

## A Transformative Experience: Expanding My Teaching and Learning Horizon

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*At the beginning of my academic journey I held the belief that I would learn to teach simply by teaching. To my dismay, I had underestimated the complicated nature of teaching in higher education and gave little consideration to the ways students learn. Feeling overwhelmed by my situation, I began questioning my teaching practices and student learning. It was then I understood that my teaching skill and conceptions of teaching and learning lacked a theoretical framework. Missing an important piece of the teaching and learning puzzle, I have been on a quest to seek answers. This paper outlines my journey of professional discovery through my experiences in the Graduate Certificate in Education. This transformative experience has aided in expanding my teaching and learning horizon by focusing on diverse learners and inclusive teaching practices.*

### Introduction

I began my academic career in 2006 at the Centre for Regional Engagement, University of South Australia. I was enthusiastic, excited, and passionate about my new position as lecturer in the undergraduate Social Work Program. Much of my previous working life had been spent working in State Government as a Human Service Practitioner. I assisted communities, organizations, groups, families, and individuals to meet their full potential on an intellectual, physical and emotional level, even against the greatest odds. The central focus of this work involved advocacy, social change, empowerment, equity, respect for client choice,

and human rights of youth and juvenile offenders (Mass, 2000). I firmly believed that I would learn to teach through the act of teaching. However, as time passed I soon came to appreciate that experience alone does not necessarily guarantee teaching quality. Reflecting on my teaching experiences in 2006 and 2007, I found that I was a gatekeeper of knowledge and directed the learning process. This power meant that students played a passive role in their own education. I realized that this was not an adequate way to teach and thus felt a strong sense of despair, isolation and insecurity about my teaching and student learning. What self-confidence I had turned to self-doubt, my enthusiasm to exhaustion, and my excitement to apprehension. I understood

that my personal experiences of teaching were valuable; however, I lacked knowledge about teaching and learning that was based on research (Kreber & Cranton, 2000).

## Graduate Certificate in Education

The University of South Australia began offering the Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching), now called the Graduate Certificate in Education (Academic Practice), in 2007. Policy requirement mandated that all new academic staff appointments (levels A-C) undertake the Graduate Certificate in Education (GCE) as a condition of probation (Quinn, 2010). As I had been appointed the year before the commencement of this policy requirement, there was no obligation for me to undertake this program. I desired to enhance my effectiveness as a teacher (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004), and to develop conceptions of teaching and student learning. I believed that the GCE, the aim of which was to enhance the quality of teaching and learning by developing understandings and abilities through highly relevant, flexible, and comprehensive in-service education for academic staff at graduate level, aligned with my teaching goals. This paper explores some of the transformative experiences I have had while taking the GCE, which has assisted me to expand my teaching and learning horizon.

## Reflection

The value of reflective practice in teaching is widely acknowledged in the literature (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2004; Lea & Callaghan, 2008; O'Brien & Hughes, 2006; Schon, 1983; Zeichner, 1994). A reflective practitioner is someone "who engages with his or her experience in ways that turn it into meaningful knowledge" (Kreber & Castleden, 2009, p. 511). Throughout the GCE, I was constantly challenged to critically reflect on my teaching and this initially caused me to feel vulnerable and anxious. However, it was the safe and supportive environment of the GCE that gave me confidence to dig deep down into the roots of my teaching practices.

Reflecting on my path into teaching, I became aware that I presumed that my discipline knowledge and skills were sufficient enough as basis for my approach to teaching and student learning. Consequently, my teaching methods were teacher-directed; students were being encouraged to take a superficial approach to their learning (Ramsden, 2003). Recognizing my ineffective teaching practices, I desired to grow and develop as a teacher. I began applying the new-found skills learnt in GCE to my own teaching, for example, taking a more student-centred approach. Gibbs (1992) suggests that a student-centred approach "gives students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study" (p. 23), which was now the aim of my teaching. In implementing such changes I witnessed a considerable shift in power during the learning experience; this power, which had previously resided with me, now resided with the students. As the teacher, I began to take on different roles, which included facilitator, mentor, supporter, and guide. Rather than transmitting information, I began to provide opportunities for students to identify gaps in their knowledge and foster new ways of accessing and processing information. Students now played more of an active role in their own education and in the subsequent acquisition of knowledge. This transformative experience helped me to see the importance of my development as a teacher. It increased my desire to discover what supports or hinders student learning, and what part I could play in this important process.

## Diverse Learners

Students are not a homogenous group; they have individual learning preferences, varied life experiences, individual needs, values, and abilities. Students differ in race, socioeconomic status, gender, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, work commitments, family responsibilities, and geographical isolation (Morley, 2009; Worthington, 2008). Of significance to my reflection, was the diversity of distance learners and the challenges this presented to my teaching. The Centre for Regional Engagement has its operations at the Whyalla Campus

and the Mount Gambier Regional Centre. Education is delivered through an off-campus distance mode to students located across Australia. Responsible for the delivery and course coordination of six courses in the Social Work Program, I use face-to-face classes for internal Whyalla students, podcasts for off-campus students and videoconference lectures to the Mount Gambier students; all students are supported by online environment. A major and lingering concern has been how to support the diversity of needs of learners.

## Inclusive Teaching Practices

Addressing and responding to the diverse needs of students became a focus of my reflections. It became evident from students by means of formal (course evaluations) and informal (emails) feedback that my teaching practices were not always inclusive of all students. During my involvement in the GCE I came to appreciate and understand that in order to reach students I needed to modify content, approaches, structures, and strategies from my current teaching practices. Inclusive teaching is challenging in any environment; however, I was optimistic that given the research, support and in-service application of learning from the GCE I would be able to increase participation in learning and alleviate the isolation students experienced within and from the educational setting.

### Learning preferences

I was concerned, even anxious, that I was impeding rather than fostering inclusive practices for teaching and learning. I made the fateful assumption that students' learning preferences mirrored my own learning preferences. Studies in the GCE developed my understanding and appreciation of the differences that exist in learning preferences, particularly in reference to online learning. I was introduced to Bonk and Zhang's (2006) R2D2 model, which focuses on knowledge, from its acquisition, to reflection and representation of knowledge, through to application. This conceptual model links design and delivery of online education with various instructional strategies, and acknowledges differences in student learning preferences (auditory and verbal learners, reflective

and observational learners, visual learners, and tactile learners). I developed a deliberate and organized approach to teaching, using a combination of new approaches, some of which included, cooperative learning techniques (Perkins & Saris, 2001), problem-based learning scenarios (Wong & Lam, 2007), interactive virtual tours (Bellefeuille, Martin, & Buck, 2005), and active learning techniques (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Accommodating different learning preferences and diversifying the types of online instructional strategies was of significant benefit to students. Students commented that some of the advantages included "developing new ways of learning" and they "gained a better understanding of course concepts," which in turn "increased participation in learning."

### Communication methods

Distance learners are more likely to experience a sense of isolation and alienation from the education setting due to the separation of their geographical locations (Rovai & Downey, 2010). This is certainly the case for students at the Centre for Regional Engagement, who voiced a strong sense of disconnect, particularly as the social opportunity to communicate with the teaching staff was difficult. My early approach to communication was a one-way transmission of messages. I did not allow for or encourage social interaction, sharing of meanings, ideas, or feelings, and my approach lacked reciprocal process of exchange. Social communication and interaction is important in retention of students (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003); thus, I endeavoured to enrich communication with students. The GCE exposed me to a variety of methods including online discussion boards and chat rooms, which I trialled with students in an attempt to increase the social opportunities. I discovered that these methods were suited to course discussions rather than socialisation. Students often avoided freely expressing themselves for fear of, as one student put it, "sounding silly." There were also difficulties in getting students online at the same time, given the diversity in personal and professional commitments. A review of the literature and discussions with the teaching staff in the GCE led me to develop a weekly e-newsletter

(Love & Edwards, 2009), which updates students on developments in the course, gives helpful academic tips and tricks, alerts students to important events or information, and offers a space for personal social commentary, and the opportunity to ask questions or give suggestions about new resources or tools. Feedback I subsequently received from students identified that such efforts “kept them in touch,” “helped reduce isolation,” were “helpful,” they were “more confident to ask questions,” and it provided opportunities for students to “tackle [their] learning in a different manner.” This strategy improved the volume of social communication with students, but also assisted in additional supports and services being identified for distance learners.

Delivery of my formal lectures emulated the didactic approaches of past instructors from my own educational experiences. As a gatekeeper I controlled students’ access to information and merely transmitting material; information, facts or ideas were readily accepted uncritically. Retention of information was superficial and did not promote a deeper approach to learning (Ramsden, 2003). Through my involvement in the GCE I was encouraged to challenge my approach and subsequently changed the way I conduct formal lectures in an attempt to address this ineffective communication approach. I now make direct linkages between course aims and to the students as future practitioners from the outset of each lecture; this strategy creates a broader personal understanding and commitment to the subject (Ramsden, 2003). I also introduced a five minute discussion partway through lectures; these mini discussion sessions encourage students to engage with the content in meaningful ways. This helps students to make sense of and apply information, evident changes have been noted in student construction of knowledge; one student commented: “the five minute discussions help me to contribute to my own understandings and address my misunderstandings.”

## Conclusions and Future Directions

In conclusion, the GCE has been instrumental in assisting me to expand my teaching and learning

horizon. The in-service application of learning aided in transforming my notions of teaching and teaching practices. I was challenged to look deeper than my own needs and encouraged to examine the bigger picture of teaching and student learning in higher education. My quest to seek answers gave me new insight about my own students, the diversity of their needs, and the importance and value of inclusive teaching practices. The knowledge gained from this powerful experience has instilled in me the desire to strive for continuous improvement, to engage in critical reflection, to communicate my successes and failures and to continue on my journey to develop and grow as a teacher. I will continue the work to breakdown barriers that impact students from diverse backgrounds who are engaged in education. Future aspirations include promoting and supporting learning by aligning assessment tasks to different learning preferences.

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