Vol 7 | Issue 1 (2019) | pp. 37-46

JOURNAL OF
Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

www.jpaap.napier.ac.uk

Experiences of staff new to teaching postgraduate students online: implications for academic staff development

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a phenomenographic methodology to explore the experiences of academic staff new to online postgraduate education in order to obtain a better understanding of their professional development needs.

We identified four categories of development: preparation, initial reflection, evolving awareness of the social aspects of online learning, and engagement. These categories show variation in three ways: the perceived role of the educator, the educator's understanding of the online environment, and the nature of interaction between staff and students. These findings have implications for the increasing numbers of academic staff involved in planning and delivering online education.

Findings are discussed through the lens of a growth narrative rather than the traditional constraint narrative often considered when starting to teach online. The findings support previously published work but the novel framework suggested for the conceptualisation of online postgraduate teaching gives a more nuanced picture that will be of value to both those involved in online education and those supporting their development.

We recommend that academic developers consider teacher agency and empowerment rather than the delivery of packages of decontextualized skills and information. Support should be ongoing rather than front-loaded, with adequate time and space for reflection to allow educators to successfully undertake this new and evolving role.

Keywords: online education, faculty experience, scholarship of teaching and learning, phenomenography, growth narrative

Introduction

Growing numbers of postgraduate students undertake online study as a pragmatic solution to combining employment and academic study. Many taught postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes are aimed at those in established professions such as healthcare and law, with participants choosing to study for personal interest, career progression or to meet the requirements of professional regulatory bodies.

Whilst the motivations and experiences of postgraduate students have been reported (Ho, Kember and Hong, 2011), much less attention has been focused on the experiences of those who teach on postgraduate programmes that are delivered online (McShane 2004; Conceicao 2006) focusing largely on those teaching undergraduates. Debate has centred on trying to define the required competencies of online educators (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Berge and Collins, 2000; Coppola, Hiltz & Rotter, 2002; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples & Tickner, 2001; and Salmon (2004). However, Rennert-Ariev (2008) warns that such an approach can have the effect of privileging technical-rational conceptions of teaching at the expense of an understanding of teacher agency. We sought to investigate how educators define and shape their practice in the context of ill-defined and rapidly evolving roles (Bennett and Lockyer, 2004). It is clear that educators moving to teaching online need new or adapted skills and knowledge. Importantly, they should not be required automatically to assume new roles without having the opportunity for ongoing reflection on their developing practice and to consider the impact on students' experience and learning.

It has been acknowledged that there is a need for better support for educators who are new to online education. Baran, Correia & Thompson (2011:143) state that, to date, there has been limited success in "bringing the teacher's voice" into the design and implementation of support and training for online education.

Moves towards a more nuanced, holistic understanding of teaching online are in tune with current ideas about authentic, practice-based academic staff development.

By authentic, practice-based development we refer to those activities that emerge from everyday work: they are embedded in the context of real-world relationships, opportunities and constraints. They derive their urgency from the fact that they are actual issues that need to be addressed. They connect with colleagues' values because they concern things that really matter. (Loads & Campbell, 2015: 356).

We sought to address those things that really matter to educators, by gaining an understanding of the opportunities, constraints, relationships and real-life issues that shape their practice. Despite the association of online education with innovation, nevertheless there is a tendency for online skills training to uncritically represent old assumptions and orthodoxies that do not address the empowerment of online educators nor promote critical reflection (Baran et al., 2011). We wanted to bring the insights of online educators themselves into the debate about professional development for online teaching in the spirit of 'adopting a stance of questioning, challenging and critiquing taken-for-granted ways of doing things in higher education' (Quinn, 2012).

Methodology

In this study, we define online education as the use of technology to allow learning at the same, and different times as other people, in different places (adapted from Coldeway, 1995). This study relates to the experiences of those delivering a PGT programme in Clinical Education. The part-time programme is delivered entirely online; students are all practising healthcare professionals with an educational role. Approximately 50% of students live outside the UK and do not have English as their first language. Students have a range of professional experience and are encouraged to share this experience as valuable learning for all involved. The programme runs on a Virtual Learning Environment that contains a repository of course materials, discussion boards and a blog. In addition, real-time tutorials are held weekly during term time using Adobe Connect software. A flipped classroom approach is taken with recorded lectures available for students to view at their convenience and specific topics are then discussed with the lecturer at an online tutorial. The ethos of the programme is to encourage a social-constructivist approach to learning.

A phenomenographic approach was taken to understand the perceptions and experiences of teaching online. Typically featuring interviews (Kvale, 1996), phenomenography is useful in attempting to discover how different individuals experience the same phenomenon in a range of different ways (Marton, 1994) and provides a means of interpreting the structural relationships between these different experiences (Akerlind, 2004). It is this variation in perception that is of interest when considering how best to support staff development.

The study was also shaped by a deliberate turning away from a narrative of constraint, and towards a narrative of growth (O'Meara, Terosky & Neumann, 2008). In methodological terms, this led us to de-emphasise (although by no means to deny) the narrow instrumentalism, inadequate metrics and unsupportive climate of contemporary academia, and to bring back into view educators' agency, commitment and potential for self-awareness and growth. We did not ask our respondents about skills deficits, productivity targets, inequitable reward systems or career blockages. Instead, we invited them to articulate their understandings, values and professional judgements drawn from years of teaching experience and reflection.

Ten educators were interviewed; this was the total number of staff involved in the programme at the time. Local ethical approval was granted with participants providing informed consent. Questions were broad and open-ended, inviting participants to reflect on their experiences of teaching online and hence define their own terms of reference. Unstructured follow-up questions were used to seek clarification or elucidate more information to allow participants to explore their experiences as fully as possible.

It is important to acknowledge the impact of the researcher on this research. At the time of the interviews the researcher undertaking the interviews (GA) was a colleague of those interviewed. As a newly appointed online educator, the researcher wished to improve their understanding of the issue and undertook the interviews in an open manner, allowing participants to frame the discussion. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were collated into one document and were read with a hermeneutic approach to allow the researcher to understand and interpret the words of the participants to identify categories of description (Säljö, 1997). Similar statements were grouped together looking for meaning and potential relationships between the groupings. This process was repeated until the researchers felt confident with the resulting categories; these were then discussed with colleagues working in this area to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Results

Those interviewed varied considerably in their face-to-face teaching experience, from one to more than 20 years. Six respondents were women and four men all in the age range 40-60. All but one ranked their technical ability as 'competent', with one ranking themselves as 'expert'.

Categories of description

The unit of analysis was the individual's perception of online education and the different ways this was experienced when starting

to teach online. Four categories of description were identified, related in a hierarchical manner, with categories A and B concerned with the experience of preparing to teach online and C and D relating to experiences as educators become more comfortable teaching online. Participants are conceptualised as passing through categories sequentially.

Table 1: Categories of description

Category		
A	**Preparation** Orientation and context of online teaching, consideration of time BEFORE TEACHING	Educators begin to develop their understanding of teaching online and consider how best to develop and design teaching for online delivery. Focus on technology
B	**Reflection** Considers how online differs from face-to-face, and how this affects teaching BEFORE and AFTER TEACHING	Educators reflect on their online teaching, consider contingencies in event of technical problems. And have clearer understanding of developmental needs
C	**Interaction** Evolving awareness of the learning environment, with interaction (not technology) as key	Becoming more familiar with online teaching, develop a more collaborative approach. Emphasis moves from technology as a 'thing' to a place
D	**Engagement** Emotional engagement/reward	As educators develop more online skills this mode of teaching becomes more rewarding

A Preparation for online education

During the preparatory phase participants were looking for more support and orientation into the online world than they currently received, including both technical support and contextual information from the programme team. The need for more training, specifically in the use of technology for teaching purposes was identified, e.g. "staff development or training in how to make best use of this particular format because I effectively went in cold". This is a useful reminder that online teaching can be a disorientating experience.

B Reflection that online differs from face-to-face

There was clear acknowledgement that teaching online encouraged educators to plan teaching in a different way from face-to-face teaching: " there is a conception that online takes less time, but I actually think it takes more time, than face-to-face". Much discussion focussed on running online tutorials and recording lectures, and the skills required to do this effectively. The tutorials have webcams, audio and text chat all running at the same time, which does require time to master. Comments suggest there is a competency-based element to orientation in online education including the development of new skills, seen as useful when teaching online. These skills were seen as distinct from the initial planning for online delivery. For example, educators have to become proficient in paying attention to the screen and filtering out distractions.

> *I found it quite disorienting at first to have the multiple streams of communication going on ……that's a hell of a lot to be going on at the same time and you kind of lose thread of your responses half-way through.*

There was also some comparison of how teaching online differed from face-to face, specifically relating to interactions between staff and students. Educators expressed awareness of the need to run online sessions differently to their face-to-face teaching:

> *… sometimes I think I am more directive in an online environment than I am in a face-to-face environment*

> *… the way you have to speak is slightly different with the tutorials….I find I need to be slower and clearer*

Equally, this factor may be related to the international nature of the student body, for many of whom English is not their first language.

Generally, educators perceived their first experience teaching online to be disappointing, encouraging them to strive to improve the next time. Staff reported how they planned to overcome the challenges encountered and were not discouraged from teaching online again; discussion focussed on getting better next time.

> *It's another form of teaching and there is a learning curve with all these things.*

C Interaction

There seemed to evolve an understanding that online learning was more about a place where learning could occur rather than a tool, with the personal, human interaction afforded by technology considered key to successful online education:

> *… all of that [technology] doesn't matter, or whether you are in the same room as people physically, it's about the relationship you have with people.*

Educators differed in their opinions of the synchronous tutorials; some educators relished the relinquishing of control to a more student-centred approach, while others felt this was an abdication of their responsibility and preferred a more structured approach.

> *I suspect the other tutors run a much more kind of passive style and get the students to do the actual work.*

> *… these are adult learners and their meeting and they should drive the agenda …*

However, there was agreement that the tutorials afforded an opportunity for interaction that required the development of new skills

> *You need to develop some skills and techniques for managing the discussion. Not to control it, but to ensure that people's ideas don't get ignored or lost.*

Despite differences in approach all found the tutorials to be a valuable teaching opportunity; real-time tutorials added an extra dimension to the online communication.

D Engagement

Teaching online was considered to be rewarding; largely due to the sense of community that was established. Educators expressed surprise at this and had not previously considered it a possibility. Enthusiasm and excitement overcame the initial anxiety as educators became more practised:

> *… what was good was the informality and enthusiasm of the tutorials…there was genuine warmth and a kind of community sense of people being together as a group, which you don't curiously get in face-to-face.*

The rewards were acknowledged as a two-way process. The discursive aspects of the learning space ensured that educators could see that students were making use of their learning in their professional lives. Weekly tutorials allowed students to test their new learning/insights out in practice between tutorials:

> *… discussion is important for deep learning and enabling people to transfer their learning from one situation to another.*

Dimension of variation (relationship between the categories).

The dimensions of variation give a richer view of the experience of new online educators and help to describe the relationship between the categories. These dimensions are the perceptions of the role of the online educator, the educator's conception of the online space and nature of student-staff interaction. The perceptions of the role of the online educator describe a change in focus from content, to delivery of content and then to interaction. In category A, the educator is focusing on how to adapt their teaching for online delivery, with a clear focus on what the educator is doing. In category B, the educator is still focusing on their own actions but now reflecting on their initial online teaching. In category C, the focus of the educator shifts towards the interaction afforded with students online and in category D, the educator appreciates that the online space can enrich their teaching and

development.

The educator's conception of the online space also develops as they become more experienced online. In category A, the educator has not considered the online environment as a space: the focus is on the development of teaching materials. In category B, after an initial teaching experience, the educator begins to reflect on the differences between online teaching and their previous experiences teaching face-to-face, and in categories C and D the educator expands their focus from their own use of technology to a consideration that new types of interactions with students can occur.

The nature of student-staff interaction is considered from the perspective of the educator. Again, there is an expansion in focus from a transmission-based model of education where the educator is providing information in categories A and B. In category C, educators begin to see the online space as a place for interaction and discussion, whilst category D described it as a place for collaboration between both staff and students, but also between students.

The relationship between the categories and dimensions are summarised in table 2. This highlights the hierarchical nature of the ways in which educators new to teaching online experience the process. Preparation is the most limited way of experiencing online teaching, with the educator focussing on their own role and teaching resources and not considering interaction with students. Engagement is the highest category of description in the hierarchy as it describes a more complete and complex understanding of the experiences of teaching online. The category goes beyond educators' own actions and considers the online space as somewhere to allow two-way interaction, between staff and students, and collaboration between students. This interaction is beneficial to both staff and students.

Table 2: Resultant outcome space

		Dimensions of variation		
		Perception of educator role online	Educators' conceptions of online space	Nature of staff-student interaction
Categories of description	Preparation	Reviewing materials for online delivery	Unformed	Transmission
	Reflection	Understanding dimension and context of teaching	Appreciation that it is different to face-to-face	Transmission with some consideration of difference to face-to-face
	Interaction	Begins to consider online as a social space	Consider social aspects/ collaborative approach	Discursive
	Engagement	Considers how can facilitate interaction	Two way communication/ students are considered partners	Collaborative/ Peer

Discussion

Some interesting findings emerged:

1) The respondents' unexpected sense of community and 'humanness' of the online environment.
2) The comparatively late emergence of a sense of engagement with online teaching (not a prerequisite for development, but the result of experience).
3) A suggestion that effective academic development should be offered to online educators in two ways: initial technical instruction then additional developmental support after the initial online teaching has occurred.
4) No threat to their academic identity was expressed by this group of educators when moving to teaching postgraduate students online.

These results can be framed within the narrative of faculty growth proposed by O'Meara et al. (2008) that educators are central 'players' in the design of activities that will aid their development. Whilst such opportunity may (or may not) be afforded by academic institutions, educators have a responsibility for their own 'developmental trajectories'. The results presented here clearly describe the importance of educator agency in developing into a new role, and specifically the importance of reflection in this

development and putting educators firmly at the centre of their professional development.

In terms of academic development, if we better understand what is being learned (in this case becoming an online educator) we are better able to support learning (Neumann, 2006), putting learning and development at the centre of the academic role and highlighting the constantly evolving nature of academic work. These results provide a helpful example of educators' commitment to teaching in being prepared to undergo this potentially difficult transformation.

Results from this study are broadly similar to previous work describing the role of both the online educator (Gonzalez, 2009) and the face-to-face teacher (Akerlind, 2004), evolving from teacher-focussed to student-focussed. Prosser & Trigwell (1999) suggest that educators with a teacher-focus tended to have students who focus on surface learning, whilst educators who focussed on what students were doing resulted in students adopting deep learning strategies. This work supports the findings of Gonzalez (2009) that an educator's approach to their teaching will vary with context. The process described above illustrates this with an initial focus on a teacher-focused approach moving to a student-focused approach as educators became more comfortable in the online environment.

Student-staff interaction

This work supports the suggestion of McShane (2004) that online education is democratising educator and student roles, to the benefit of both groups. The traditional view of the academic in the ivory tower unsullied by the demands of the market economy is no longer credible. These findings suggest that it is the very nature of interaction and discourse with students that adds to the sense of reward described by this group of educators, with the online educator adopting a collaborative role, resulting in a 'more intimate' relationship with students (Conceiceo, 2006).

This insight will be valuable in training and supporting new online educators. It may also reassure and encourage those who have previously been reticent about teaching online, and fear that the personal interaction of the classroom would be lost online. Educators new to online teaching expressed surprise at the personal and sociable aspect to this type of learning, this insight largely afforded to both tutors and students by the webcams, and the locations from which students chose to log into tutorials during the synchronous sessions.

> T*here's something really touching…it feels in a way that you build a stronger relationship with some of the people because you see their kids or their cats [on screen] … and I feel totally charmed by it.*

The social aspects of online learning can be easily overlooked, with a focus often on technology; however these results emphasise the importance of social interaction in successful online programmes with synchronous communication offering exciting possibilities for interaction with students and building international learning communities (Golden, 2016). This point is key in the development of effective programmes of professional development.

Nature of the students

The nature of the students taught will have a significant impact on the delivery and planning of teaching. Educators were asked about their experiences of teaching postgraduate students in this study, while their previous teaching experience was mainly undergraduate face-to-face teaching experience. There are likely to be differences in approach to teaching on this basis but this was not mentioned in any of the interviews; it is unclear if the experiences would be mirrored when teaching undergraduates online and this is worthy of further investigation.

This group of postgraduate students are working professionals who could be considered as the educators' peers. Postgraduate students in the programme are actively encouraged to share their experiences and engage in a reciprocal learning environment and this can initially be an unexpected challenge to some staff (and students). This is not only in online programmes, with Leung and Kember (2005) reporting that part-time, face-to-face postgraduate students felt they had better relationships with staff and were more engaged with learning than full-time students, suggesting these students were more willing to engage with educators as equals and discuss real-life experiences, so enriching the learning environment for all. These findings suggest this relationship exists online.

Training the educator

Koehler and Mishra (2005) state that it is not so much technology per se, but the ways in which educators are using technology that is transforming online teaching. These findings highlight this important distinction that should be considered when creating development activities for online educators. Many online programmes rely on a number of external tutors who come in to deliver a few sessions and new training will result in educators with a better understanding of the possibilities and challenges of teaching online. Results suggest that this should include contextual information about the programme and consideration given to an understanding of the teaching process as well as the actual methods of teaching online (Akerlind, 2004). It is important that this is an ongoing process as our findings suggest that as staff become more familiar in the online environment they become more aware

of its potential in their teaching.

The outcome space described by this study supports the notion that the online educator has a number of different roles and the importance of these roles will alter as the educator gains experience.
These participants articulated a desire for support; this requirement is more complex than can be satisfied by the delivery of 'new to online teaching' courses currently offered by many academic institutions. Certainly, there is a continuing need for such courses but also a need to supplement them with ongoing follow-up support allowing staff to reflect on their evolving understanding. De Gangne and Walters (2009) describe this transition as staff moving from a provider of knowledge to a facilitator of learning as they become more experienced. The framework we propose articulates this process in the development of greater student empowerment in postgraduate online education

Overcoming challenges

We must remember that several of those interviewed had many years teaching experience and they were prepared to engage with a completely new way of teaching which was initially challenging. This may differ from the experience of those with less teaching experience. Educators in this study alluded to the fact that they initially found online teaching to be challenging; such challenges were initially technical and contextual with a clear need for staff to be better supported during the initial stages. While these challenges were disconcerting there was a realisation that online education was not only a new way of teaching but also provided an opportunity to move to a more discursive relationship with students. This challenge could be seen as a potential threat to the educator's established academic identity; leaving a position of security when teaching face-to-face and becoming a novice online educator, but participants did not express this shift as a threat to their academic identity as has been alluded to elsewhere (Copploa, Hiltz & Rotter, 2002). This dissonance in educator identity is well described in the literature (Maggio, Daley, Pratt & Torre, 2018). Participants in this study expressed concern about the physical use of technology but did not see this as a threat, rather a challenge to be overcome, further supporting the growth narrative.

The practicalities of teaching online/ evolving pedagogy

Synchronous communication is the focus of the educators' reflections, suggesting it has a bigger impact than asynchronous communication, in their experience. Both staff (from this study) and students (anecdotally in programme evaluations) have highlighted the sense of belonging and connectedness that these real-time sessions offer; whilst acknowledging that problems with internet connections could detract significantly from these benefits on occasion. When the technology worked well it enabled educators and students to have a brief glimpse, through webcam, into each other's lives; important in the formation of the online community. Online postgraduate programmes that do not currently offer such modalities should consider doing so. Reflection is key to the evolving pedagogy of teaching online. This is explicitly discussed in category B, but is implicit in the whole model as the educator reflects on the process and considers their additional insights as their experience grows. Baran et al. (2011) stress the importance of reflection to educators, in a process of continual critical analysis that allows transformation of their understanding of their online teaching.

Online as a social space

Whilst initial anxiety at putting oneself 'out there' in a highly visible way online (Golden, 2014) was described by participants, there was a general agreement that moving to online teaching required a shift in the planning and delivery of their teaching. This shift largely related to the social and discursive aspects of teaching online that surprised participants, but this sense of online community influenced greatly the perceived satisfaction with online teaching. It is interesting to consider the teaching environment as an online space rather than merely a repository of information (Redmond, 2011) and this evolving consideration of online teaching challenges the roles and expectations of educators. Redmond also suggests that online can be a more intellectually challenging teaching space that requires educators to be willing to move from a place of comfort to challenge in their teaching:

> *… anything that takes you out of your comfort zone and away from what you have done all your life is going to be a challenge.*

Conclusions

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations about academic development activities for those new to online teaching.

1. Support educators' agency focusing on the social and community aspects of online teaching and how to foster this.

2. Take into account that the educators' needs for academic development will evolve from technical to pedagogical as they become more experienced in teaching online. This learning while doing is likely to be of value to peers and this should be a shared process with others.
3. Make the most of opportunities for disruption in re-imagining academic staff development to empower online educators to more critically engage with this role and confront existing assumptions about learning and teaching, taking into account that a standardised approach will not be sufficient in addressing the complexity and diversity of online programmes in existence.
4. More work should be carried out to publicise how educators are teaching online, celebrating the innovation and creativity adopted in this dynamic and evolving area.

The model of developing as an online educator described here is a useful illustration of growth narrative in academic development; whilst acknowledging the constraints that adopting a new mode of teaching can place on educators, adopting a counter-narrative of growth can help overcome challenges and make new and valuable contributions to teaching and learning. This insight will be of value to those involved in online teaching and academic development more broadly.

Satisfaction with online programmes has generally been found to be related to engaged and motivated staff who are visible online; this framework suggests a means by which staff can be supported in this development. Limited information is available on staff perceptions of teaching online; previous research has focused on educators' conceptions of teaching rather that their actual experience of teaching. This work considers the under-researched area of synchronous online communication with postgraduate students.

It is important to consider the limitations of the study; firstly, the study does not consider any markers of the quality of the teaching delivered by the educators nor any student perceptions of this teaching. Secondly, these results apply to one online programme and to a small group of respondents, however nothing specific to clinical education was raised, suggesting that there may be similarities in the experience of those teaching in other disciplines. This is worthy of further investigation. Thirdly, the participants all work at one UK institution, although several have worked at other academic institutions, raising the question of whether these findings would translate to other settings and it should be stressed that this is one model of online programme where technology is used in a specific way. It should be remembered that the participants in this study were those for whom online education makes up a small part of their work. There may be important differences between the experiences of this group and those for whom online teaching is their main mode of teaching delivery.

Biographies

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