

Discomfort at the coalface: Issues for sessional tutors teaching in online enhanced learning environments

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Higher education institutions are undergoing a period of rapid change during which time a number of strategic professional development efforts have been made to improve teaching in order to improve students' learning outcomes. Sessional tutors, who are consistently at the coalface and have close contact with students, have often been excluded from formal opportunities for professional development offered to more permanent staff. This anomaly is now being recognised and more efforts are being made across the sector to ensure that tutors are better equipped to teach in contemporary learning environments. This paper discusses issues of concern to tutors that arose from recent professional development workshops and suggests that some of the major issues currently confronting sessional staff relate to the need to be able to teach effectively in online enhanced learning environments.

Key words: sessional tutors, online enhanced learning environments, professional development.

Introduction

The employment of sessional or casual tutors in higher education has been a long standing practice. Because tutors act as intermediaries between lecturers and students, they play a critical role in higher education institutions. In most cases, tutors are postgraduate students who have an excellent grasp of the discipline's content matter. More recently, they may also be experienced industry personnel employed to 'pass on' the benefit of their knowledge and practical experience to students. In most discipline areas, the assumption has been that if people know and can communicate the content, they will be suitable, effective tutors. Most staff employed in this way have little or no background in education practice and university culture, yet they are expected to implement University teaching and learning policies and understand university infrastructure and technical systems. The tradition of employing sessional tutors has assumed a face to face transmission approach to teaching in higher education which is now somewhat outdated.

With the current emphasis on student centred approaches across the sector, more strategic, systematic efforts are being made generally to improve teaching and learning. These efforts include online technology implementation, the development of certificate courses in Higher Education, more professional development initiatives for academic staff, and first year initiatives to reduce attrition and help students negotiate the transition from school to university. However, observations suggest sessional tutors, the staff who are closest to students and have most to do with them on a daily basis, have been less able to benefit from opportunities for professional development offered to more permanent staff. It is now recognised that to improve student learning, sessional tutors need to be well trained and knowledgeable about university systems, particularly in light of the trend to employ more staff in this way than ever before. (Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI), The University of Queensland, 2003a)

Current trends in professional development for sessional tutors

Over the past few years, issues associated with employment of sessional tutors have been the subject of research by authors such as Basset (1998), Jacobs (1998), Leslie (1998) and Blanchard and Smith (2001). Most concerns identified by these authors related to exploitation in respect to working conditions, the vagaries of university culture, lack of training opportunities to keep up with trends in the sector and a tendency to treat tutors as an underclass in academia, something Jacobs (1998) referred to as a 'culture of separation' (p.17). Research by Sheard and Hagan (1999) went beyond work conditions. They demonstrated the value of establishing communities of learning for sessional staff to promote professional development. More recently, the Australian Universities Teaching Commission (AUTC) sponsored a project called *Training, Support and Management of Sessional Teaching Staff*. The project provided an

extensive literature review (TEDI, 2003a) and compiled case studies of professional development for sessional tutors from seven Australian and 2 UK universities. It also highlighted the major issues in sessional teaching situations, the most pressing of which were:

- Payment for extra work
- Need for more/better professional development
- Lack of time and/or opportunity for sessional staff to get to know each other and full time academics
- Need for (paid) training in the use of teaching tools and equipment (e.g. online resources)
- Lack of recognition for good work
- Better access to computers, Internet connections and other facilities (TEDI, 2003b)

The above mentioned research clearly pointed to the need for more systematic, ongoing professional development for sessional staff. This need has been recognised and a number of mechanisms to help tutors are already in place in Australian institutions, including some of the less costly, inclusive mail and print based strategies suggested by Jacobs (1998). For example, some universities now offer face to face induction programs and/or workshops. (e.g. Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Flinders University, University of Queensland,). Some like Monash University have articulated the institutions responsibilities in respect to tutor employment. Others have developed excellent print and/or online material for professional development of sessional staff. (e.g. University of New England, Centre for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Melbourne, TEDI, UQ). Tutors do not necessarily pay for face to face induction programs and workshops, but they do pay for online materials in terms of the need to access them and in terms of the time it takes to read them.

Emergence of new issues associated with tutoring in online environments

In online enhanced environments, the nature of the 'coalface' is more complex because tutors have to be able to operate seamlessly between both face to face and online activities and mediate between lecturers teaching face to face and/or online and students learning in both situations. Previous literature relating to sessional staff has not focused on this phenomenon.

In first semester, 2004, 90 sessional tutors attended paid professional development sessions at Deakin University's three main teaching campuses. These tutors were essentially employed to teach in face to face situations in units with online components. The sessions were aimed at increasing tutors' awareness about the different categories of students, providing some techniques for helping students learn more effectively in contemporary learning environments, and informing them about University resources available to assist staff and students. Opportunities were also provided during the workshops for tutors to raise issues that concerned them. They are consistent with those that emerged in the AUTC project.

- Dealing with difficulties associated with 'getting started' at university: Tutors do not always know what services the University offers, and what their rights and legal responsibilities are.
- The majority of tutors want more professional development, especially in respect to the use of the University's Learning Management System, discipline specific teaching and learning applications and dealing with more diverse student cohorts.
- Many tutors work in isolation. They come to the University, run their classes, then go home. They rarely have opportunities to get to know each other and collaborate collegially.
- In many instances, tutors choose to do extra work without payment, despite Faculty policies that specify they should not. In some cases tutors are excluded from program planning processes because faculties cannot afford to pay them to attend meetings and do not want to be accused of exploitation.
- When tutors are not part of a unit team, there are fewer opportunities for contributing to the development or renewal of units.
- Tutors feel there is an apparent disinterest on the part of some administrative and academic staff in assisting them at the beginning of semester. They are often left to find out things for themselves.

In 2004, a new situation has arisen at Deakin University with the implementation of policies relating to the use of online materials and the move towards offering more wholly online units and more units that integrate online and face to face activities (blended environments). Every unit now must have a basic online presence that includes unit guides, web based resources and a general discussion space. Many units incorporate more online activities such as multimedia resources, quizzes, online group work and discussions along with their face to face classes, while some are now wholly online units with no face to

face classes. Approximately 20% of Deakin academic staff are sessional tutors and the way they currently work in the University varies considerably across faculties and schools. Some assume much greater responsibility in the new environments than others. For example many have responsibility for moderating tutorial discussion spaces that are seen to be an activity equivalent to running a face to face tutorial. There are also instances where tutors have been given responsibility for developing online material. Working in this new environment has led to the emergence of a range of issues for tutors that have not been raised in previously mentioned literature. In general:

- Tutors worry that less students attend classes now that much of the content is available online – they want strategies to encourage students to attend classes. Their employment is usually contingent on the number of face to face tutorial groups needed.
- Tutors are often not familiar with the University’s Learning Management System even though all units are now incorporated within it. In some units, students are more likely to be present in the online environment than are tutors. This leads to some student dissatisfaction.
- Switching between face to face classes and online activities, that is working effectively in the blended environment, is difficult without training and is therefore more time consuming than operating only in face to face tutorial situations. The extra time needed is often not paid for.
- Tutors find it difficult to become familiar with all the resources in online resource intensive environments, particularly when they are employed just as semester begins, as is often the case. The Unit Chair usually selects resources and the rationale for their use is not always communicated to tutors.
- When tutors are unfamiliar with the technical systems and resources, students ask questions they cannot answer. This places them in an uncomfortable situation. In fact they generally feel less comfortable and confident in an online enhanced environment.
- When tutors do venture into the online environment, they need strategies for encouraging students to engage seriously with resources and participate in online discussions.
- Due to the large increase in the number of international students, tutors have concerns about cultural differences in respect to online participation.
- Tutors are concerned about the increase in plagiarism, which they believe has been exacerbated by the wider use of online resources.

Since the issues raised above were articulated in workshops and evaluation surveys, it is not possible to say whether they are widely applicable in all disciplines. Moreover, it has to be acknowledged that some may also be pertinent to permanent academic teaching staff. However, the difference is that the latter have more opportunities for paid professional development.

Future initiatives

The evidence from recent workshops indicates that tutors are eager to improve their practice across a range of areas, but they need more assistance to enable them to feel more comfortable about teaching in the new environments. The adoption of professional development strategies that tap into this enthusiasm and respond to individual Faculty based needs is an important strategy for improving teaching and learning across the institution. One of the components of the Deputy Vice Chancellor’s Strategic Teaching and Learning Fund is a commitment to the systematic provision of opportunities for professional development for sessional staff. The following initiatives are being or will be implemented at Deakin University in response to the emerging issues. Some are paid activities and some are not.

- Paid induction sessions for sessional tutors will continue;
- Paid workshops on ‘Dealing with Diversity’ in online enhanced environments will continue;
- The introduction of Faculty based lunchtime seminars focusing on specific areas relating to teaching (e.g. assessment, evaluation, moderating online discussions, using quizzes etc.);
- Tutors will be encouraged to use an online discussion space recently created in the University’s Learning Management System (LMS), Deakin Studies Online (DSO), to enable them to communicate with and support each other. It also provides an opportunity to become familiar with DSO in a non-threatening situation. To initiate discussion, questions relating to tutors’ practices and experiences have recently been posted.

The following professional development opportunities are available for all staff including sessional tutors:

- Attendance at DSO training sessions - whether or not tutors are paid depends on the policy adopted by particular faculties.
- Participation in a DSO Users Group recently established for staff to share their experiences and ideas. This is something tutors could tap into if they choose to.
- The opportunity will be available for tutors who want to pursue an academic career to enrol in the University's Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. However, as with any other course, they will have to pay for this themselves unless scholarships can be created.

Conclusion

The initiatives indicate that Deakin University has recognised the need to equip sessional tutors to teach in more complex environments. Indications are that tutors have so far appreciated the opportunities for professional growth, but more focused research is needed in future. Possible questions for research are:

- What is the efficacy of each initiative in terms of addressing the issues raised by tutors?
- Which initiatives are more likely to attract tutors and why?
- What are the particular experiences of tutors operating in online enhanced environments?
- Does the online discussion space provide an effective forum for tutors to communicate and learn from each other, to keep informed about what's happening around the University and to become more proficient operating in the LMS?

Further work will ensue relating to these and other questions that arise in the future.

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Please cite as: Rice, M. (2004). Discomfort at the coalface: Issues for sessional tutors teaching in online enhanced learning environments. In R. Atkinson, C. McBeath, D. Jonas-Dwyer & R. Phillips (Eds), *Beyond the comfort zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference* (pp. 798-801). Perth, 5-8 December. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/rice.html>

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