"It has been a real voyage of discovery": Staff as students in an online course – what have we learned?

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ABSTRACT: This paper sets out to examine and critique evaluations of a fully online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education professional development programme. As facilitators of fully online programmes where the staff are our students, we were interested in exploring the following research questions:

1. **What can we as facilitators of the programme learn from 'staff as student' end of semester evaluations of our online professional development programme?**

2. **What do these evaluations tell us about staff as students and their perceptions of teaching and learning, and their own learning?**

3. **What light do these evaluations shed on how SoTL contributes to transformed patterns of learning and behaviour?**

Feedback was sought from over 130 staff as students undertaking two programmes: the first evaluated 100 mainly local staff who had undertaken their first module on the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The second student evaluation sought feedback from 35 staff as students taking the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Both cohorts were surveyed at the end of Semester 1 for the 2016-2017 academic year, and yielded 41 responses and 12 responses respectively. While both courses have a long history of being delivered face-to-face, this is the second year the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education has been delivered fully online and the first year the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education has been delivered fully online.

Qualitative data collected via the surveys was analysed using a thematic framework approach. The results point to how this course has fostered many different transformed patterns: around learning, behaviour as a discipline expert, student and SoTL practitioner. Results have pointed to the fact that students ultimately wish to develop a stronger, more robust online community of practice. The paper will address this and other emerging issues and focus on interventions for the future development of the programme and of the professional, scholarly development of staff/faculty.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is a year-long programme delivered by the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. Staff from both within the university as well as external and who are involved in teaching at third level can undertake the programme. In 2015-2016 the course was offered fully online via Blackboard, the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and had almost 100 staff undertake the course, a similar number reflected in enrolments for 2016-2017. Staff[1] may also progress to undertake the Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education which also moved to being delivered fully online in 2016-2017, and had a cohort of 80 over that year.

Both programs have been delivered face-to-face for a number of years but the current facilitators of the online version were keen to evaluate the students studying in this online program.

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

2   METHODS

A link to an anonymous online survey via Google Form was embedded into Blackboard. Students were given around a four-week window during which to access the survey. All data from a Google Form is populated directly into a spreadsheet. One of the authors of this paper extracted the qualitative data from the spreadsheet which was analysed using thematic analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). There were a total of 41 responses from the Certificate students and 12 from the Diploma.

3   LITERATURE AND RESULTS

3.1   Literature themes

The infographic and table below presents some of the key literature around transformed patterns of learning within a SoTL framework. This literature has formed the lens through which the data was analysed.
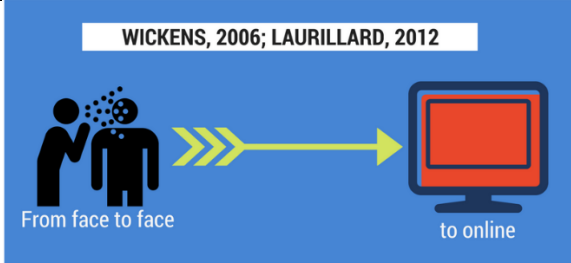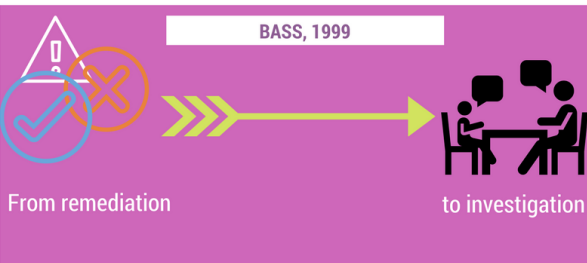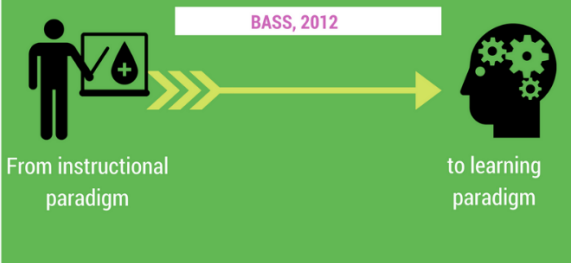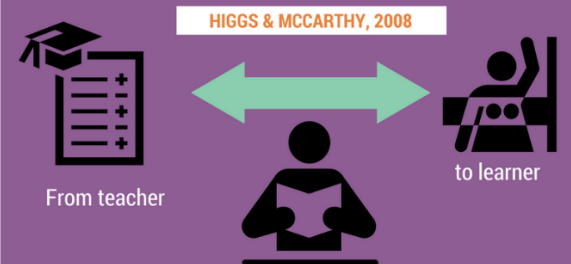
Transformed patterns of learning	Transformed patterns of behaviour
WICKENS, 2006; LAURILLARD, 2012 — From face to face to online	**BASS, 1999** — From remediation to investigation
BASS, 2012 — From instructional paradigm to learning paradigm	
HIGGS & MCCARTHY, 2008 — From teacher to learner	

Table 1: Tranformed patterns in SoTL

We have organised the literature and data results under 2 main thematic areas as illustrated in *Table 1:* Transformed patterns of learning and transformed patterns of behaviour. The names as mentioned here pertaining to the literature are only scratching the surface, but for the sake of brevity, these names are highlighted as the main sources for this paper presentation.

3.2   Research question 1: What can we as facilitators of the programme learn from 'staff as student' evaluations of our online professional development programme?

3.2.1   *Transformed patterns of learning: From face to face to online*

Laurillard (2012) argues that "knowledge technologies shape what is learned by changing how it is learned" (p. 3). In our online courses, content delivery has been via videos and readings. In the face-to-face version of the programmes, a heavy emphasis was placed on a constructivist approach –

utilising communication and dialogue as central to learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In a fully online environment we created asynchronous discussion boards to foster communication and dialogue online.

For some students, the flexibility of the online course meant an appreciation and enjoyment of resources such as videos.

> *I found the readings particularly stimulating and these solidified the content shared in the various videos and presentations. (Certificate Student 13).*

> *It was well organised and clearly laid out and the videos were of great help also I liked that the articles to be read were short and succinct and relevant to topic being studied. I liked the flexibility of online learning, I could sit by the fire after work and read the articles and then stop to watch a programme and come back to it. (Certificate Student 17).*

For others, the transition to learning in an online space, proved challenging.

> *The current system whereby contributors can participate at any time throughout the week to group discussions is draining and not time efficient. I feel a single time slot dedicated solely to facilitate discussion would enable better time management and enhance online group participation. It could also enable a better flow of conversation and debate, and require people to engage in the reading in order to participate in the discussion. (Certificate Student 19).*

> *The only problem I can see is the dynamic of the discussion boards but that has nothing to do with the course itself but with the participants. In my group the majority posted on the last day and that was very frustrating. It was hard for me to contribute as English is not my first language and also there is such a finality about the written word, but I made sure I posted early and so did another member of the group and from then on there was silence until Sunday night. I would check the entries, which happened to be very interesting, but by then it was too late for any meaningful exchange and discussion. This term we seem to be following the same pattern... Maybe if there were different deadlines for the first intervention and the discussion, things would improve a bit. But as I have said, that has nothing to do with the design of the course or the work of the tutors. (Certificate Student 26).*

The data such as the quotes above seemed to indicate a very heavy reliance on the idea of the contribution to discussions and portfolio assessments as being mutually exclusive. Although the various components of what makes a discussion forum 'successful' include group engagement, it is interesting that the comments in relation to the discussion board talk about 'others' not contributing, and do not address the fact that the ongoing archiving of reflections is a record of an individuals' work over time. 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).

Interestingly, research undertaken with a cohort from last year (to be presented in a separate paper at this conference) points to how the students had picked this up by the end of the course – perhaps midway through the course is too soon for the students to make this connection.

There were also a significant number of comments which emphasised an interest in face-to-face or 'live' sessions:

> *I also feel more face to face sessions are required...I would like to suggest the use of "live" sessions...I would recommend that an initial weekend-long seminar could open the module. (Certificate Student 19).*

> *Meet in person on more occasions (Certificate Student 21).*

> *Blended learning - monthly meetings of some kind, perhaps a lecture, or conference (Certificate Student 31).*

> *It is a bit difficult to figure out what needs to be done to complete an assessment. Again, the face to face optional session with [course facilitator] really helped with this. (Diploma Student 10)*

3.3 Research question 2: What do the evaluations tell us about staff as students and their perceptions of teaching and learning and their own learning?

3.3.1 Transformed patterns of learning: From instructional paradigm to learning paradigm

Bass (2012) suggests that:

> A growing appreciation for the porous boundaries between the classroom and life experience, along with the power of social learning, authentic audiences, and integrative contexts, has created not only promising changes in learning but also disruptive moments in teaching. (Bass, 2012, p. 1).

An interesting point to observe in these results is the disruption which has occurred for some of the students undertaking this course. This point of disruption and transformation comes at the point where there is an acknowledgement of the shift between viewing teaching in a different light – moving from conceived notions of the instructional paradigm towards a learning paradigm. It is clearly articulated in their language as they talk about their discomfort, acknowledging perceived 'failures' of the course content getting "under my skin", of the work being at times frustrating, but at the same time acknowledging this point of disruption as a point of their own learning.

> *The full course has made me be much more aware of my teaching and has allowed me to reflect on the understanding and knowledge that I expect my students to know. It has enabled me to re-attack difficult content in a new light and has aided me to learn that sometimes it is through failure that we succeed. Because it is ok to make mistakes, we can learn much more, as we strive to work together. The various learning tools that we have learned about make for much more interesting and thoughtful classes. (Diploma Student 7)*

> *For the first time in my life I have reflected on my own way of learning and that has given me a very important insight into my students' learning. It has been a real voyage of discovery. The questions posed have got "under my skin", they have challenged me and I have to say it has been a wonderful learning experience. The tasks proposed are very imaginative and can be very challenging, as you would expect in this type of course. It is very different to any course I have done before and I have enjoyed every minute of it. (Certificate Student 20).*

> *Reflection is not a strong learning style for me so being forced to engage in reflective practices, while frustrating, was something I found beneficial in order to enhance my learning abilities. I enjoyed the use of the visual learning technique as this is something I enjoy and use within my own classes. (Certificate Student 16).*

3.3.2 Transformed patterns of learning: From teacher to learner (and learner to teacher)

The students undertaking this course are highly pressured academics and teachers working in third level education, often with full time jobs, families and so on. It has been an interesting exercise to observe the learning patterns of academics as students in this space.

Perhaps understandably, not all staff are comfortable with the shift from expert in their own discipline to perceived novice in SoTL. (Higgs and McCarthy, 2008), as is highlighted by this student:

> *There should be an appreciation that certain terms may be unfamiliar to those whose previous studies have not been in the humanities, e.g "reflection", "rubric", the implications of giving a word count (is it a maximum, a minimum, or a "ballpark figure"?). Some of us may be like First Arts students in some ways. (Certificate Student 24).*

Some struggled with the theory of the course:

> *The content is too abstract- this coming from a person whose research and teaching is theory based! (Certificate student 24).*

> *I find that the content of the module is highly theoretical with few concrete examples/tools for me grasp and apply in my teaching. There is too much 'thinking' and writing required with very little that I could say has improved my teaching in practice. (Certificate Student 5).*

> *Dramatic flourishes should be kept to a minimum. Landscapes, dinosaurs, Sherlock Holmes. Give me a break. If the pursuit is a scholarship of teaching and learning, this certainly does no favours in adding credibility to that end. (Certificate Student 3).*

> *Too many art analogies, would prefer more to the point (Certificate Student 21).*

Others found balancing time-frames difficult:

> *Given we are all busy with full-time jobs, the two-week window for discussion boards can be a little short (I missed one entirely) - it would be great if a 3-week window could be made available; if possible within the time span of the module. (Certificate Student 13).*

> *From a time-management perspective, I find it very tough to contribute to an online discussion as well as complete an assignment. (Diploma Student 10)*

Another rather common theme related to engagement and participation, and the online paradigm shift:

> *More feedback and engagement with the participants. We need to feel like we are getting what we are studying. I'm not sure as I don't know if my assignments are on the right track. It's very frustrating. (Certificate student 7).*

These comments are not to say that the onus is on the student to develop their sense of 'student-ness' and thereby getting us as facilitators and course designers 'off the hook'. But by viewing these comments through the lens of a transition from teacher to learner can also help in terms of course renewal, revision and also allow us as facilitators of the course to get a deeper sense of where these comments may be coming from.

Interestingly, the comment below suggests a smoother transition to the identity of 'student' – although as a diploma student, he or she had already completed a year previous undertaking the Certificate.

> *I really like the way the assessment is designed. It develops accumulatively with feedback from tutor along the way. This makes final submission less stressful and of higher quality, It helps us reach a better potential. (Diploma Student 4).*

Again, a diploma-level student articulates their learning as a part of moving towards a teaching identity:

> *I am finding this course very useful in shaping my identity as teacher at third level, I find the (some) of the interaction with my peers very positive, interesting and it gives me the fuel to find the time to engage on a deeper level. (Diploma Student 8).*

3.4 Research question 3: What light do these evaluations shed on how SoTL contributes to transformed patterns of learning and behaviour?

3.4.1 Transformed patterns of behaviour: From remediation to investigation

"Changing the status of the problem in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about" (Bass, 1999).

This was expressed by the students in a number of ways:

> *[The course] opened my mind to teaching and learning in a way that I hadn't thought of before. (Certificate Student 10).*

> *[I learned from] the space for personal reflection and critique on my own teaching practice and peer exchange (Diploma Student 4).*

> *Signature Pedagogies was a very useful and interesting concept. Peer teaching review provided a positive and worthwhile challenge. (Diploma Student 5).*

> *I found the TfU quite an interesting point. I found that it was something I was doing already while teaching but without any structure or particular theme. (Certificate Student 22).*

4   REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a snapshot in time of students who at the time of this data collection, were halfway through either their Certificate or Diploma studies. A transformative lens has provided a rich and multi-faceted framework through which to explore the experiences of students studying both courses.

While looking at an experience at a specific point in time was useful in helping to inform approaches to content delivery and facilitation in second semester, this is also limitation of the data: it can be difficult for learners to conceive of the bigger overall picture of their learning over time. The authors of this paper endeavour to follow this research with further tracking of student perceptions of their transformation at the end of the course and compare data sets. We also plan to triangulate the data further in terms of looking at the experiences of the facilitators of this course, and investigating their transformation through the same theoretical lens.

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