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## Pitfalls to Avoid in Establishing A SoTL Academic Pathway: An Early Career Perspective

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## **Pitfalls to Avoid in Establishing A SoTL Academic Pathway: An Early Career Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Interest in developing academic career pathways that are focussed on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has surged in recent years. Yet, to many, SoTL remains equivocal to scholarly teaching. Expectations of the roles and responsibilities of SoTL academics are still clouded. In this reflective essay, I aim to point out some pitfalls to avoid for those who are new to the SoTL academy and those who are considering the opportunity.

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### **Introduction**

Traditionally, academics at research intensive universities are distinguished by their efforts in productivity in discipline-specific research, research-led teaching and engagement in service to the university and the wider community. Many would argue that teaching, research-led or otherwise, is generally undervalued (Martin & Ramsden, 2000). This has changed somewhat in recent years and we have seen a surge in academics who are "teaching academics" and the promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Cambridge, 2000; Martin & Ramsden, 2000; Kreber, 2002). The introduction of "teaching academics" into main stream tertiary education institutions has been prompted on the one hand, by the increasing number of awards and quantity of funding made available by government bodies to academics who display exceptional teaching scholarship as well as teaching awards and recognitions as one of the measures of excellence for universities; and on the other, by a improved access to higher education globally, a worldwide shortage of "teaching and research academics," increasing job dissatisfaction and job-related stress among existing teaching and research academics, increasing support for diversity and flexibility in the workplace and increasing emphasis on quality working life and for work-life balance (Winefield et al., 2001 & 2008; Winter & Sarros, 2002; Kinman et al., 2006; Kreber, 2007; Edwards et al., 2009).

I began my academic career in 2004 as a teaching and research academic, meaning I taught and conducted research within my discipline of dentistry and oral health. In 2007, The University of Queensland introduced academic appointments that focussed on teaching and teaching-related scholarship at all position levels and within all faculties. These appointments became known as "teaching focussed" (TF) (UQ, 2006).

At the time, I was on maternity leave and reconsidering my career options. The options available to me were many and varied including not to work at all, work part-time or work full-time; work as a fixed-term academic with defined duties or work as a casual clinical teacher; return to working as a dentist in private practice or extending my hours as a dental officer in public services, etc. At the time, I wasn't quite ready to give up the privilege of working with and for students, but it was clear to me that if and when I did return to life as an academic, I could not continue to work late to fit in time for course

and program coordination responsibilities, clinical research, laboratory preparations, services and engagement duties etc. Nor could I continue to take work home and work through the night to meet deadlines and due dates. I was also conscious that even burning the midnight oil did not lead to enough reflection and writing time in the past and that as a mother, my productivity would likely decline further, at least for a few years.

I asked the advice of my Head of School, who indicated that TF could be a good option, especially for lessening the pressure to research and publish. I didn't want to fall in the "publish or perish" scenario so I took up the opportunity to transfer from a teaching and research appointment to a teaching focussed appointment when I returned to work in July 2008. In moving across to being TF, I thought I would have the "right" to officially focus on what I love doing – teaching to improve learning and making a difference for students.

To many it was an unwise move into uncharted territory, where I would be a lonely team of one in my School. Those around me who didn't think my decision as poor choice, thought of "TF" as a "soft option". Unwittingly, in some ways, probably so did I. Needless to say, I now know otherwise. During the last year and a half, I have gained greater clarity and insights in "the ways of being teaching focussed". I have learnt the conventional way – mostly through trials and errors. In this essay, I will endeavour to share some pitfalls that have led to personal learning, unlearning and relearning as an early career teaching focussed academic.

### **Pitfall 1: Thinking that Teaching Focussed is a "Soft Option"**

TF is definitely not the "easy way out" and should not be recommended to those who want to "just teach" or others who wish to "just survive" in academe. The expectations and workloads for TF academics are just as overwhelming as those of teaching and research academics, if not more onerous. TF academics must display substantial content knowledge and skills in their professional discipline, in educational pedagogy and effective practices and in pedagogy specific to their discipline (UQ, 2007). They must be actively engaged in teaching, research and service. Career progression and promotion are assessed against all three areas. At the same time, TF academics must battle bureaucratic misnomers, institutional uncertainties and red tapes, amidst a dynamic and evolving SoTL culture.

In terms of stress, TF academics can expect similar levels and sources of stress as teaching and research academics. TF academics are not insulated against insufficient funding and resources, lack of recognition, support and incentives, work overload, problems associated with management and administration, job insecurity, high student : teacher ratios and loss of academic freedom - problems identified across universities in the twenty-first century (Winter & Sarros, 2002; Winefield et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2009).

### **Pitfall 2: Assuming that Scholarly Teaching and SoTL Are One and the Same**

To the unwary, TF represents the need to focus on teaching and teaching only. Whilst on the surface, scholarly teachers and scholars in teaching share some commonalities e.g. being research-informed, reflective, reflexive, and aim to optimize student learning (Andresen, 2000; Richlin, 2003; Allen & Field, 2005). More in-depth exploration of TF roles and responsibilities would reveal that in reality, excellent teaching i.e. scholarly teaching is assumed of TF academics and very different to the scholarship of teaching

and learning (SoTL). Scholarly teaching is different to SoTL in both intention and outcome. Scholarly teaching aims to benefit students at individual and local levels, resulting in improved student motivation, engagement and learning.

In contrast, SoTL aims to enhance not only student learning but to determine how this occurs, is subject to critical review, is disseminated publicly and in doing so contribute to the body of knowledge in higher education and exert much wider impact (Kreber, 2002; Richlin, 2003).

The University of Queensland in their *Working Party on the Diversity of Academic Roles Report* (UQ, 2007) differentiates scholarly teaching and SoTL in the following ways:

Scholarly Teaching	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Striving for a high level of proficiency in stimulating students and fostering their learning in a variety of appropriate ways</li> <li>• Being familiar with the latest ideas in one’s subject</li> <li>• Being informed by current ideas for teaching that subject</li> <li>• Evaluating and reflecting on one’s teaching practice and the student learning which follows”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scholarly teaching assumed</li> <li>• “Requiring high levels of discipline-related expertise</li> <li>• Understanding of who the learners are, how they learn, and what practices are most effective in the context of the discipline (pedagogical content knowledge)</li> <li>• Breaking new ground and is innovative</li> <li>• Can be replicated and elaborated</li> <li>• Documented, subjected to peer review”</li> </ul>

In essence, it could be said that excellent teachers display scholarly teaching, whilst expert teachers not only display scholarly teaching but also scholarship of teaching and learning, whereby they continuously improve their practices by identifying, analysing, understanding and solving problems (Kreber, 2002). Expert teachers go above and beyond the normal expectations.

### **Pitfall 3: Not Differentiating between SoTL and Education Research**

The term, “scholarship of teaching and learning” is sometimes used interchangeably with education research. It is important to know that they are not one and the same. SoTL and education research are overlapping but different domains (Kreber, 2002). SoTL scholars are not necessarily educational theorists and are not expected to have superior broad-spectrum understanding of educational theory. To be a TF academic is to show teaching scholarship. The focus is on improving practices in specific contexts and not theorising to develop broad frameworks and contribute to theoretical debates (UQ, 2007). Those involved in SoTL and those involved in assessing SoTL work must have the understanding to delineate the differences.

### **Pitfall 4: Believing That Supervisors Know Best**

“Teaching focussed” and the pursuit of the scholarship of teaching and learning are new realms in most research intensive universities. Most academic supervisors and mentors are themselves teaching and research academics and have been for many years. Therefore, be aware that those who have been appointed to supervise and mentor you, may not necessarily be familiar with the particularities of being “TF” or what SoTL truly entails. Despite that, it is important to discuss matters with your supervisors and

mentors as it is essential to gain their “support-on-action” i.e. support and approval for what you want to do. Discuss workload, expectations and professional development opportunities, obtain discipline-specific feedback and deliberate the alignment of your priorities with those of your department, school or faculty, but be very clear in your mind what you need. If possible, seek out those who are teaching focussed academics themselves and those with a passion for SoTL to provide the specific support that can assist you in planning and shaping your career trajectory and progression.

### **Pitfall 5: Considering TF and SoTL as a Solitary Endeavour**

Historically, scholars tended to work in isolation. This is no longer the trend. Research teams and scholarly teams have become increasingly popular (Benjamin, 2000). “No man is an island”. The energy, ideas, capabilities, expertise and outputs of one person are limited compared to a “critical mass”. Pursuing SoTL activities in collaborative groups create synergy, provide “support-in-action” (i.e. tangible assistance and help), sustain motivation and enhance job satisfaction. Therefore, seek to work with others who share the same mission and drive, rather than alone if it is possible. Stay away from competitiveness among colleagues – collaboration creates synergy, competition does not. *“Synergy is the highest activity in all life...what results is almost miraculous. We create new alternatives – something that wasn’t there before. Synergy is the essence of principle-centred leadership. It catalyses, unifies and unleashes the greatest powers within people.”* (Covey, 1986, p.262)

Build bridges, network and collaborate with those more experienced than you as well as those new to the challenge, both within your own discipline and beyond. If you are the only TF academic in your discipline, seek out those working in the University’s teaching and learning centre (at some universities, it may be called the higher education development institute and at others, the centre for the advancement of teaching and learning and the like). Develop collaborations with “critical friends” and “peer mentors”. Participate in local interest groups and relevant professional bodies e.g. the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Attend SoTL and higher education conferences regularly and aim to speak with and seek advice from keynote speakers, presenters and if you present, your audience. Take the initiative to ask questions, to learn from others, to unlearn and relearn.

Developing collaborations to assist with your teaching, SoTL and service will optimize your performance in these areas, and enhance the enjoyment. Collaborations need not be restricted to the “doing”, but can be helpful for obtaining suggestions when planning a project and for writing up and publication. For example, to assist with developing and sustaining a publication track record, Sadler (2006) made two recommendations:

- The formation of small group “publication syndicates”, especially for early career researchers *“who feel that they lack experience in academic publishing, lack confidence in their ability to publish in high quality journals, or lack the knowledge and skills to deal with editors and reviewers”* to *“provide mutual encouragement and continuing motivation to accelerate the production of publishable manuscripts”* (p.31) and
- *“Having a trusted colleague review your manuscript before you submit it to a journal can help improve its quality...Look on your internal reviewer as a critical friend who can help you debug the manuscript. Properly done, internal review improves the likelihood of acceptance, thereby reducing the damaging effects of having papers rejected”* (p.40).

### Pitfall 6: Building Your Reputation

It is possible to be very busy without being necessarily productive. Taking up every opportunity that comes by, may not be the wisest for career development. Specialists are much more sought after than "jack-of-all-trades". Maximize impact by focussing your efforts into one or a limited number of fields of interest. This is applicable to teaching, SoTL and service. Track records are important for building up reputation and recognition, as well as for career progression and promotion. A mentor once explained, *"publishing ten papers on one topic will give you a bigger bang for your bucks than publishing ten papers covering ten different topics."* McGaghie & Webster (2009) recommended the following for scholarship development:

- *"Address research goals selectively, in priority order, recognizing that time, energy and resource limits prevent attention to all academic objectives";*
- *"Keep focussed on particular research goals and resist distraction";*
- *"Scattered, one-shot, disconnected studies are less likely to inform best practices...than investigations that contribute to a thematic research line"*

### Pitfall 7: Developing SoTL in Your Spare Time

Just as discipline research is highly esteemed within academe, so should the scholarship of teaching and learning. TF does not equate to teaching full-time or teaching only. The SoTL time of TF academics should be prioritized and respected. However, for many early career academics, balancing teaching, research and services responsibilities are next to impossible. *"Day-to-day satisfaction in teaching and service may be perceived by new lecturers with substantial teaching workloads as their short-term career priority and hence more important than long-term output"* (Hemmings & Hills, 2009). Overtime, a pattern is developed in which more and more time is devoted to teaching and service, leaving less and less time for the development of SoTL. This is detrimental to academic career development, progression and promotion.

Establishing a long term academic career relies on knowing the difference between "urgent" and "important". Devote the most time to matters that are important i.e. developing SoTL, even if they do not result in instant gratification (Covey, 1986). Two suggestions from Covey (1986) are highly relevant to early career academics who find themselves not having the time to develop the SoTL aspect of their career:

- *"Anything less than a conscious commitment to the important is an unconscious commitment to the unimportant."*
- *"The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities"*

Publishing scholarly writing does not occur without sustained effort and purposeful persistence. Guard reflective time. Guard writing time. Guard time devoted to planning and implementing SoTL activities. Crudely put, two hours spent on a staff meeting with no agenda or definite goals are better spent in critical reflection or in scholarly writing:

*"Scholarship is legitimate work and is valued in proportion to its time allocation in one's daily schedule, and one's weekly, monthly, and annual calendar. If scholarly*

*productivity is a professional expectation, time and resources must be set aside to achieve it.” (McGaghie & Webster, 2009, p.8)*

*“Quarantine time specifically for writing and make sure that you cannot be interrupted. Space your writing sessions so that you are able to maintain momentum. Set yourself realistic goals (such as 300-500 words per session) and keep track of your progress.” (Sadler, 2006, p.31)*

Plan and outline writing ideas. Don't wait for a free day or a free week before writing. Write regularly and frequently so that momentum can be maintained. Writing two hours every day for the entire year can result in higher productivity than writing in-between semesters only:

*“‘Snacking’ can be just as effective as ‘bingeing’ in getting an article or book written, so it is a mistake to assume one needs a weekend or even a week to write anything half-decent.” (Rowena Murray, quoted in Reisz, 2009).*

Sustain efforts and never give up. Aim to have at least one article under review at any one time; *“aim for at least three data based, peer reviewed articles per year”* and *“always have something “in press””* (McGaghie & Webster, 2009).

### **Pitfall 8: Building Your Reputation Through Peer Reviewed Papers Only**

Publishing peer reviewed papers is the well-recognized route for dissemination, frequently recognized as “the gold standard of academic expression” (McGaghie & Webster, 2009) and should be pursued zealously. After all, career promotion committees recognize peer reviewed papers far more than any other forms of “deliverables” for the demonstration of academic scholarship. However, the fact is publication in scholarly journals is extremely competitive. The acceptance rates of the top journals can be as low as less than 10%. For an early career academic, repetitive failures and rejections can lead to a complete loss of confidence. Being aware of different forms and different routes for dissemination and communication with colleagues internally and externally is therefore very important. Think diversely about what can be written and published.

Scholarship can and should be defined broadly. Conceptual papers, commentaries, reflective essays, monographs, book chapters, editorials, conference papers, should be considered alongside peer-reviewed articles, empirical papers and reporting of research findings, especially for early career TF academics who are developing their writing skills and publishing confidence:

*“Perhaps the best training ground is the realm of book reviews. Book reviews are easy to have accepted, first of all....I strongly recommend graduate students and others email review editors, stating their areas of specialization and level of study while asking to review a book for the journal. Review editors will almost always agree and when they do – voila! – you have a publication “forthcoming” for your CV. A star is born.” (Brooks, 2008).*

### **Pitfall 9: Too Busy for Professional Development**

It is easy to neglect professional development when workload is heavy and time is limited. Yet, it is absolutely essential. Do not overlook the necessity of professional development, lifelong self-directed learning and the renewal of the mind. The knowledge economy depends on continuous learning, unlearning and relearning. As a TF academic,



time needs to be devoted to discipline-based professional development, education-based professional development and personal development:

*“Sharpen your sword...this is the single most powerful investment we can ever make in life – investment in ourselves, in the only instrument we have with which to deal with life and to contribute. We are the instruments of our own performance, to be effective, we need to recognize the importance of taking time regularly to sharpen the saw.”* (Covey, 1986, p.289).

If nothing else, devote time to read widely and reflect deeply:

*“Reading is the cornerstone of scholarship...yet it often goes unnoticed... Learning to participate effectively begins with learning to read powerfully, both to learn what matters most in the field and to observe special instances of scholarly performances that can serve as models for emulation in one’s own work.”* (McGaghie & Webster, 2009, p.2)

Learn directly and indirectly. Enroll in online continuing professional education courses and institutional professional development programs. Attend discipline-based as well as educational and SoTL conferences, workshops and symposiums regularly. Pursue further studies if circumstances permit. Learn from colleagues and be challenged by them. Enter into scholarly disputations. Exchange ideas and obtain feedback.

### **Pitfall 10: Going with the Flow**

Be purposeful. Read the rules that govern career progression and advancement, don’t just go with the flow. Have an in-depth understanding of what constitutes scholarship at an institutional level. A career trajectory needs to be planned, developed and documented explicitly so that progress can be measured and evidence can be tracked:

*“One’s career is too important to be left to chance; casual, episodic attention, or to the stewardship of another person like a dean or another administrator....Build and manage a professional portfolio that describes and documents professional goals and activities, provides evidence about their quality or impact, and allows for frequent updates of one’s academic profile.”* (McGaghie & Webster, 2009, p.13).

### **Conclusion**

The past year and a half has been a steep learning curve. Although there have been many challenges, I am still convinced that my decision to move to a teaching focussed academic position is a correct one for me. It is in this position that I am able to make the most difference for students, in particular, in the areas of student engagement, learning and professional development. I am slowly discovering the “tacit knowledge” affiliated with the ways of being a teaching focussed academic. I am grateful for the support I’ve received from peers and mentors, on an individual basis and via communities of practice. Being the only full-time continuing appointment at my School who is teaching focussed is still difficult and at times, problematic, but my unique position has also created opportunities that I never dreamt of. During this time, I have learnt, unlearnt and re-learnt continuously. I have come to the realization that career progression and advancement is possible for TF academics but cannot be left to chance. Take the initiative to plan and strategize.

In having learnt the hard way, my suggestions to those considering a teaching focussed appointment or those new to SoTL are:

- Work smart by being conscious of potential pitfalls, learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others.
- Be familiar with the rules, concepts and frameworks that you must work within.
- Plan strategically, prioritize and work towards focussed and realistic goals to ensure sustained progress and continuous achievement.
- Devote time and effort on matters that are important.
- Build a track record on restricted number of carefully selected themes.
- Work collaboratively. Seek out mentors, support groups and collaborative partners.

Most importantly of all, be prepared to continuously learn, relearn and unlearn. It is possible to step beyond “just surviving” to enjoying the journey and playing a part in making a difference for tomorrow’s generations.

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