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Abstract

I have just completed my second year as a casual lecturer and have enjoyed engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). However, my casual status has brought a number of challenges to ensuring my SoTL work has both long term and institutional impact. As the trend for casualisation in higher education continues across the world, I believe that the potential detriment it can cause to SoTL needs to be addressed by the SoTL community. This paper describes firstly a SoTL project I have carried out using a wiki-based assessment method. Secondly, it presents my reflections on the difficulties I face in continuing my SoTL work and feeding it into my department. Finally, it argues that employment on a casual basis can restrict SoTL potential and, consequently, it is time to ask how SoTL can still flourish in this type of environment.

Keywords

Casual workforce, Wiki, SoTL challenges, Isolation

Reflections on SoTL by a Casual Lecturer: Personal Benefits, Long-Term Challenges

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Abstract

I have just completed my second year as a casual lecturer and have enjoyed engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). However, my casual status has brought a number of challenges to ensuring my SoTL work has both long term and institutional impact. As the trend for casualisation in higher education continues across the world, I believe that the potential detriment it can cause to SoTL needs to be addressed by the SoTL community. This paper describes firstly a SoTL project I have carried out using a wiki-based assessment method. Secondly, it presents my reflections on the difficulties I face in continuing my SoTL work and feeding it into my department. Finally, it argues that employment on a casual basis can restrict SoTL potential and, consequently, it is time to ask how SoTL can still flourish in this type of environment.

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Introduction

As an educational researcher in higher education (HE) in England, I have always been committed to the values of and need for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). However, in this role, my experience with SoTL has been limited mainly to supporting other academic staff in developing the skills and confidence to begin investigating and researching their own teaching practices. Two years ago, though, I took up the role of a lecturer in Education Studies on a casual basis¹, i.e. employed on a yearly contract that may or may not be renewed to teach one or two modules, and I was excited to begin practising SoTL in relation to my own teaching, my own classroom and my own students. Though I have enjoyed engaging in the SoTL process, I have also become aware of the challenges that my casual status brings to my SoTL efforts having any long-term or departmental influence. The trend towards a casualised workforce in HE is gaining pace in many countries, and particularly in those with an already firm allegiance to SoTL, such as England, America and Australia (Fowler, 2005; Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan, 2009; Chalmers, 2011). Consequently, I believe that the impact of this trend on the development and progression of SoTL should be both a source of concern and an essential area of investigation for SoTL advocates. This paper will, firstly, describe one aspect of the SoTL work I have carried out in my casual role and its effect on the learning of my students. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it will present my reflections on the difficulties I feel I face in ensuring my work has a longer term impact both for me and the department that I work in.

¹ This contract is not based at Birmingham City University.

My SoTL project

For two years now I have taught an undergraduate module based around recent changes occurring within the education system. With the first group of students I taught I recognised a certain unwillingness in them to become active participants in the learning process, which often resulted in fairly strained group discussions and activities that felt akin, at times, to pulling teeth. Their final assignments seemed to reflect their passivity with very few students approaching anywhere near a deep level of engagement with the subject matter. I am aware that much has been written about this issue and that there is general concern among the HE community about the increasing passiveness of students and their apparent desire to be 'spoon fed' (see e.g. Smith, 2006). Unfortunately, space does not permit me here to discuss the rights or wrongs of these perceptions about students, or the external influences on HE that may encourage these attitudes (see e.g. Borden and Evenbeck, 2007, and Wingate, 2007 for further discussion). What I can definitively state, though, is that it is very demoralising as a teacher to see this happening in your own classroom. When I knew I would be teaching the same module again, I decided to consult the pedagogical literature for ideas about how to inspire a more active learning approach in my students. I recognise that, at this level, I am perhaps engaging more in scholarly teaching, which Richlin (2001, p.58) defines as intending only to 'impact the activity of teaching and the resulting learning'. However, I agree with Western and McAlpine's (2001) continuum of growth towards SoTL and would place myself in the early phase that they describe as growing in one's own teaching.

A review of the literature led me to the idea of proposing a wiki-based assignment in place of the traditional formal essay. A wiki is a 'web site, the content of which can be edited by visitors to the site, allowing users to easily create and edit pages collaboratively' (Su and Beaumont, 2010, p.417). Wikis are viewed as tools that can help to promote student motivation and collaboration, and facilitate more active learning by appealing to different learning styles and intelligences (Hazari *et al*, 2009). Moreover, they are identified as supporting the development of social-constructivist learning (Su and Beaumont, 2010) by encouraging the collaborative growth of knowledge (Slotter, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2011). A wiki, therefore, seemed to offer the potential to develop an active learning role in my students through its emphasis on sharing and collectively building knowledge. Consequently, after guidance on how to create and build wikis, the students were asked to form small groups and investigate a topic of their own choosing based on the material covered throughout the module. All details about the organisation and presentation of the wiki were left up to them, and they were told that the final session of the module would involve them peer reviewing each other's work.

The experience of the wiki assignment proved very interesting both for me and the students. All students indicated that it was a very different way of working than they were used to, and at times they did appear out of their comfort zone. For example, the lack of a word limit seemed to worry some students as they were not used to deciding for themselves when they had done enough work. However, as they progressed their creativity and sense of responsibility grew and I was asked less and less questions about how they should organise their work. The overall outcome was that the majority of groups displayed a much deeper connection to the topics we had been discussing in class and utilised a wealth of different sources that a traditional essay format would have restricted. Some groups even took the initiative to carry out very small scale research projects about their topic and discussed the results within their wikis. The best evidence of the effectiveness of the wiki

assignment, though, comes from the evaluation comments made by the students themselves:

It's a good way to learn. It's different to other assessments and modules, which meant I was kept interested and motivated.

It was a really good experience. I was able to express my ideas in a creative way.

Being able to work collaboratively on a project with my peers has enabled greater understanding of the topic

Using a wiki has enhanced my skills and has also helped me to learn extensively about the subject

Challenges for impact

Introducing the wiki assignment and seeing my students become more active and engaged in their learning has been very personally satisfying for me as a teacher. It has also given me further ideas about methods and strategies that I would like to try in the future. From a personal perspective therefore, my scholarly efforts have been very beneficial to me and to this particular group of students. Nevertheless, my satisfaction is dampened by the fact that, as a casual member of staff, I feel isolated in my SoTL work. A study by Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan (2009) highlights that academics on casual contracts often feel less respected and valued than permanent members of staff, and experience exclusion from the core business of the wider programme, department and university. I too sense this exclusion: I am only in the institution I teach in one day a week, which does not happen to be the day that team or wider departmental meetings are held. I could make the effort to go in especially for the meetings, however the relatively low pay of a casual contract, as Fowler (2005) stresses, means that I invariably have other types of work 'on the go' at other institutions, which restricts my availability. I know this exclusion is not malicious, or even consciously done. Yet I have nearly completed a whole year of teaching with only the very briefest of glimpses of the other teachers, the subject head or the head of department. Unfortunately, this situation only confirms my perception that I lack value to the department. Consequently, I feel unsure of how to feed the results of my wiki-based assignment into the wider scope of the department so that this experience can be built on by the other academics.

Additionally, though the wiki experience has given me further ideas that I would like to try in my teaching practice, I am currently stalled as I do not yet know if my contract will be renewed for the next academic year. Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan (2009) state that casual contracts are often agreed at very late notice, and in England, impending funding cuts have only exacerbated this state of affairs. My experience to date confirms that contracts can be arranged only one or two weeks before teaching begins, which in my view presents considerable obstacles to the long term planning of the teaching strategies to be used within a module. More often than not, a piece meal approach has to be taken in which the module is planned on a session by session basis, rather than as a holistic unit. The lack of time to plan and think beyond the very next session restricts any capacity for SoTL based inquiries and promotes instead a reliance on simply doing what was done before. It may be no surprise then that as I contemplate a possible third year of teaching on a casual basis, I feel more cause for concern than enthusiasm.

Throughout my experiences as an educational researcher and as a casual lecturer, I remain convinced about the power of SoTL to advance the practice and professionalism of teaching, and to foster meaningful, long lasting learning in students. I think it is time to insert a caveat however, that this power may be reduced as the casualisation of the academic workforce increases. I present my reflections in this paper as a first-hand account of how this casual status can restrict SoTL potential and long term impact. I do not pretend to have the answers to this situation, but I do believe it is time that the SoTL community begins to ask the questions about how SoTL can still flourish in this type of environment.

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