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Keywords

Early career academic, Teaching and learning, Graduate certificate in education

Rough Seas to Calmer Waters: The Journey of an Early Career Academic

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Abstract

As an early career academic I have had the opportunity to reflect on my early experiences in academia. This paper is a reflection on my journey through rough seas to calmer waters. This paper describes an uneasy voyage of experience, from confident practitioner to uncertain academic. Helping to steer me through uncharted waters on the high seas of academia was the Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching). This experience was instrumental in my development as an academic. Key to this personal reflection is discovery, action and reflection.

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Introduction

I began my teaching career one month before celebrating my 30th birthday. I was excited with anticipation and confident in my knowledge of the discipline area I was teaching. I had a strong background of experience and expertise as a Human Service practitioner, previously running the largest young offender team in the state. This role involved advocating, recommending and reporting on young offenders to the Youth Court of South Australia; in addition I supported and supervised a team of practitioners. I believed that my previous experiences in the social work field and my earlier university studies were an adequate preparation for such a change in my career.

The weeks and months that followed were filled with high levels of enthusiasm and eagerness and low levels of self-doubt and apprehensiveness. But it became a confusing time, particularly as a practitioner. I openly encouraged and accepted debate and questions, yet as an academic I was restless at what I interpreted to be an interrogation of my knowledge by students. I felt completely isolated, disorientated and disempowered. I started to think that being an academic was very different to what I envisaged it would be like. I went from confident practitioner to an uncertain academic in a matter of months.

During this time, I turned to my journal, a personal diary, and looking back over my entries in my early days of being an academic, I found that I was continually asking myself a series of common questions. Some of which included, *how was I making students learning possible? What was my philosophy of teaching? What is the aim of my teaching? How do I know if they know what they should know? Do I know what I need to know?* What was clear was that I was unsure of the answers, and I did not know how I could go about answering them. My earlier reflections were the catalyst for the unfolding of the bigger picture of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

On the quest to seek answers to my questions I began to reflect on the feedback I had received (i.e. course evaluations, student evaluations of teaching, student emails, feedback from the field and peer evaluations of my teaching). The process of reflection provided me

with an opportunity to question my teaching practices, to contemplate key theories that underpin teaching practice and allowed me to consider the wider role an academic plays within a higher educational setting. Voicing such questions allowed me to develop an ongoing dialogue with academic developers. Such conversations were instrumental in my 'development as an academic' (Douglas and Douglas 2006) and it was through such exchanges that I was able to increase my understanding of the 'scholarship of teaching' (Andresen 2000, Prosser & Trigwell 1999, Ramsden 2003), something I knew nothing about. My curiosity was sparked; I wanted and need to know more about the theories that underpin teaching and student learning. I subsequently enrolled in a Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching).

Over the next 18 months I undertook the Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching) which provided me with a firm foundation, not only to teaching in higher education but also student learning. A series of courses provided me with the opportunity to learn and consider the principles, theories and different methodologies of university teaching. I gained a better understanding of the distinctive nature of teaching and learning environments in higher educational settings, in particular the University of South Australia. My involvement in this program encouraged me to reflect constructively on my teaching practices. I came to understand that I believed that I should be at the center of epistemological learning, in essence a gatekeeper of knowledge. This didactic approach meant that I was promoting 'superficial learning' (Ramsden 2003), 'low level student choice' (O'Neill and McMahon 2005), and 'dependency' (Arko-Cobbah 2004).

Upon this reflection and underpinned by literature I sought to change my approach and attitude towards teaching. The most significant change was from teacher directed, where the responsibility of student learning resided with me, towards an approach which was student-centred. This change allowed "...students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study" (Gibbs 1992, p.23). Indeed, this is what is now being experienced by students. Some students recently commented that "I really like your approach to teaching, I felt I was highly involved in this course because of the environment" and "you are always willing to make time for your students and are willing to offer guidance to students that facilitate their self-learning".

Whilst I was able to implement change to my approach to teaching, I knew that to be fully engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning I needed to share my experiences, developments and understandings with colleagues across the globe. This was incredibly confronting for me and I was frozen by such thoughts. However I started slowly, presenting on teaching and learning at local and state symposiums. This experience was monumental in my professional development and I value the experience and the feedback given by colleagues on the content and my presentation skills. I no longer feared the "interrogation" but rather I saw it as an opportunity to receive critical feedback on my views, approaches and development on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Such feedback has given me the confidence to now present at national and international conferences.

Whilst my experiences have not always been pleasurable I can see now that this journey on the high seas was one I needed to take. Through my natural curiosity, reflection and my openness to change I have seen immense growth, professionally and personally. I have witnessed changes to my teaching skills, development of conceptions of teaching and learning and, most significantly, the consequential changes in student learning. I am excited about the future and look forward to engaging more and more in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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