Reviewing reflective teaching portfolios about online learning: What are they telling us?

B. Supple, C. Fennell, M. McCarthy, *University College Cork, Ireland*

ABSTRACT: This paper sets out to explore reflective teaching portfolios of university staff, focussed on their engagement as students in a fully online professional development programme in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. As facilitators and designers of this online programme, where the staff are our students, we were interested in learning from staff reflections of their experiences of being online students and observing how learning in this environment transforms patterns of learning and behaviour as staff became immersed in SoTL.

80 university staff completed two modules of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at University College Cork, Ireland, during the 2015/2016 academic year. While this programme has a long history of being delivered face-to-face, 2015/2016 was the first year it had been offered fully online via Blackboard, the university's virtual learning environment.

For this paper, qualitative data was collected via 20 randomly selected, anonymous, student reflective portfolio entries, which detailed their learning as online students. These are submitted as part of a final teaching portfolio submission which invites them to reflect on their engagement as students in the online teaching and learning programme. The entries were analysed using a thematic framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

This paper outlines some of the issues that arose from the reflections. For example, there is a palpable sense of vulnerability in the reflections, but also a sense of community when sharing ideas within small cross-disciplinary discussion groups. For one student this reflective online process with peers became both "confessional box and cathartic release". Our results emphasise the value of tracking and capturing reflections as 'artefacts' and the transformative nature of the learning. The results also highlight some of the challenges which exist when staff operate as students in an online space and how both person and practice can transform in order to meet these challenges.

1   INTRODUCTION

The course description for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is as follows:

> The Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education offered by University College Cork aims to provide the staff of universities and other third level institutions with the opportunity to develop a research approach to their teaching and student learning and to provide them with the pedagogical tools that will enable them to document and harness student learning. The programme is grounded in the research principles of a scholarship of teaching and learning approach. Students in this context are staff who work in a variety of teaching roles in higher education, ranging from full time academics to lecturers who have part teaching to those who work in adult education programmes. (UCC Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Fact File, n.d.).

80 university staff completed two modules of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education ('PG Cert in T&L') at University College Cork, Ireland, during the 2015/2016 academic year. While this programme has a long history of being delivered face-to-face, 2015/2016 was the first year it had been offered fully online via Blackboard, the university's virtual learning environment. As part of a final teaching portfolio submission, students are required to complete an entry in this portfolio which invites them to reflect on their engagement as learners in the online programme. The ideas which scaffold the reflective entries can be found in Appendix 1.

2 METHOD

For this paper, qualitative data was collected via 20 randomly selected, anonymous, student[1] reflective portfolio entries, which detailed their learning as online students. The text for the entries was analysed using a thematic framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002) with coding using QDA Miner software.

3 LITERATURE AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Discussion boards as a catalyst for transforming patterns of learning

3.1.1 *Transforming patterns of learning through Communities of Practice*

A vital element of the PG Cert in T&L is in the creation of a robust community - of working to decrease the isolation and "pedagogical solitude" (Schulman, 2004) which is often the reality of teaching. This is achieved in an online course by the students openly sharing ideas through engagement in discussion boards. Students then become immersed in a process of "ongoing investigation" of their teaching (Bass, 1999), as distinct from "the terminal remediation" approach of "fixing" teaching and learning. Through the medium of discussion boards online and reflections, stories of teaching are openly shared and critiqued amongst colleagues from a variety of disciplines, in order to "look closely and critically at student learning in order to improve their own courses and programs, and to share insights with other educators who can evaluate and build on their efforts" (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011, p. xix).

Throughout their reflections, the students all mentioned the use of the discussions boards on the course; described by one student as a '*valuable learning instrument*'. The students highlighted various strengths and weaknesses of the discussion boards. Starting with the strengths, one student summarised them well saying:

> *Strengths of on-line SoTL discussions include the ease of generating records, fewer constraints in terms of space, geography and time (for example, compared to a lecture-based course) and the potential to interact with a more diverse group, enhancing the probability of encountering distinct perspectives on teaching and learning. In summary, these on-line discussions have enhanced my development as a teacher, belonging to a SoTL community.* (Student 10)

Looking across the entries, each of these strengths is mentioned by other students. Firstly, 'the ease of generating records' and the ability to access an archive of the discussion was seen to be of great benefit, and is discussed in terms of the artefacts created in the following section. Several students saw the flexible nature of the discussions "i*n terms of space, geography and time* "as being of benefit. This flexibility allowed them the time to consider ideas in more depth compared to face-to-face.

> *I think the fact that we were not having a face-to-face discussion, and had to write our answers, gave us our first unofficial 'pause moments'. We had time to consider the nuances of our colleagues' comments, and formulate considerate replies. In that way I felt that we very supportive of one another, which in turn made it easier for me to speak my mind.* (Student 20)

> *Given that we all had the opportunity to contribute to our discussion boards in our own time (whether day or night), I feel that we had time to think about our responses carefully before posting them. I often left and returned to my responses throughout the day before posting them which provided us with a great learning freedom.* (Student 7)

> *The nature of this course was that all the materials could be accessed at any time to allow candidates to fit all the work into our own individual schedules. This was a huge advantage of the course for me and allowed me to do most of the work at evenings and weekends, being my only spare time. (Student 18)*

Some felt that the online nature allowed them to be more open and honest, it gave them time to pause and consider answers, it gave them a sense of community, shared experience and removed isolation.

---

[1] From herein, for the purposes of this paper, participants undertaking this course will be referred to as 'students'.

My contributions to the discussion boards in both semesters I felt started off a bit strained but as I started to examine the material and engage I found my voice and started to enjoy the experience. (Student 8)

These conversations [on the discussion boards] stood out because they show a willingness to see teaching and learning as a valid, active area of research. They also demonstrate the ability of members of the group from distinct disciplines (Physiology, Chemistry, Social Sciences) to discuss and review SoTL activities using a common language, as part of a community of scholars. (Student 10)

There was a very clear sense of learning within SoTL which crosses disciplines and that interdisciplinary groups shared a common language and vision.

Another exciting learning moment that I reflect on is from Discussion 6 in Semester 1. This group discussion stood out for me as a good example of how as a group we all critiqued and discussed each other's posts. I found this to be a good example of SoTL and it highlighted for me where the community of teaching parallels with the community that I am already familiar with in the scholarship of research. (Student 12)

The discussion boards really helped me to surface my assumptions and question them in my approach to teaching. I can see throughout my contributions that my assumptions and my beliefs are ever present in my approach to teaching. (Student 5)

The collaborative nature of the course was hugely beneficial to me. It allowed me direct access to years and years of teaching experience, which I have not yet garnered myself to date being at an early stage of my teaching career. I have learnt very much from my colleagues and I hope that I have also contributed some ways to their learning on this course. (Student 18)

Overall, the discussion was important for me as I got a sense that others were having similar problems, that reflection on the parts of your teaching that you are least satisfied with can be the most rewarding, and that it is possible to learn from the experiences and strategies of others to move away from that experience and to develop more positive teaching practices. (Student 19)

3.1.2 *Transforming patterns of learning through self-reflection and artefacts of learning*

Throughout the course, students are brought along a self-reflection journey through discussion board engagement with their peers. As Laurillard (2012) suggests:

"educators have embraced the idea of peer discussions...because that kind of interaction is so powerful for stimulating the productive internal conversation that leads to learning" (Laurillard, 2012, p. 143).

We have certainly found this to be the case in our context - the discussions have served as a catalyst for breaking down barriers and self-consciousness, and thereby allowing students to learning about learning and reflecting as a student in that process.

The second [learning moment] was seeing that individuals in my group who teach in a variety of disciplines and institutions share the same worries and concerns as me. I think because teaching can be such an individual activity we don't tend to talk about these too much. This has reassured me a lot that actually the issues we face are quite similar. (Student 5)

I thought it was refreshing that one and all were open to critique, felt it was a healthy and necessary element of our practice. (Student 15)

For some this learning occurred at a very palpable point of discomfort: we could term this point a 'disruptive moment' (Bass, 1999).

Within the forum all the participants and I began a process of implosion regards LO of programmes and the forum had the dual role of a confessional box and cathartic release. (Student 3)

> *My past experiences with the Open University regards student discussion forums had left me with an impression that they had little or no contributory value to my educational development. In reflection because online interactions lack the non-verbal cues that are a component of face to-face contact the extent and depth of the communication was poor, and my judgement was to swift. In review of reading all the contributions from semester 1 & 2 my option has changed, many of the contributions are insightful, interesting and relevant.* (Student 3)

Important to this disruption moving towards transformation was that trust develops over time.

> *In the beginning I was apprehensive about contributing to the online discussion and of responding to colleagues. I felt a novice at teaching and wondered what experience would I have to contribute to the online forum. I wondered had I enough competence in teaching to be a valuable member of the group. I started to feel more confident as I learned more about the Teaching and Learning philosophy.* (Student 13)

> *I have to admit that I found it challenging to participate in our discussion boards to begin with but I became more confident and comfortable with participation following the first discussion board.* (Student 7)

One of the advantages of an online course is that the discussions are recorded as textual artefacts of teaching and learning and shared as "community property" (Shulman, 2004), open to critical review, debate and evaluation (Schulman & Hutchings, 1999). "Once public and visible, teaching can constitute the proper object of research and constitutes a form of research in its own right" (McCarthy, et. al., 2010, p. 5). These artefacts serve as valuable and powerful sources of both their learning and teaching journey and our own learning and teaching journey as facilitators in helping to inform and enhance course design and delivery. As Wickens (2006) argues:

> Web-based courses and their various components may be saved, allowing teaching to be documented for the purpose of sharing it as research. In mastering the pedagogical and technical skills needed to design and use web-based courses and their components, faculty transcend the conventional distinctions between teaching and research and approximate Boyer's definition of a scholarship of teaching. (Wickens, 2006, p. 23).

The advantages highlighted by both Wickens (2006) and Schulman (2004) are highlighted within the data. One student saw it of greater benefit than reading an article.

> *Through our discussions, it emphasised a point made about SoTL, that it encourages continuous self-examination and improving of teaching abilities. Reaching that conclusion myself from reading the discussions has given the learning moment a greater impact than just reading about it in an article.* (Student 1)

Importantly, 'members of one's community begin to use it and to build upon it (McCarthy, et. al., 2010).

> *To have an archive of all these discussions for me, it is like having a text book of your own work and a body of work that you have built with your group to be able to access anytime.* (Student 14)

This data highlights how through the reflective process of observing their practice, students come to understand that teaching and learning are inextricably linked and like all research, it is an ongoing process of investigation. (McCarthy, et. al., 2010).

4   CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

In conclusion, the data highlights a number of issues which influence patterns of learning though both the creation of communities of practice and self-reflection. However, it is also important to note that the study does have some limitations; firstly, the data sample was small, in the future, it may be useful to analyse a larger sample in the future and examine if similar issues arise. Secondly, the data was collected based on assessment piece and so it could be argued that responses may have a degree of bias. It would be interesting to ask similar questions in a different context, perhaps through an interview or questionnaire (independent of the assessment) and see if similar issues arise. Despite these limitations, the value of tracking and capturing these reflections as 'artefacts' still seems evident

and the issues raised appear to demonstrate the transformative nature of learning which is occurring in this online space.

REFERENCES

Bass, R. (1999). The scholarship of teaching: What's the problem? *Inventio: Creative Thinking about Learning and Teaching, 1* (1) 1-10.

Higgs, B., & McCarthy, M. (2008). *Emerging issues II: The changing roles and identities of teachers and learners in higher education* (Vol. 2). NAIRTL. Retrieved from http://www.edin.ie/pubs/ei2-chapters/ei2-ch1.pdf

Hutchings, P., Huber, M., & Ciccone, A. (2011). *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hutchings, P., & Shulman, L. S. (1999). The scholarship of teaching: New elaborations, new developments. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *31*(5), 10-15.

Laurillard, D. (2012). *Teaching as a design science: Building pedagogical patterns for learning and technology.* New York: Routledge.

McCarthy, M; Neville, G; Higgs, B; Murphy, J ; (2010) 'From Dry Ice to Plutarch's Fire: The Integration of Research and Teaching and Learning' In: *Medical Education: The State of the Art*. New York: Nova Science

Ritchie, J., & Spencer, L. (2002). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. *The qualitative researcher's companion*, *573*(2002), 305-329.

Shulman, L. S. (2004) *Teaching as Community Property: Essays on Higher Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

UCC Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Fact File (n.d.) Retrieved from https://www.ucc.ie/en/ckb02/

Wickens, R. (2013). SoTEL: Toward a Scholarship of Technology Enhanced Learning. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, *32*(2).

APPENDIX 1
– GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSMENT TASK (REFLECTIVE PORTFOLIO ENTRY)

Assignment 6 – Portfolio Entry 6 Guidelines to help you build this entry

Begin by rereading a selection of the Discussion Boards from both Semesters. It is important to reflect on the fact that an online course provides you with an archive of all discussions. These can be a powerful vehicle for your research. They demonstrate a SoTL approach in providing multiple perspectives and evidence regarding key aspects of the course and what participants thought and felt.

To focus in on a key learning moment ask yourself a number of the following questions:

- What surprised me in this discussion?
- Why does this discussion stand out for me?
- What turned the experience into a learning one for me? Did the comments of my group contribute to this learning?
- Did I notice any change in my contributions to various discussions over time?
- What made the group dynamic work in a particular discussion and how did this contribute to our learning?
- What are the essential features of a good discussion? Do you think that these were present in at least a selection of the discussion boards?

Finally, to reflect on the nature and benefits of online and collaborative learning, you might build on this entry by responding to a selection of the following questions:

- What discussion stood out for you in both Semesters?
- How did you find the experience of contributing to the online discussion forum?
- How did you find the experience of responding to colleagues?
- Would you say that entering into the discussion became more real and trusting as you got to know your group? What might your response tell us about the nature of discussion itself?
- What surprised you about engaging in the process of contributing and responding to the discussion forum?
- What are the challenges of online discussion in your view?
- How can online discussions contribute to the development of a community of learners/a community of practice?
- Do you feel at the end of this process that you are part of a community of practice that shares a common language and vision?
- What would you change about your engagement with the discussion forum?
- What worked well?
- What didn't work in this online discussion process?