

2015

The Nebulous, Essential Dimensions in Effective University Teaching: The Ethic of Care and Relational Acumen

Donald E. Scott

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, descott@ucalgary.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp>

Recommended Citation

Scott, Donald E., The Nebulous, Essential Dimensions in Effective University Teaching: The Ethic of Care and Relational Acumen, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 12(2), 2015.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol12/iss2/9>

The Nebulous, Essential Dimensions in Effective University Teaching: The Ethic of Care and Relational Acumen

Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationships between teaching beliefs and approaches, instructional design, relationships with students, and academics' and students' perceptions of effective teaching and learning. Mixed methodology was utilised and included interviews with academics and students, and questionnaires, inventories, and learning journals. As anticipated educationally optimal instructional design was appreciated by academics and students, however, it was not the most significant aspect in influencing students' perceptions of 'good' or effective teaching. Differences were found between two teaching academics' beliefs about students and these translated into varied approaches to teaching, interactions with students, and different capacities to establish positive classroom environments and relationships. Academics' ethic of care and relational acumen were the pivotal components in students' criteria for effective teaching, which may present a quandary to academic developers. Findings indicate the importance of relational acumen and an ethic of care and may also have significance for university leaders in matching academic teaching activities to faculty strengths and potentially explaining negative student feedback in well-designed units.

Keywords

Effective teaching, relational acumen, ethic of care, teaching beliefs, beliefs about students, instructional design, university academics, relationships with students, student perceptions

The Nebulous, Essential Dimensions in Effective University Teaching: The Ethic of Care and Relational Acumen

Keywords

Teaching, relational acumen, ethic of care, student perceptions, instructional design, university academics, relationships with students, teaching beliefs, beliefs about students.

Objectives

Many academics within western universities are bombarded with demands to increase the quality of their university teaching so as to increase student learning outcomes. This research provided a rare insight into the impact varied approaches to teaching can have on students' perceptions of the quality of their learning experience. It examined two academics' beliefs about teaching and students and how these influenced their teaching approaches and relationships with students, and students' reactions to their teachers and the unit.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on two main assumptions. First, university academics have been held more accountable for their instructional activities, and this accountability has increased the pressure on them to engage with pedagogical theories and approaches to become more effective (DETYA 2000; Holt 2010). Universities' student populations have changed from primarily elite intellectuals to more general population-representative demographics with a range of diverse learning needs and motivations (Biggs & Watkins 2001; Fraser & Sanders 2005; Lao & Gonzales 2005; Levine & Sun 2002; Radloff 2005). Additionally, students are more informed and discerning about their learning needs, have higher expectations and are prepared to challenge academics and institutions to receive a quality education. Second, lecturers are expected to demonstrate effective teaching and instructional design to establish optimal learning environments (Chickering & Gamson 1991; Chickering, Payne & Poitras 2001; Duarte 2013; Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1998; Prosser 2013; Ramsden 2003; Smith & Ragan 2005). Conceptualisations of effective teaching have been further complicated with the advent of the Internet and the resultant technological innovations that have influenced instructional environments (Alvarez, Guasch & Espasa 2009; Arinto 2013; Black 2010; MacDonald & Poniatowska 2011; Wallace 2007). Therefore teaching and learning in universities is not only more important but more complex. This paper explores the nebulous but essential aspect of effective teaching: academics' ethic of care and their capacity to develop positive relationships with students.

Accountability for quality university teaching

Universities in the 21st century have experienced reductions in government support along with an increase in accountability for the quality of university outputs (Adelman 2009; Australian Universities Quality Agency 2006; Coates 2009; Findlow 2008; Holt 2010; Kai 2009; Paewai, Meyer & Uhibai 2013; Walker 2008). These outputs include the three core dimensions of academic work: research, teaching and service/leadership. The dimension that comes under the

most public scrutiny is teaching, due to its visibility in terms of interaction with students, quality of graduates, the fees associated with courses and the capacity for student appeals against teaching and assessment practices. Tensions related to these frequently end up publicised in the media (Council for Higher Education 2008; Ewell 2009; Ryan, Fraser & Dearn 2005). To further compound the tensions surrounding university teaching, over the past three decades there has been a call from society to increase access to university programs; hence, university-student demographics have become more diverse. This means that students have different needs and expectations to those of their counterparts even two decades earlier (Scott 2009; von Treuer & Marr 2013). This implies that the traditional conceptualisations of university teaching – that is, lecturing – has had to change with these contemporary expectations from society, students and university leaders. Students in the 21st century tend to be more proactive, technologically-conversant and critical of inflexible and boring learning environments (Black 2010; Scott 2009). These expectations and characteristics emphasise the importance of understanding the principles of adult learning and optimal instructional design to promote student engagement.

The work of Knowles and his associates (Knowles 1984; Knowles, Holton III & Swanson 2005) and Merriam (2006) regarding the nature and needs of adult learners goes some way to explain the greater expectations university students have of their lecturers and institutional services, as well as their demands that the learning is relevant to the real world and pragmatic in empowering them to obtain a career they desire, and that the lecturer is credible, reasonable and approachable. With globalisation and the advent of the Internet students are no longer restricted to studying within the boundaries of their home locale. As a result many students in western universities are studying in languages other than their native tongue, may be engaged through technological media and are paying considerable fees for accessing the services of reputable institutions outside their own countries (Leask 2013; Levine & Sun 2002). This illustrates the complexities that academics must manage while ensuring student success. So what are the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes academics must attain and demonstrate to be effective university teachers?

Good teaching

The question of what is “good” or “effective” teaching is an important and contentious one (Duarte 2013). Some academics believe their role is to provide the required discipline content to students. On occasion, others cite very eloquent arguments that the discussion should focus on enhancing learning; they contend that talking about teaching only deflects attention from what they must consider, plan and organise and **do**, and what skills and competencies they need to hone. Likewise, some academics do not believe it is their job to help students learn; rather, they are simply there to explain concepts and answer questions (Bhatti 2012; Prosser & Trigwell 1999a). The latter view also underpins conceptions that it is not the academic’s fault if students do not learn, as students’ learning is somehow divorced from the actions of the lecturer, who provided the content, or “cast pearls before swine”, in the lecture theatre. Our later research found there were even some within the professoriate who deny that there is a pedagogical knowledge base (Scott & Scott in press).

Research about university teaching and learning, even though not as well established as that in the K-12 context, has been continuing since the early 80s. Researchers such as Chickering and Gamson (1991), Biggs (2001), Ramsden and his associates (1991, 2003) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999a & b; Trigwell & Prosser 2003;) explored aspects of teaching that made a difference to students’ learning *as well as* defining the nebulous and debated conceptualisation of good teaching (Prosser 2013). They also explored the linkages between academics’ beliefs about teaching and their practices and the resultant student learning behaviours (Trigwell 2010). One of the most interesting aspects was that they did not find a direct relationship between being a successful

researcher and being an effective teacher (Prosser 2010). Additionally, others have explored the instructional-design principles that have described how good teaching can successfully move into online media (Oliver, Omari & Herrington 1998; Smith & Ragan 2005). Others have chosen to focus on students as sources of valuable information about the learning experience and what pedagogical behaviours supported their learning (Marsh 1987; Marsh & Roche 1994).

Chickering and Gamson (1991) and Ramsden (1991, 2003) focused on defining teaching behaviours that made a difference to student learning. These included: subject expertise; good relationships with students; effective communication of expectations and feedback on performance; integrating active-learning strategies; promoting engagement with the content; aligning content objectives and the assessment tasks that measure the learning; motivating students through differentiated (variable) instruction and meaningful assessment; developing metacognitive (reflection) capacities; challenging students with meaningful content and learning experiences; respecting and working with student diversity; encouraging reciprocal engagement with peers and experts; and academic scholarship in teaching and learning using a range of data sources. While an ethic of care and the expectation of the importance of positive relationships with students are implied within a number of these principles and in Ramsden's (2003, pp.86-7) "important properties of good teaching", these are not overtly stated, possibly because of the concepts are nebulous and more philosophical than pragmatic. These aspects of effective teaching appear to resound with common sense; however, they require time, expertise, and attention to detail, which many academics find challenging. Additionally, these aspects present further complications when academics are expected to move their teaching into the online environment.

With the proliferation of educational technology, instructors must review teaching and assessment strategies, learning experiences and activities and resources traditionally used in the face-to-face setting for use in online contexts. This is not an automatic replication, as the online environment presents its own challenges and the technology interface presents unique difficulties for students. Instructional design has been highlighted as crucial to establishing clear and effective online coursework (Price & Kirkwood 2008). Smith and Ragan (2005) referred to instructional design as "the systematic and reflective process of translating principles of learning and instruction into plans for instructional materials, activities, information resources, and evaluation" (p.2). They identified three main activities as: identification of instructional goals; the design of instructional strategies necessary to achieve these goals; and the evaluation and revision of the instructional materials. They emphasised the importance of ensuring that content materials and assessments and the resources to support them were articulated in sufficient clarity and depth to be understood as standalone instructions, due to the sometimes-limited interaction between academics and students, or indeed between student peers. Reinforcing this, Ruokamo, Hakkarainen and Eriksson (2012) highlighted that it was the designer's responsibility to develop an environment that supported active learning strategies and methods to enhance learning; this closely aligns with Chickering and Gamson's (1991) emphasis on active learning and Ramsden's (2003) "using teaching methods and academic tasks that require students to learn thoughtfully, responsibly, and cooperatively" (p.87). Active and cooperative learning may look different and require different instructional strategies within the online mode. Aragon (2003) refers to the human interaction aspects of online learning as "social presence", which it is important to establish and nurture for effective online learning. With voice-over-Internet-protocol (VOIP) capacity becoming more commonplace and affordable, many universities are integrating synchronous (live) online classrooms that more closely mirror traditional face-to-face classrooms where students and academics can engage in discussions and group work.

Therefore, considering the range of aspects and behaviours that teaching academics must consider

and adopt if they aim to be effective in the classroom, the implication is that conscientious faculty members will need to pursue professional development to expand their pedagogical knowledge and expertise, and interrogate their beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching and good learning.

Method

The overall study explored the effectiveness of synchronous online learning in a capstone business unit; this was linked with an exploration of motivation associated with multiple intelligences and learning styles. This paper specifically examines the interactions between teaching academics (N=2) and an administrator (N=1) and between the academics and a group of students (N=84), and the students' perceptions of the teaching and learning structures and environment. The capstone unit was a culminating experience whereby student teams were placed into a virtual marketplace to run a (fictitious) company for a virtual eight years across the 13 weeks of the semester. Students were in interdisciplinary teams representing several areas of expertise – marketing, management, information systems, economics and finance and accounting – with the intent to provide these students with the opportunity for the closest experience to a real-business context as could be provided within the university setting. As is usual for all doctoral studies, this research underwent rigorous ethics-approval procedures.

A pragmatic paradigm underpinned the mixed-methods approach used in this study; it included interviews with the administrators, academics and students (Gay, Mills & Airasian 2012; Ongwuegbuzie, Johnson & Collins 2009). I also included student feedback questionnaires, learning-management styles, inventories for determining students' multiple intelligences and student learning journals. Student feedback instruments explored students' perceptions of the teaching, assessments, development of professional skills and clarity of expectations, and included open-ended sections that invited students to reflect on the aspects of the unit that were most and least helpful to their learning, as well as their suggestions for positive change. Reflective journals were designed to enhance students' metacognitive capacities by encouraging them to capture their learning- and professional-skills development as they experienced the simulation. This study included in-depth interviews with three academics: the program designer (administrator), the unit coordinator and the experienced lecturer. Interviews with the administrator explored her perceptions and approaches in the instructional design of this unit and her beliefs about effective teaching and learning. Similarly, the interviews with the teaching academics explored their perceptions of the effectiveness of the unit structure, the learning experiences, students' engagement and their own beliefs about "good teaching". Interviews ranged from one to one-and-a-half hours. Interviews were also conducted with students (n=16) to explore their perceptions of the learning and teaching environment, their views of online teaching and learning, their suggestions for enhancement of the unit and the teaching and learning approaches. These interviews again ranged from one to one-and-a-half hours. Even though there was a quantitative (Quan) presence in the data collection the emphasis was on the qualitative (QUAL) data (Creswell 2012). Data analysis included descriptive statistics and qualitative iterative thematic analysis, which were supported by SPSS and NVivo, respectively. Thematic coding was used for the qualitative data from interviews and the open-ended aspects of the questionnaire; the themes emerged in a way similar to a grounded-theory approach, as I did not impose an analysis framework on the data. As may be expected in a doctoral study, many themes emerged. One was students' acceptance of VOIP learning due to the convenience and flexibility these environments offer, although their predominant preference was for face-to-face, likely due to the social and relational elements that face-to-face offers. Additionally, there was also no correlation between

students' learning styles, multiple intelligences and motivation; however, weak relationships were identified from the qualitative data. These findings have been published previously; this paper focuses on the academics' perspectives (Scott 2008).

The unit designer (the administrator) did not teach the students, but was an educator who collaborated with a business expert on the instructional design of the unit content, learning experiences, assessments and associated resource materials. Both unit coordinator and lecturer – who were the teaching academics interviewed – taught this cohort of students, although in different modes. For example, the unit coordinator taught the students in an initial intensive face-to-face component, which accounted for half the teaching contact time for the entire unit. His role was to introduce the purpose of the unit and the resource materials, conduct the orientation to the simulation and explain the assessments. He answered questions and established group membership and processes. Students were inducted into the synchronous software by staff from technical support services. After this intensive section of the unit, the local lecturer facilitated the class within the online environment in a two-hour-weekly commitment during the rest of the semester.

The student sample included an entire cohort of students (N=644) enrolled in the final capstone unit in the Bachelor of Commerce in a large Australian university. The subset of students (n=84) who were the main focus in this study were studying online while at an offshore site. The online coursework was mediated using synchronous (Elluminate Live!TM) and asynchronous (BlackboardTM LMS) software, which enabled students to engage in a live online-classroom environment, as well as engage with learning resources and activities through the LMS. Participation in this study was overwhelming, with all 84 students in the class agreeing to participate along with all three academics.

Results

These findings relate to the academics' perspectives within this unit, in terms of the instructional design and/or the teaching elements. It was a curious process: in this unit there was a separate unit-design team who, once the design was completed, were not closely involved in the actual teaching of the unit. This separation had been done with the deliberate intent to formulate a capstone unit that was educationally optimal in design of resources and assessments and provided a unique opportunity for students to demonstrate their repertoire of professional skills (i.e., communication – written, interpersonal and presentation; teamwork; critical and creative thinking – problem-solving and decision-making; and information-technology and information-literacy skills) – all essential outcomes of their degree. The interviews with academics revealed significant findings in terms of the importance of sound instructional design, but more importantly, academics' beliefs about teaching and students. These themes are compared and contrasted with students' responses to share my insights related to possible causes and effects.

Instructional design

This unit was proposed to satisfy a key criterion in the pursuit of accreditation for the business degree; that is, there was the need to ensure that students were provided with the opportunity to demonstrate their development and refinement of a range of professional skills integrated with their discipline knowledge. Unlike most other units in the B.Com, which were content-focused, this capstone unit was designed to simulate a real-world business setting whereby students were expected to apply their discipline knowledge accrued over the course of their degree to the operation of a (virtual) company. The unit designer commented:

This software was selected because it provided students with the most authentic learning experience possible without sending them into the field for an expensive practicum. Even though real-world practical experiences would have been more desirable, it was not viable or sustainable.

This type of unit had not been developed before and it presented challenges to the business academics, who had significant discipline expertise but no experience in integrating professional skills or the principles of instructional design into a unit. Therefore, a design team was established combining the expertise of a pedagogical expert with a business expert to ensure a balance was obtained between engaging, valid, realistic content and sound instructional design, including exemplary assessment approaches. As the unit designer stated:

It was also really important that as many academics from the disciplines were involved in the discussion about how to set up a really sound unit...it was all about getting that alignment between the outcomes for the unit, the right learning activities that scaffolded students' attainment of knowledge and demonstration of skills, and developing appropriate and educative assessments.... In effect, I wanted this consultative process to be a form of academic professional development that could be replicated for other units.

The instructional-design process addressed the thoughtful construction of a set of learning outcomes. Additionally, the team created the rationale for the inclusion of the professional skills as a key feature of the unit experience; developed the learning activities within and external to the simulation; drafted a unit manual that provided additional information and support data to assist student teams; and articulated the assessments along with the associated rationale for each assessment form. The teaching academics appreciated the unit design and materials, as it eased much of their workload:

These materials were excellent.... They took the burden off the lecturer to develop all of these for the students...and meant that the students had consistent information about their assignments regardless of which tutorial group they were in.... It also helped the offshore lecturers, who are often kept a bit in the dark regarding the unit coordinator's expectations for marking.

The unit also included an evaluation in the form of student and academic feedback, which provided valuable information to further refine the unit. Professional development about the unit rationale and design was provided to the academics, and training in the technical aspects of the simulation and the new synchronous virtual classroom was provided to both academics and students. The technical support personnel from the teaching and learning department demonstrated the synchronous virtual classroom software to the students, and further training with the simulation was provided in intensive sessions conducted by the unit coordinator. It only took one session for students to report being comfortable and competent with the technical aspects of the various software packages they needed to use throughout this unit.

Beliefs about teaching

Interviews with the two teaching academics in this study revealed interesting differences in their beliefs about teaching and students. While both believed themselves to be discipline experts, they expressed differences in conceptualisations of teaching and how learning occurs.

The unit coordinator had a more learner-focused perspective, which was demonstrated in his enthusiasm to teach this unit and to work with the cohort within this new and experimental unit design:

I can see the value of this unit and how it will enable students to experience the real world within the safety of their coursework...they will get the chance to show their skills and to reflect on how to improve before they are thrown in the deep end.

He particularly endorsed the use of the simulation due to its student-centred approach. He saw the value of students working together in largely independent teams to make sense of the information about the company they were running, pooling their knowledge and collaboratively engaging in problem-solving and decision-making activities, as he felt this most closely resembled the realities of the contemporary workplace. He was concerned though about whether the students would engage with the text-based learning resources, as they were generally ESL students and therefore found the extensive amount of reading challenging for them. When queried about his approach to teaching in the intensive component of the unit, he indicated that he demonstrated the software, held discussions about the unit design and assessment expectations, provided explanations of the rationale for the various learning experiences, discussing how they aligned with the unit outcomes, and made himself available before and after class to engage with students who were worried or had specific questions. He used a mix of lecture presentations, small-group and whole-class discussions and question-and-answer formats. He described his preference for the mix as he explained that lecture format alone was boring to students, and that he wanted them to more fully engage with the materials, particularly as his section of the unit was to facilitate students' understanding of what they were doing and why, so they were "set up for success".

The local academic was also an experienced university teacher who had a business background. His orientation to teaching was more mechanistic and functional than the unit coordinator:

My main role was to do a lecture which reviewed the success of the previous week's team decisions and identify some of the common errors and problematic areas that teams encountered which affected their performance...I was not supposed to guide or interfere with the teams' decision-making or discussions, as they were supposed to be quite autonomous.

He indicated that he found the hands-off facilitation role difficult, as he was used to lecturing and providing explanations to students so they "could pass the test...get the right answers". He felt that the unit design was quite different to what he had experienced previously, but liked the "locked down" nature of the program; that is, the complete resource package and lecture materials. He liked that it took the guesswork out of his role; he felt secure he was going to "cover the content" in the way that met the expectations from the Australian campus. As he was employed

based upon student (satisfaction) feedback, he expressed real concerns over any risky teaching behaviours: “If I do anything students do not like then I will not be re-employed again.”

Both the unit coordinator and lecturer were eager to teach this unit, as it represented an innovation in the business school; the unit coordinator had the additional motivation that he felt it would “be good for my career to step up and take on this new initiative”. Even with a high level of motivation, both lecturers expressed discomfort at teaching this unit, as it was focused on skill development rather than knowledge acquisition. They clearly articulated that they were discipline experts in their business field and were used to “sharing [their] knowledge” with students. In particular the local lecturer found the facilitation orientation of the learning experiences “frustrating and worrying”, as the learning experiences required him to allow the teams to exclusively “engage with each other and the resource materials, to make their own decisions and solve their problems, to negotiate and mediate conflict and to take complete control of their own company without interference or persuasive guidance from the lecturer” (unit designer). The lecturer indicated that he felt this approach was particularly “risky” for him as,

the students expect me to teach, and if I do not give them the right direction they will get angry with me.... [The students] had no experience and I could have given them good advice, but this was not allowed...my hands were tied by the unit outline and structure of the unit, which meant the students were teaching themselves.... I am not sure why I was there, really.

While both the unit coordinator and local lecturer had no previous teaching experience using synchronous software, the local lecturer found this technology most confronting due to the differences it presented compared with face-to-face teaching environments. He expressed concerns with the newness of the technology (in his experience), and as a mature academic, had no experience with social media or synchronous forms of communication. He found it confounding when his previous teaching strategies for generating small-group discussion did not elicit responses in the “live voice section of the class”; rather, students opted to respond within the peer-to-peer texting facilities; hence he became frustrated, as he felt that these conversations were not within his control in a live conversation stream. His perception was that the students were ignoring him, “doing their own thing”, independently of how he wanted them to interact.

Beliefs about students

The most interesting difference between the two academics was their respective attitudes toward students. Throughout his interview, the unit coordinator expressed positive attitudes about students in general, and his students specifically. He expressed a liking for the students, empathy towards the difficulties they encountered and a desire to help them resolve their learning difficulties in a timely way, and he made himself available to them in and out of class time. He was conscious of promptly responding to emails; this indicated his awareness of the stress students were under, as most were juggling the demands of work and studies. He was prepared to trial different instructional approaches that could be more effective for student learning, even when he was not convinced of their value or found them confusing. For example, he expressed doubts about the advantages of reflective journaling, but agreed to keep it in the unit to trial the impact on the students’ learning.

In contrast, analysis of the local lecturer’s comments indicated that he held a deficit perception of students. His interview resounded with qualitative judgements of students such as “lazy”,

“unmotivated” and “expected too much of me”. While the unit coordinator expressed concerns with the large amount of text-based resources due to students’ ESL difficulties, the local lecturer attributed students’ concerns to a lack of motivation:

The unit resources were very good if they [the students] just got around to reading them... This makes it really difficult for us [lecturers] because we are responsible for maintaining standards...they criticise us [lecturers] because they say we refuse to help them, and it is about them wanting to be spoon-fed.

The synchronous software also presented the local lecturer with some challenges. He had not used voice-over-internet-protocol software previously in his teaching and found aspects of it confronting, such as no physical presence, the difficulty of eliciting answers to questions, controlling the flow of chat in the room and uploading the unit materials. He felt that students should have engaged directly with him, and each other, in a traditional question-and-answer approach in class time within the voice facility of Elluminate Live!TM, and was resentful when students wanted to have the freedom to create their own meetings within Elluminate Live!TM at times convenient to the team members rather than being locked into class times:

I encouraged them to meet at the end of the lecture in groups to start their discussions for the next week’s decision round but many of them never seemed to want to do this...they just wanted to leave early.

Students explained that this was largely due to their other work and life responsibilities, and they wanted the autonomy to schedule their team meetings for the convenience of all members rather than being restricted to the academic’s timetable:

Having the group meeting times right after the lecture when we got our results back from the last week was not good timing, because we really needed more time as a group to think about the results and formulate good questions to ask the lecturer. But we did not have that time between getting the results and having our meetings in breakout rooms (a separate virtual room in the Elluminate Live!TM classroom).

Comparing students’ perceptions of the learning experiences

Students enjoyed the unit, with 63% agreeing that “overall [they were] satisfied with the quality of the unit”. Even though only 63% agreed they were satisfied, almost all expressed positive sentiments about the clarity of the resource materials, the transparency in assessment, the challenge in running the company and the team processes. Just under half (47%) agreed that “the unit was intellectually stimulating”, although only 41% agreed that they felt “part of a learning community”. This may have been due to the restricted nature of the interactions and the sometimes-adversarial interactions reported between students and the local lecturer. Another mitigating factor to possibly explain students’ lower satisfaction levels may have been the high level of challenge that this unit represented and the extent of the reading that was required to be able to engage with the virtual-company activities, which may have discomforted the students.

Even so, almost three-quarters (72%) of the students agreed that the unit facilitated their demonstration of a range of professional skills.

Probably the most significant theme from students was the considerable difference in the attitudes displayed towards them by the two teaching academics. When asked to evaluate the “good teaching” dimensions for each of the teaching academics, they rated the unit coordinator at 55% approval, but rated the local lecturer at 41% approval. Students expressed concern with the level of approachableness and care that the local lecturer displayed. They liked how the unit coordinator spent time with them, did not rush them or make them feel stupid when they had questions, made time after class to spend individual time with them and appeared to enjoy teaching them. They frequently contrasted his attitude with the local lecturer, who was impatient with them and suspicious of their motivations: “he was only prepared to spend class time with us”, “would not answer our questions”, and felt he used the excuse that “this was their company and their decision so he could not offer any information”. They reported, “we doubt [the local lecturer] even liked us at all” which left them feeling antagonistic towards him, thereby establishing an adversarial atmosphere in class.

Overall, the students and lecturers alike received the unit materials and instructional design positively, both pedagogically and in terms of discipline knowledge and professional skills, although students did express concerns with the amount of required reading. While both academics expressed enthusiasm with the student-focused unit, they were uncomfortable with the level of student control this entailed. While this raised issues of trust in students’ commitment and capacity to work independently, the unit coordinator was prepared to suspend judgement because of his fundamental belief that students would rise to the challenge. The simulation was challenging and moved students beyond their pre-existing comfort zones, but not so much that they felt defeated. Students rose to the challenge of independence and expressed their desire for more control over team processes, access to the meetings rooms within the software and warmer relationships with the local lecturer.

Discussion

The findings indicated there was a disconnect between the instructional design and the implementation, or “teaching”, that occurred in this unit. The instructional design of the unit was an exemplar in terms of educational validity, in that there was clear alignment between objectives, learning activities and assessments (Lao & Gonzales 2005; Smith & Ragan 2005) and transparency in purpose and types of assessments and the assessment instructions (Flood, Coleman & Marshall 2005), and the simulation was established in the appropriate zone of proximal development – i.e., neither too easy nor too challenging, causing retreat and defeat (Snowman, McCown & Biehler 2012). Therefore, a disconnect was introduced at the teaching stage, evidenced by the lecturers’ lack of understanding of the value of certain learning activities, such as reflective journaling (Marzano 1988, 2000; Schon 1987) and cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1998, 2007), which were questioned to a lesser extent by the unit coordinator and a greater extent by the lecturer. This meant that even though the educational rationales for such activities was explicitly stated in the handbooks, academics did not reiterate these rationales overtly to the students; rather, they advised students to simply “read the materials”. This lack of reinforcement and endorsement of the value of the activities and assessment tasks may have negatively influenced students’ perceptions of them. This situation indicated that these academics were encouraging what Prosser and Trigwell (1999b) described as superficial or surface approaches to learning. As Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell and Martin (2007) stated that this was an

indicator that these lecturers' beliefs about teaching revolved around the transmission of discipline knowledge only, rather than about encouraging students to construct their own knowledge and to learn about themselves as learners (constructivism and metacognition). It also demonstrated deficiencies in good teaching approaches, as there was a failure to "explain the material plainly" and "make it absolutely clear what has to be understood, at what level, and why", and in providing the rationale for "using teaching methods and academic tasks that require students to learn thoughtfully, responsibly, and cooperatively" (Ramsden 2003, pp.86-7). As Ramsden and his associates (2007) stated, this may have explained why students rated the teaching lower for the local lecturer. Therefore, for optimal teaching and learning results, there must be both good instructional design **and** good teaching – that is, effective teaching that promotes optimal learning outcomes.

The findings in this study clearly identified that good pedagogy should shape how learning experiences that are facilitated through the online delivery mode are structured and supported (Price & Kirkwood, 2008). Attention needed to be given to ensuring that learning experiences within the online environment were active, interactive, reflective and engaging (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). As Aragon (2003) stated, the local lecturer in this study needed to create a psychologically "safe" space that promoted a "social presence" (p. 57) through positive interactions between lecturer and student and among peers, rather than actively suppressing peer-to-peer interaction. Aragon advocated lecturers establishing a warm classroom atmosphere where students feel welcome by using ice-breaker strategies and humour, and by being approachable and available to students. He linked social presence with student satisfaction in the online classroom, which was clearly an issue in this current study and may explain the differences in students' ratings of good teaching between the two teaching academics.

Clearly the lecturers' beliefs were founded in transmissive orientations focused on knowledge transfer; this resulted in students adopting a minimalistic engagement in classroom interactions. This confirms the literature that describes the influence of academics' beliefs about teaching on their structuring of learning and the resultant impact on student engagement – that is, transmissive beliefs and a lack of respect for the adult learner's capacity to take responsibility for their learning will lead to the adoption of surface-learning approaches and reduced student motivation and satisfaction (Merriam 2006; Prosser & Trigwell 1999; Trigwell 2010). Chickering and Gamson (1991) articulated the need to "encourage contact between students and faculty", with an underlying assumption that this contact would be positive, implying notions of approachability, which this study found to be problematic. This again identified a disconnect between what is known to be good teaching and the reality of the teaching approach in this study.

Ramsden (2003) explicitly identified the importance of "showing concern and respect for students", alluding to a relational quality that was a crucial missing element in this study. Indeed, it was possible to have most of the principles and elements of good teaching incorporated into the design and teaching, but if academics' paradigmatic "ethic of care", with its associated relational acumen, was deficit, this had a significant deleterious influence on students' perceptions of the value of the learning environment. The findings highlighted the importance of academics' beliefs – an ethic of care – which influenced their actions through the demonstration of relational acumen. This ethic-of-care paradigm goes beyond Ramsden's (2003) "showing concern and respect for students". It involves an academic's fundamental beliefs about *students*, not so much about teaching, whereby he/she genuinely cares about students as individuals, as well as their learning. Relational acumen, which is the evidence of an ethic of care, would be demonstrated by establishing a warm and caring classroom atmosphere where the academic is genuinely interested in students' learning and lives. This may also translate into working with students in different

ways to meet their varied needs, in order to optimise their capacity to be successful (Biggs & Watkins 2001; Dunn, Denig & Lovelace 2001; Fraser & Sanders 2005). Small aspects of communication, such as responding to queries in a timely way and expressing interest in students on a personal level, are important within an ethic of care. It is logical then that academics who have a highly refined ethic-of-care philosophy and relational acumen will ensure that their instructional design and teaching approaches are educationally sound, demonstrate coherence and alignment and embody a student-centred orientation; in other words, if you care about students you will place them at the centre of the learning focus and tailor teaching approaches that promote effective and deep learning (Trigwell & Prosser 2003).

Implications for Academic Development

When considering the context of higher-education accountability in which academics are teaching and researching, and the expectations placed upon them, the findings highlight the need to consider academic-development programs. Academic development frequently focuses on the functional aspects of quality teaching and instructional design (Arinto 2013; MacDonald & Campbell 2012) – for example, acquiring generic teaching skills – but if academics do not have positive beliefs in the capacity of students as adult learners; genuinely like students as individuals; and have the capability to use their interpersonal, communication and relational skills to create positive relationships with students and the class as a whole, they will likely continue to receive poor student ratings (Dixon & Scott 2004). As Saroyan (2010) identified, doctoral graduates are prepared for research and frequently have poor interpersonal skills; therefore, relational acumen is an aspect that demands attention in academic development for those who plan to teach in universities. This means that academic developers should expose university teachers to literature (and perhaps role plays) that explore the nature of contemporary students; prevalent constraints placed upon students – e.g., juggling the demands of work, family, and study; and what motivates students to engage with learning (Scott & Dixon 2009). Gaining an understanding of students may influence academic beliefs about students; role plays can promote deeper reflection on the impact that lecturers' interactions have on students, while encouraging academics to hone not only their pedagogical skills but more importantly their relational acumen.

It is acknowledged that relational acumen may be an intangible and sometimes nebulous quality within academia. Relational acumen may explain the quandary leaders face in explaining why some academics appear to be innately good teachers while others who also expend effort on their teaching and instructional design and who are experts in their field fail to attain students' respect and consistently rate poorly on student feedback surveys (Ramsden 1998). Therefore, relational acumen has leadership implications, whereby faculty leaders may need to explore administrative strategies to enhance relational acumen and to place academics into roles that align with their strengths.

Conclusions

Examining the impact of teaching approaches is usually difficult because of the number of variables and factors in play within a usual teaching setting. This study was unusual in that it allowed the investigation of different teaching approaches while controlling for other factors such as curriculum and instructional design, resource materials and students. That is, the only aspect that varied in this unit was the two teaching academics; by eliminating the other variables it enabled a more thorough exploration of the impact of different teaching approaches, interactions

and relationships formed with students. Even with stating the parameters of this study, I acknowledge that this was only one unit in one university with a reasonable student population; therefore, the findings may have limited transferability to other settings. Nevertheless, I hope that the findings may generate deeper thinking about the importance of the university teacher and his/her capacity to positively influence students both academically and emotionally. The future research implications emerging from this study entail further exploration of the nebulous dimensions of an ethic of care and relational acumen, and their impact on students' achievement and satisfaction with their learning environments.

This research found that educationally optimal instructional design is only the first step in good teaching. This was endorsed by the finding that even though students reported positive views of the simulation, instructional materials, assessment formats and associated instructions and the teamwork orientation of the unit, their overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit was lower than may have been anticipated. Good teaching, therefore, is significantly associated with the individual teacher. The differentiated ratings of good teaching for the two academics indicated that students held distinct preferences for one over the other. Students' comments led to inferences that faculty members' relational acumen was a pivotal determinant in students' perceptions of quality teaching. It can be posited, then, that university teachers who demonstrate an ethic of care and are able to establish psychologically "safe" and convivial classroom environments are more likely to be perceived by students as good teachers. Additionally, relational acumen is a motivator to these adult learners, who want not only respect but also a positive relationship with an approachable and caring instructor.

Acknowledging the importance of relational acumen has implications for university academic developers, as it is a more nebulous aspect of teaching, unlike generic teaching and assessment strategies, and therefore more difficult to integrate into professional development programming. Understanding the impact that relational acumen has on students' perceptions and satisfaction in their studies may also offer valuable insights to university leaders in the pursuit of greater alignment between an individual academic's strengths and his/her predominant university role – teaching, research and service/leadership; that is, if an academic can effectively demonstrate relational acumen with doctoral students but not undergraduate classes, it would be a prudent leadership decision to align the academic's teaching towards doctoral supervision rather than undergraduate teaching. Additionally, if consideration of the types of faculty workload activities is not possible, leaders need to consider the provision of academic-development experiences (e.g., mentoring, workshops, etc.) that can build relational capacity in their faculty members.

References

- Adelman, C 2009. *The Bologna Process for US Eyes: Re-learning higher education in the age of convergence*, Institute for Higher Education Policy, Washington, DC.
- Alvarez, I, Guasch, T & Espasa, A 2009. University teacher roles and competencies in online learning environments: A theoretical analysis of teaching and learning practices. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 321-336.
- Aragon, S R 2003. Creating social presence in online environments. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, vol. 100, no. 3, pp. 57-68.
- Arinto, P B 2013. A framework for developing competencies in open and distance learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 167-185.

- Australian Universities Quality Agency 2006. *Quality Frameworks: Reflections from Australian universities*, Australian Universities Quality Agency, Melbourne.
- Bhatti, M T 2012. Dimensions of good university teaching: Faculty and department chairs' perspectives. *Design and Technology Education*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 44-53.
- Biggs, J B 2001. The reflective institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, vol. 41, pp. 221-238.
- Biggs, J B & Watkins, D A 2001. Insights into teaching the Chinese learner. In Watkins, D A & Biggs, J B (eds.), *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical perspectives*, Comparative Education Research Centre and The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd., Hong Kong.
- Black, A 2010. Gen Y: Who they are and how they learn. *Educational HORIZONS*, vol. 88, no. 2, pp. 92-101.
- Chickering, A W & Gamson, Z F 1991. Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, vol. 47, Fall. In Chickering, A W & Gamson, Z F (eds.), *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education: New directions for teaching and learning*, Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco.
- Chickering, A W, Payne, C & Poitras, G 2001. Teaching and technologies for human development. *Educational Technology*, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 46-51.
- Coates, H 2009. What's the difference? A model for measuring the value added by Higher Education in Australia. *Higher Education Management & Policy*, vol. 21, pp. 1-19.
- Council for Higher Education 2008. *New Leadership for Student Learning and Sccountability: A statement of principles, commitments to action*, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC.
- Creswell, J W 2012. *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.), Pearson Education Inc., Boston.
- DETYA 2000. *Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills: Research report 99/7*, Evaluations and Investigations Program, Higher Education Division, Canberra.
- Dixon, K C & Scott, S 2004. Professional development programs for international lecturers: Perspectives and experiences related to teaching and learning. *18th IDP Australian International Education Conference International Education*, Sydney.
- Duarte, F P 2013. Conceptions of good teaching by good teachers: Case studies from an Australian university. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, vol. 10, no. 1, n.p.
- Dunn, R, Denig, S & Lovelace, M K 2001. Multiple intelligences and learning styles: Two sides of the same coin or different strokes for different folks? *Teacher Librarian*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 9-15.
- Ewell, P 2009. *Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the tension*, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, Washington, DC.
- Findlow, S 2008. Accountability and innovation in higher education: A disabling tension?. *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 313-329.
- Flood, A, Coleman, K & Marshall, S J 2005. Assessment in higher education. In Fraser, K (ed.), *Education Development and Leadership in Higher Education: Developing an effective institutional strategy*, Routledge Falmer, Abingdon, UK, pp. 1-4.

- Gay, L R, Mills, G E & Airasian, P 2012. *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (10th ed.), Pearson Education Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Holt, D 2010. *Strategic Leadership for Institutional Teaching and Learning Centres: Developing a model for the 21st century*, Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Strawberry Hills, NSW.
- Johnson, D W, Johnson, R T & Smith, K A 1998. Cooperative learning returns to college: What evidence is there that it works? *Change*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 26-35.
- Johnson, D W, Johnson, R T & Smith, K A 2007. The state of cooperative learning in postsecondary and professional settings. *Educational Psychological Review*, vol. 19, pp. 15-29.
- Kai, J 2009. A critical analysis of accountability in higher education: Its relevance to evaluation of higher education. *Chinese Education and Society*, vol. 422, no. 2, pp. 39-51.
- Knowles, M S 1984. *The Adult Learner: A neglected species*, Gulf, Houston.
- Knowles, M S, Holton III, E F & Swanson, R A 2005. *The Adult Learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*, Elsevier, Amsterdam.
- Lao, T & Gonzales, C 2005. Understanding online learning through a qualitative description of professors and students' experiences/ *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, vol. 13, pp. 459-474.
- Leask, B 2013. Internationalizing the curriculum in the disciplines: Imagining new possibilities/ *Journal of Studies in International Education*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 103-118.
- Levine, A & Sun, J C 2002. *Barriers to Distance Education*, American Council on Education, Washington, DC.
- MacDonald, J & Campbell, A 2012. Demonstrating online teaching in the disciplines: A systematic approach to activity design for online synchronous tuition. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 43, no. 6, pp. 883-891.
- MacDonald, J & Poniatowska, B 2011. Designing the professional development of staff for teaching online: An OU UK, case study. *Distance Education*, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 119-134.
- Marsh, H W 1987. Students' evaluations of university teaching: Research findings, methodological issues and directions for future research. *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 11, pp. 253-388.
- Marsh, H W, & Roche, L A 1994. *The Use of Students' Evaluations of University Teaching to Improve Teaching Effectiveness*, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Canberra.
- Marzano, R J 1988. *Dimensions of Thinking: A framework for curriculum and instruction*, Alexandria, VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R J 2000, 20th century advances in instruction. In Brandt, R S (ed.), *Education in a New Era*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA, pp. 67-95.
- Merriam, S B 2006. *Learning in Adulthood*, John Wiley & Sons, New York.
- Oliver, R, Omari, A & Herrington, J 1998. Investigating implementation strategies for WWW-based learning environments. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 121-138.

- Ongwuegbuzie, A J, Johnson, R B & Collins, K M T 2009. Call for mixed analysis: A philosophical framework for combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. *International Journal for Multiple Research Approaches*, vol. 3, 114-139.
- Paewai, S R, Meyer, L H, & Houston, D J 2007. Problem solving academic workloads management: A university response. *Higher Education Quarterly*, vol. 613, no. 3, pp. 375-390.
- Palloff, R M & Pratt, K 2005. *Collaborating Online: Learning together in community*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Price, L & Kirkwood, A 2008. Learning and teaching and technology. In Scott, S & Dixon, K C (eds.), *The Globalised University: Trends and development in teaching and learning*, Black Swan Press, Perth, pp. 83-113.
- Prosser, M 2013. Quality teaching quality learning. In Salter, D J (ed.), *Cases on Quality Teaching Practices in Higher Education*, pp. 26-37 Hershey, PA, IGI Global.
- Prosser, M 2010. Faculty research and teaching approaches: Exploring the relationship. In Christensen Hughes, J & Mighty, J (eds.), *Taking Stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON, pp. 129-137.
- Prosser, M, Ramsden, P, Trigwell, K & Martin, E 2003. Dissonance in experience of teaching and its relation to the quality of student learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 37-48.
- Prosser, M & Trigwell, K 1999a. *Understanding Learning and Teaching, on Deep and Surface Learning*, Society for Research into Higher Education, London, and Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.
- 1999b. *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The experience in higher education*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.
- Radloff, A 2005. Decentralised approaches to education development: Supporting quality teaching and learning from within a faculty. In Fraser, K (ed.), *Education Development and Leadership in Higher Education: Developing an effective institutional strategy*, Routledge Falmer, Abingdon, UK, pp. 72-107.
- Ramsden, P 1991. A performance indicator of teaching quality in higher education: The Course Experience Questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16, pp. 129-150.
- 2003, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Routledge Falmer, London.
- Ramsden, P, Prosser, M, Trigwell, K & Martin, E 2007. University teachers' experiences of academic leadership and their approaches to teaching. *Learning and Instruction*, vol. 17, pp. 140-155.
- Ruokamo, H, Hakkarainen, P & Eriksson, M 2012. Designing a model for enhanced teaching and meaningful e-learning. In Lindberg, J O & Olofsson, A D (eds.), *Informed Design of Educational Technologies in Higher Education: Enhanced learning and teaching*, IGI Global, Hershey, PA, pp. 375-392.
- Ryan, Y, Fraser, K & Dearn, J 2005. Towards a profession of tertiary teaching: Academic attitudes in Australia. In Fraser, K (ed.), *Education Development and Leadership in Higher Education: Developing an effective institutional strategy*, Routledge Falmer, Abingdon, UK, pp. 182-197.

- Saroyan, A 2010. Research on student learning: Converging and diverging messages. In Christensen Hughes, J M & Mighty, J (eds.), *Taking Stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston, ON, pp. 95-112.
- Schon, D 1987. *The reflective practitioner*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Scott, D E 2008. Effective VoIP learning experiences: The relationship between adult learners' motivation, multiple intelligences, and learning styles. *The International Journal of Learning*, vol. 15, no. 3, n.p.
- Scott, D E & Scott S in press. Leadership for quality university teaching: How bottom up academic insights can inform top down leadership. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*.
- Scott, G 2009. *University Student Engagement and Satisfaction with Learning and Teaching*, Office for Learning & Teaching, Australian Government, University of Western Sydney.
- Scott, S & Dixon, K C 2009. Partners in a learning organisation: A student-focused model of professional development. *Educational Forum*, vol. 73, no. 3, pp. 240-255.
- Smith, P L & Ragan, T J 2005. *Instructional Design*, Wiley Publishing Inc., New York.
- Snowman, J, McCown, R & Biehler, R 2012. *Psychology Applied to Teaching*, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Belmont, CA.
- Trigwell, K 2010. Teaching and learning: A relational view, in J Christensen Hughes & J Mighty (eds), *Taking stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education*, Montreal and Kingston, ON, McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 115-128.
- Trigwell, K & Prosser, M 2003. Qualitative difference in university teaching. In Tight, M (ed.), *Access and Exclusion*, JAI Elsevier Science, London, pp. 185-216.
- Uhibai, S 2013. *Reflection on the development of Chinese higher education in the post-industrial area*, Paper presented at the Eurasian Higher Education Leaders Forum, 20-21 August, Conference Proceedings, Astana, Kazakhstan.
- von Treuer, K & Marr, D 2013. *Tracking Student Success: Who is falling through the cracks?* Office of Learning & Teaching, Australian Government, Deakin University, Melbourne.
- Walker, J 2008. Social/corporate accountability: A university's "trek" towards excellence. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 382, no. 2, pp. 45-71.
- Wallace, L 2007. Online teaching and university policy: Investigating the disconnect. *Journal of Distance Education*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 87-100.