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Personal Reflection: Transforming Teaching Practice through Action Research: The Role of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This reflective piece describes my experiences of teaching practice in an Indian University and my transformed practice as a result of enrolment in the Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching) in an Australian university. I enrolled in this course with hesitation, considering it time consuming and likely to detract from any focus on research. However, the experiences and learning in different modules of the graduate certificate became instrumental in producing an action researcher from a standard academic. In this essay, I will share my engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning through an action research project which has transformed my teaching practice.

Keywords
Graduate certificate in education, Transformed practice, Action research, Feedback

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The Role of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

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Introduction

I started my academic career nearly 17 years ago in India. I taught in an Indian University for 12 years and then came to Australia to an academic position in social work with the University of South Australia. In the initial phase of my career in Australia, I realized that the teaching and learning environment was different, challenging and exciting here, as there is more autonomy to plan and design teaching practice with lots of support available to guide the lecturer on how to teach and assess students. I felt that there were striking differences in the teaching practices in Australia and India which warranted my attention, such as transforming teaching practices from teacher-focused to student-focused, learning from the student's perspective and shifting control from teachers to students. I was asked by the University's Learning and Teaching Unit to enrol for the Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching) as a requirement of my service contract. This is now called the Graduate Certificate in Education (Academic Practice). My unit head also suggested that I should do this as it would help me have better ideas on teaching practice and student learning. Although I wanted to improve my engagement with students and become a student-focused teacher, I must admit that I reluctantly enrolled in the graduate certificate in teaching as I thought it was unnecessary, time consuming and could keep me away from my own research agenda. I had never thought of how scholarship in teaching could change my teaching practice or help me become more student-focused.

Learning About Scholarly Teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching

When I started the first module, 'Introduction to University teaching', I read Boyer's seminal work on the "scholarship of teaching" (Boyer, 1997) and Ramsden's description of the "nature of good teaching" (Ramsden, 2003). A quote from Ramsden explains this:"Good teaching is open to change; it involves constantly trying to find out what the

effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying the instruction in the light of the evidence collected" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 98), as do Biggs and Tang, who describe "Transformative reflection" as that "which is to enable the transformation from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be" (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 43).

These writings were influential and motivated me to think about my own teaching practice. Contrary to my teaching practices in the past, which were teacher centred, I found I knew very little about student-focused teaching pedagogy, theories underpinning student learning and how to engage students in learning. At this point, I wondered: How do I engage students with learning? What strategies should I adopt to make my teaching practice more influential and instrumental in student learning? What can I do to improve my evaluations of teaching?

I realized that answers to these questions were not straightforward and it required me to engage with "scholarly teaching which impacts the activity of teaching and the resulting learning" (Richlin, 2001); where I could question my teaching pedagogy, evaluate it from students' perspective and implement new strategies that are underpinned by theories of teaching and learning. In this quest for learning how to improve teaching practice, I looked at Course Evaluation Instruments (CEIs) and Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) and read students' comments (Dunkin & Precians, 1992), spoke to my colleagues, and continually read literature on student engagement. I was intrigued by the literature on assessment and feedback, as the majority of assessment pieces that I chose to write for the module 'Introduction to University teaching' and the next module on 'Assessment and evaluation in higher education' focused on assessment practices and their value in higher education. Over a period of one year in studying for the graduate certificate, I presented two seminars on assessment and feedback and wrote reflections on my engagement with teaching and learning. Through these reflections I came to understand that I was assessing students' performance rather than providing constructive feedback to help them in future learning. Students' feedback on my CEIs and SETs also indicated that they valued in-depth and detailed feedback on assessed work. The literature also pointed to the fact that students were generally dissatisfied with feedback provided to them if it did not meet their expectations.

My Project on Student Engagement and Feedback

While I was doing my last module on a 'Negotiated project' in the second year of the graduate certificate, I had to plan a project on teaching and learning that I was passionate about. My reflections and deeper insights that came from the literature on assessment feedback affirmed that I needed to change my teaching pedagogy and make it student focused to engage them in learning and that feedback was important in engaging students with learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Ramaprasad, 1983; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Ramsden, 2003; Hattie, 1997); and students could be engaged by providing effective feedback on their learning progress (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). I decided that I would explore feedback practice; I consulted with department colleagues and lecturers in the Learning and Teaching Unit and prepared the project proposal on developing effective feedback strategies in social work education. The questions to which I wanted to seek answers were students' perceptions of feedback and what they saw as needed changes in feedback practice; also staff views on feedback and their practice and how they could learn from each other. I planned to go into this topic in depth; I successfully applied for a collaborative teaching and learning grant for developing effective feedback strategies in the Social Work and Rural Practice unit at the Centre for Regional Engagement. This generated a lot of enthusiasm amongst my social work colleagues and we decided to use this opportunity for our self-growth and professional development. Whilst I was successful in gaining an internal grant to fund the project, I learnt that this

was just the beginning and I needed to involve and collaborate with colleagues at every stage of the project to share findings and analysis, and draw insights to develop a framework for developing effective feedback strategies.

Now the project has been going for one year and is in its final phase of implementing strategies to improve feedback to students. Throughout the life of this project, through my active engagement with the research process, while reflecting on my past experience with receiving feedback as a student and now as a teacher with providing feedback, I learnt more about feedback and gained knowledge about effective feedback strategies underpinned by theories of student learning. The research process also gave voice to students' experiences with feedback. It has given not only me but all staff members involved in this project a better understanding of the role feedback can play in student engagement. Everyone feels more valued for what have they offered to students by providing constructive feedback and they have learnt different strategies from each other. These strategies have been underpinned by theories of learning that can be implemented depending upon their course requirements. The social work team together has made a decision to incorporate a framework that includes feedback functions classification (Orsmond & Merry, 2011), having dialogue with students (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and creating sustainable feedback strategies (Carless et al., 2011). The action research approach has given an evidence-based grounding for implementing changes in the right direction so that both teachers and students are able to benefit from research outcomes.

Conclusion

Recognizing the need to engage with students and engage them with learning, and my curiosity to find ways to do that, helped me focus on scholarly teaching. The graduate certificate in teaching became my platform to learn that the scholarship of teaching and learning is all about sharing, demonstrating, implementing, evaluating and learning from experience – a cycle of action research. So far, I have enjoyed becoming a teacher-researcher and have gained valuable insights drawn from this process, and I know there is much more to follow.

This further supports Ramsden's call for teaching practices to be geared towards student engagement. I also consider that not all teaching strategies will be perfect and bring desirable outcomes. It requires scholarship of teaching where I can share, discuss and improve upon my teaching strategies by making my teaching open for peer scrutiny, students' feedback and make it more widely published (Andresen, 2000; Ramsden, 2003).

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