember the good, the bad, and the ugly. And so the aim for me is … not to be the awful academic that people complain about.

As a younger academic, Susan’s experiences as a student encompassed online learning, as have her teaching experiences. Despite this, she could not imagine how her more engaging classroom activities could be provided online, and her concept of online learning appeared limited to lecture recordings, If you get given a textbook and some online lectures, you can’t see the face of the lecturer and how excited they are. All you can hear is a voice. And … you can disengage really easily because there’s nobody there looking at you. … My personal experience … teaching both in person and online … I found that the online students were so ridiculously disengaged it wasn’t funny.

If we extend Lortie’s finding that teachers fall back on their own experience as a learner to academics in 2017, the lack of online learning experienced by academics is concerning. Susan had experienced more online learning than any of the other eight academics, and yet her concept of online teaching still focused on recorded lectures. Helen, also an early career academic, had less experience as an online learner. Along with other participants who had completed a graduate certificate, this had been her only experience of online learning. Asked about MOOCs she replied “What’s a MOOC?” Hayley, who also had completed a graduate certificate, reported that her only other experience of learning online was through the online short courses offered by her professional body that consisted of reading material and a quiz. Earlier in her teaching though, Hayley had seen her supervisor use a wiki, and interestingly she was the only participant who organised an interactive wiki based activity for students.

Conclusions

The nine academics participating in this study, all reflective practitioners, revealed limited conceptions of online teaching. They generally viewed Blackboard as a repository for recorded lectures and other resources and rarely offered active online learning activities. The active online approaches currently in use were limited to quizzes, journaling (one instance), structured discussion (two limited instances), and a collaborative wiki activity (one instance). In line with Lortie’s (1975) findings, their practice is limited by their own experience as learners, yet given the liquidity (Bauman, 2007) of the contemporary teaching environment it appears these experiences are insufficient for the teaching challenges they currently face. The blinkers of limited experience limit the imagination of these effective classroom teachers to consider the possibilities available for online teaching and learning. They lack a vision for what is possible in the online environment, where their effective classroom teaching has only partially been transferred. This is of deep concern when increasing amounts of teaching are taking place online, whether as part of blended learning or for distance education alone.

Academic’s blinkers of limited experience are unlikely to be the only reason for the observed limited transfer of effective teaching to the online environment. Another idea to consider is that academics rely heavily on the trusting relationships they build with students in the classroom. These allow them to be effective despite providing less than optimal learning activities. This option will be investigated in the next stage of data collection where observation of a classroom teaching instance will serve to trigger further discussion of effective teaching and learning.
Lortie’s framework provides a direction forward for supporting effective classroom teachers to become powerful and effective online teachers. Ideally we need to ensure that our academics participate in rich and vibrant online learning experiences. We could achieve this by identifying outstanding online learning experiences that incorporate innovative teaching approaches, and encouraging staff to participate. It could mean facilitating teaching networks that include effective online teachers and fostering ‘master teachers’ as key players in these networks. In addition to providing information about how to teach online, academic developers need to focus on spreading ideas to inspire teachers. With a clear vision, the reflective teachers in this study, I believe, would tackle exciting new challenges and seek out the necessary support to do so. But above all, staff need time to reflect on new ideas, and support to navigate through the bureaucracy of higher education to implement and review them.

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References


