Sinking or swimming in the deep end? Developing professional academic identities as doctoral students chairing large classes

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Much of the burden of undergraduate teaching in Australian higher education institutions falls to sessional staff and postgraduate students. These members of staff assume high teaching loads and administrative management responsibilities. This paper explores the perspectives of two female academics in the unique position of being the subject co-ordinators for large first-year psychology units (around 1600 students) whilst still being doctoral (PhD) candidates. This situation raises interesting issues around the creation of academic identity. Using the metaphor of sinking or swimming in the deep end, we explore strategies to navigate the often turbulent waters of working in academia without drowning in teaching and administration, whilst attempting to stay afloat with doctoral research.

Keywords: *First-year psychology; teaching large classes; postgraduate students' teaching; academic identity; early career researchers; doctoral students.*

The changing face of higher education

I N AUSTRALIA, like many other nations, higher education teaching has rapidly changed in the last 10 years, with governments demanding (and universities implementing) processes so that higher quality learning experiences are provided for students by teaching staff (Bradley, 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The changing demands from governing bodies, coupled with a clear student demand, have resulted in a need for a more authentic or contemporary style of teaching and course delivery than has been the case in past decades (Boud, 2010; Kreber, 2010; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Students expect their lecturers to be engaging, accessible, approachable and creative, in addition to being knowledgeable (Caltabiano & Caltabiano, 2004; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). Consequently, the role of the lecturer is rapidly shifting from that of presenter to that of performer (Short & Martin, 2011). This is particularly so with the rise of technology-driven teaching spaces, as educators must engage students in a variety of modes while being recorded or filmed. Therefore, not only is re-thinking occurring around teaching spaces, but also around the university lecturer's role and sense of academic identity (Churchman & King, 2010; Fitzmaurice, 2013; Smith, 2010; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

At our university, enrolments have increased dramatically over the last five years from 37,785 in 2009 to 46,393 students in 2013, due to a university-driven push to make higher education accessible to a greater range of students. This has resulted in students with a wide range of prior knowledge and academic skill level undertaking study. This change, along with implementing our university's work-ready graduate outcomes has meant we need to embed more skills-based learning into the first year units. However, many students have preconceived expectations that university study will be an in-depth exploration of a particular field involving content, not skills-based contact hours (Brinkworth et al., 2009).

Similarly, many students come to university expecting traditional classes (such as lectures) will be heavily based on a one-way dissemination of information. They often expect lecturers to do all the talking and students to do all the listening. Suddenly, where students are thrust into a 500-seat lecture theatre and expected to actively engage with the lecturer and their peers, answer questions, take smartphone polls on questions and discuss topics, this teaching approach often undermines their prior expectations (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). It is our experience that although they may see the value in student-centred learning, the teaching approach conflicts with their fundamental expectations of 'lectures' and perhaps what constitutes 'good' learning and teaching paradigms. In addition, some students come to university expecting a university lecturer to live up to the image of the 'sage on the stage'. Typically, the sage is expected to be an older male professor with decades of academic experience. Instead, the students encounter young females who facilitate student learning as a 'guide on the side'. This incongruence may result in students initially feeling less confident about the quality of the overall first year experience. This feeling can be exacerbated when traditional modes of assessment (exams and essays) are replaced with alternate forms of graded assessment, such as webpage creation, blogging and concept-mapping. Many contemporary assignments also require students to reflect upon their learning journey and encourage them to introduce critical self-reflection elements into assessment tasks. Overall, these combine to challenge their expectations of what university learning and teaching should look like and how it should engage them (Stein, Isaacs & Andrews, 2004; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

An additional shock for many students is that the 'sage' does not assess all their work. In many courses, students are expected to engage in peer and group assessment and also self-assessment. Not only are students experiencing a disruption to their expectations of what 'good' learning and teaching should look like, but university academics are also continually transforming what 'good' teaching looks like and what learning will encompass, including the students taking part in the assessment process. Such fundamental alteration to long-standing norms of teaching, learning and assessment in many university courses will shape future senses of academic identity, role and function in higher education teaching spaces (Archer, 2008).

Our teaching setting

At our university, teaching is an explicit and integral part of one's academic identity. Quality teaching is a major priority within the University Strategic Plan (Deakin University, 2012). The university monitors student satisfaction through internal measures of student evaluations of each unit taught (Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units – SETU), and uses national instruments that benchmark student satisfaction with their learning experiences (University Experience Survey, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Our university recognises teaching excellence through competitive awards at Faculty and University levels, with smaller awards within some Schools (such as ours). However, unsatisfactory teaching performance is also monitored and handled through performance reviews with staff. The School of Psychology is renowned (both internally and externally) for its teaching excellence, its national award-winning teachers and consistently high student evaluations of teaching. The culture of the School is built around providing a high quality student experience, and the university recognises the need to attract and retain students on the basis of high quality teaching to increase enrolments, thus ensuring funding in an unpredictable economic climate.

We (Bereznicki and Horwood) are in a unique position in this context, where high numbers of postgraduate students are also sessional academics. Although we are both

doctoral students, undertaking PhDs in the area of neuromodulation for pain reduction and personality factors in chronic illness respectively; we are also tenured academics in charge of very large core first-year psychology units (called Unit Chairs). We entered our respective positions after a period of two to three years of sessional (casual) teaching in the School, following completion of an Honours degree in Psychology. Both tenured positions were competitively advertised and our appointments were based on having won the position on merit. Although we are postgraduate students, we are paid commensurate with the responsibilities of Unit Chair roles (Deakin University, 2013). We have the same responsibility, authority, and academic freedom required to fulfil the role of Unit Chairs as any tenured member of staff. The role includes: the design and evaluation of curriculum, devising and undertaking assessments, managing and mentoring approximately 25 tutorial staff in each unit, teaching and marking, ensuring final results are correct and submitted and responding to student questions, issues and requests. We have responsibility to organise and ensure the smooth running of these two introductory first-year core units and are answerable to many formal committees overseeing quality of student learning experiences for outcomes (such as the School's senior management team, Faculty Teaching and Learning committees, Academic Progress Committee and the University's Academic Board).

The first-year introductory undergraduate psychology units we lead are very large, with approximately 1600 students undertaking each unit over the year. These units are crucial to the School's successful undergraduate program. Students can study on-campus at one of the three metropolitan or regional campuses in Victoria, or entirely off campus (online). Our students come from a diverse range of backgrounds, such as school leavers, mature-age students, and a range of socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

Due to the blended-learning design of the units, all modes of content delivery; face-to-face, live streaming of seminars, pre-recorded lectures, or online interactive tutorials are available to all students if they live in the vicinity of a campus. The first-year psychology units run as both core psychology subjects and elective units for students undertaking majors in other Faculties, so our units must also be of relevance and value to students taking them without the intention of completing a major sequence in psychology. Given that many of the students who undertake the units do so on an elective basis, students' experiences in these units can have a dramatic impact on the perceived quality of teaching in the School of Psychology. Furthermore, students' choices to continue to study in psychology (or not) may influence school retention rates in later subjects.

Many factors have impacted upon our diving into the deep end of academia, without the usual doctoral qualification required to become a tenured academic.

Piloting a path amidst academic pressures

The need to provide an authentic and supportive learning experience in an era where students will readily indicate dis-satisfaction with their university experience has meant that first-year university educators need to possess additional qualities to the formal doctoral credential. Empathy, the ability to facilitate large numbers of students in multiple simultaneous modalities, innovative technology usage, and the willingness to dive in headfirst are not the exclusive domains of the fledgling academic. However, being a new academic in this brave new academic world may be easier for those who have grown up with the technology commonly utilised by students. Being high technology users ourselves, we are confident in capitalising in our teaching on the different ways students communicate using technology. We understand student expectations regarding fast and seamless access to

information, and engage with visually appealing and interactive communication modes instead of text-saturated lecture slides. We use multiple technologies to enhance engagement, and can slot authentically into domains usually used by students, such as social media. Both first-year units utilise social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to engage students in these units. Students are able to communicate easily with each other and the unit staff in a space in which they feel comfortable. We have found that students are more willing to interact with each other about their learning through social media as distinct from the student discussion sections or forums in the university Learning Management System (LMS), where students expect the unit staff to dominate and the system itself to be more difficult and bureaucratic to use than either Facebook or similar social media sites.

Being students ourselves means that we understand the multiple pressures that undergraduate students face, such as juggling often conflicting commitments to fit in study, family, social time and work. We are often able to foresee the issues that students may encounter, and enact university support and resource systems for them. This ability to easily empathise with our students has a positive impact on student evaluations of our teaching. Student feedback on our teaching is well above the Faculty and University averages (i.e. on a five-point scale assessing student satisfaction with teaching in 2013, Bereznicki and Horwood scored 4.86 and 4.54 respectively, and the Faculty and University averages were 3.99 and 3.97 respectively).

Diving in head-first
As we are at the start of our academic careers, we are willing to take risks. It is risky business indeed to develop and implement authentic assessments and learning opportunities in large cohorts whilst using new technology that will always have 'teething' problems. For example, one of the first-year assessments requires students to develop a

webpage to explain a scientific article to a layperson. Such assessments require the provision of resources, such as instructional videos and interactive assignment guides to assist students with learning the associated technological skills, in addition to the resources and support surrounding critical thinking and deconstruction.

The risk of using such tools is that the technology does not support the intended learning outcomes. Although we plan for every foreseeable detail, we have had experiences that have not lived up to our own (or our students') expectations. For example, the online submission technology crashed the day 1200 students were due to submit an assignment. This caused major anxiety for both students and staff, and considerable academic time to sort out the issue and adopt a 'band-aid' solution until the underlying technical problem could be addressed. As we are developing our academic identities in these progressive times, we find it natural to accept that there will be technological hitches, and that we need to constantly be flexible and find work-around solutions until appropriate information technology staff can fix the problems. We accept that in trying any new technology or adopting technologies for large groups with the aim of engaging students in the learning process, that there will always be issues that need to be addressed at the last minute, no matter how scrupulously planned.

The pressure of expectations
Like most academics, we feel the weight of performance expectations from our colleagues, our doctoral research peers and the students we teach. The pressure (whether perceived or otherwise) to perform exceptionally well to justify our early tenure to both senior staff and our postgraduate peers is notable. Given the importance of the units to the School, there are many interested parties carefully watching our progress and the successes, or otherwise, of the innovations we bring to the first-year core programme. Additionally, the

pressure to excel continually in a School where teaching excellence is valued (and expected) can be challenging, particularly with the competing responsibilities of post-graduate study.

Just like other tenured staff, our perform-ance in teaching, research, and service is monitored by the School management group annually via performance reviews. If we were not to achieve the minimum stan-dards for academics at our level, we would be performance managed similar to any other tenured staff member. This also applies to our PhD progress. If we were not making suitable progress in our doctoral research our supervisors would negotiate that we undertake less teaching for a stated period of time in order that we dedicate more time to research. That said, achieving a workable balance between teaching, research and service to the institution is not an issue unique to early career academics – it is a concern for all staff at all levels of the academic hierarchy.

We do, however, face a pressure unique to our situation. As academics who are also postgraduate students, we feel the familiar and constant well-meaning pressure from our partners, families, and friends to finish our doctoral studies. The frequent questions regarding the length of time our doctoral research has taken and will take to complete can be draining. There is genuine surprise when people learn we undertake academic work in addition to our doctoral studies, as there is a clear expectation that we are only working on our postgraduate research. Some express concern that these tasks take our attention, time, and effort away from thesis writing and completion. Many people, both external and internal to the university, have advised us to complete our doctoral research, and then turn our attention to teaching. However, the irony is that without seeking out large sessional teaching loads at the start of our doctoral degrees, we would not have achieved early tenure. Given the emphasis that Australian universities place on new staff having both research and

teaching experience, there is nothing to suggest that mere completion of a doctoral degree would ensure ongoing employment for us in the sector.

Treading water on the doctoral thesis

In accepting our current positions, we expected that we would be able to juggle our doctoral research and teaching responsibili-ties easily – we reasoned, after all, that managing only one unit should be easier than working as a sessional academic on multiple units. This, unfortunately, is not the reality. The magnitude of managing and continually developing a large unit, and doing it well, takes investment in terms of time, energy, effort, and thought. All this energy is then diverted from moving towards doctoral completion. Inevitably, to prevent our drowning under the weight of teaching and administration, we needed to tread water on our doctoral theses. We both changed to part-time student status, and our research is taking much longer than we (and everyone else) expected. However, in juggling priori-ties of teaching and research we have discov-ered that teaching is a passion for us, and we give it the time, dedication, energy that it demands, not only to survive but to excel. Consequently, this means that our doctoral research is often a lower priority, and some-times for long periods of time.

We are acutely aware that we cannot progress in academia without a postdoctoral qualification, and are often reminded of this by our well-intentioned colleagues and fami-lies. We have discussed our experiences of guilt when the inevitable neglect of teaching or research occurs as we constantly juggle these competing priorities. We strive to maintain a productive and organised façade whilst sometimes struggling to stay afloat, which can be difficult. External teaching-related pressures such as student evalua-tions, staff performance reviews, and the constant reminder of teaching excellence are combined with doctoral research pres-sures such as aiming to meet an acceptable completion timeline and the need to publish

in our discipline-specific areas. Internal pressures, such as our own personal desires to succeed and excel in what we do, have resulted in our committing to more work than we can realistically handle and still achieve some form of work-life balance. Continually working to keep teaching and research staff who have vested (and often competing) interests in our performance is a constant challenge. Attempting to cope has meant that at times we have each shown the early signs of burnout as we strive to make everything work to a high standard. Finding a sustainable work/life balance is something we continue to strive for, as do many of our doctoral peers and senior colleagues.

Navigating the turbulent waters of academic identity

Our academic identities are developing while we steer a path through the challenges and privileges our positions provide. Some academic staff worry that we might damage our blossoming academic careers by putting our energy into teaching and learning, instead of pursuing our discipline-specific fields. Often, teaching-related research is not valued as much as discipline-specific research, which can attract large external grants and high-impact factor journal publications. Therefore, some colleagues find our decision to dedicate time to sharing our innovation in teaching and learning through scholarly publication a questionable use of research time. In particular, many colleagues question whether it is even possible to divide time effectively between our discipline-specific research and teaching and learning research. We are still unsure if this is possible ourselves, but have both made the conscious decision to attempt to establish a successful track record in both areas.

If we were not coping with the workload and experiencing harmful effects of burnout, naturally we feel our School would support us if we elected not to continue our PhD candidature. To the best of our knowledge, the consequences of failing to complete our doctoral degrees would be a

significantly reduced capacity to be eligible for promotion beyond our current status. Additionally, we would reduce our opportunity to be involved in School research activities and likely experience a reduction in academic credibility. Discontinuing our doctoral studies is not an option either of us have really considered, primarily because we are also developing a solid track record in our research fields. In addition, we are unwilling to forego that part of our academic identity so early in our careers.

Trying to achieve some balance shapes our developing academic identities, as we shift between postgraduate researcher and Unit Chair identity. These shifts are often pronounced and frequent. For example, in the same morning we may emerge feeling downhearted from a supervisory meeting about our PhD as we have not made substantial progress, and this is contrasted with being invited to take leadership in a discussion at a School Board meeting about assessment. Occasionally, shifting between academic roles has resulted in our overstepping previously unknown boundaries and, as a result, having our emerging confidence shaken.

Some of our doctoral peers and School staff occasionally question our role as tenured academics, as we are hybrid creatures – neither fully credentialed academics nor full-time doctoral research students. In terms of our own academic identities, we feel we do not quite belong to either academic group, and we occasionally feel we need to justify our positions to both senior staff and our postgraduate peers. At the start of our tenure, managing doctoral peers in our respective units was very challenging. The abrupt shift in the power dynamic and benefits that came with tenure resulted in some strained doctoral friendships, and this was compounded by needing to present ourselves differently to attempt to fit in with our academic colleagues. Occasionally, working with more senior staff on our units has also been a challenge. However, managing these situations has become easier over time as we

have become more experienced, comfortable and confident in our roles.

This positive confidence shift has been facilitated by the School. For example, there are many professional development opportunities for postgraduate students who teach, such as marking support and access to a specialist staff member appointed to assist in all aspects of curriculum and assessment design (Sutherland-Smith). In Sutherland-Smith's role as Director of Teaching and Learning with specific responsibility for pedagogy, she has been supportive of us in these two units. We have relied upon her knowledge of curriculum to help shape not only teaching activities, but assessment design, creation of rubrics and presentation of material to students and tutors. We also asked her to train all tutors in the self-assessment model we used in both units, interview tutors at the end of each semester to garner their ideas and feedback on how new assessments were progressing and involve herself in moderation marking meetings and provide suggestions to improve the overall teaching and learning experiences for students and staff in our units. Additionally, we each have a supportive network of formal and informal teaching and research mentors to help us guide our way through early tenure. The longer we are in these positions of teaching leadership the more we are able to identify with the academic teaching and management role, although we know our senses of academic identity will be 'constantly rebuilt, reshaped and renegotiated' (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013, p.1147) even after we have obtained our doctoral qualifications and move into the next stage of our academic careers. In fact, we are aware they will morph as we take different roles throughout our academic lives.

Avoiding burnout

We have needed to re-assess our own expectations through the course of our academic journey to date. Unrealistically, or perhaps naively, we expected we could block away time for doctoral research and writing in the midst of teaching and managing large units. In reality, this did not occur. The outcome of being highly approachable and enthusiastic is that, unsurprisingly, students approach us. We manage huge numbers of emails and discussion posts every day, in addition to meeting students face-to-face and in online contexts. We also did not expect the additional workload from staff and students that comes with implementing authentic assessments for large cohorts. Fixing technological issues and mentoring staff and students through novel assessments (as opposed to when our units had traditional assessments such as multiple-choice exams) takes up large amounts of time. Although we planned for most situations, the unexpected volume of emails and administrative work we encountered caused us to rethink the time we could devote to such matters and maintain some kind of work/life balance.

Strategies we have enacted to attempt to balance our workloads are varied, and mostly relate to time planning and management of expectations. For example, now we use multiple calendars – one for meetings and teaching commitments, one to help us effectively block our time in between commitments according to priorities on our 'to do' lists, and one to track what we actually do. This system enables us to answer accurately, when asked, about the amount of time we spend on competing demands, and identify any holes or inefficient patterns in work habits. Learning to delegate tasks is an ongoing challenge. We both found it difficult to assign tasks to others at the start of tenure – we were both so excited to have autonomy over our respective units that we wanted to do everything ourselves. Over time, this reluctance to allow others to take charge of certain tasks was broken down by necessity, and has been made easier as we have learned what we can ask team members to do and that over which we need to maintain creative control. Learning not to over-promise and then subsequently under-deliver on tasks or projects on offer in the School has also been a challenge. Like many new academics, we

used to say 'yes' to everything in order to be seen to be enthusiastic and take part in every aspect of academic life. Once we realised that we could reasonably say 'no' or negotiate timelines in particularly busy periods, our workloads have become more manageable.

We avoid burnout because of the inbuilt support structures within our School and University. The carefully shaped culture in our School of Psychology rewards excellence and innovation in teaching and learning and opens doors for staff who do not hold traditional research qualifications but excel in their teaching. We have been acknowledged as valuable contributors to academic life by winning School, Faculty, and University awards for teaching excellence and innovation. We have been rewarded with university funding to present our cutting-edge curriculum innovations at international teaching and learning conferences and some relief over peak enrolment semesters, so we can dedicate more time and energy to our doctoral work and move closer to completion.

We have people and resources available to help us when we need assistance – a very supportive and encouraging Head of School who takes a personal interest in nurturing staff and ensuring fair workload allocations; we have understanding doctoral supervisors, and higher degree by research co-ordinators. The first-year team is made up of enthusiastic senior staff and sessional staff who are passionate and dedicated to providing a quality first-year programme. As with all Unit Chairs in our School, we have academics who rotate into the Unit Chair role over the summer semester, so we can dedicate three months of the year to our doctoral studies. These personal and institutional strategies enable us to stay afloat in the deep end of academic life.

Conclusion

Our roles are challenging, but also rewarding. We do this out of a love for teaching and a passion for innovation and design. The challenge we face as tenured PhD candidates is that of relating two identities, doctoral student and professional academic. Our aim is to navigate successfully the different, and often conflicting expectations from multiple stakeholders in academic life: students; doctoral supervisors; and university management. From a doctoral student perspective, we believe it is important to be strategic when building a career in academia, and we think beyond focussing on a research track record at the expense of teaching and service. We are prepared, however, that this means an inevitable delay in completion of doctoral research. We consider it is important to remember to keep watch for what lies beneath the changing waters of higher education - the tentacles of burnout and the whirlpools of pressure that can wash away work/life balance. Ultimately, we look forward to sighting land on the doctoral completion horizon, but we know we have a way to swim yet.

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