

From a Distance: Student Empowerment and Constructing Teacher Identities Online

Ayshe TALAY-ONGAN,

Institute of Early Childhood
Macquarie University
Sydney-AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

It can doubtless be argued that many pedagogically sound teaching and learning experiences have been and will be successfully constructed in the absence of online learning. Many such experiences however, depend on opportunities of teacher-student contact through lectures, tutorials and consultations. These face-to-face interactions over the length of a semester allow a personal sense of knowing to develop among the participants, and help forge a common goal and identity. Distance education students, by contrast, experience significantly less of the benefit of such interpersonal and continuous interactions. As off-campus enrolment may be related to lower academic achievement (Dickson, Fleet & Watt, 2000), the advent of technology compelled us to find ways and means of levelling the field and provide comparable learning experiences and environments to those enjoyed by their on-campus peers on principles of social justice and equity. Online learning through the WebCT platform enabled innovations and facilitations to provide the desired processes and outcomes for distance students; our perceptions and consequences of our common three-year journey are described.

Formal evaluations of these experiences as determined by university-mediated student ratings and these evaluations have been documented elsewhere (Talay-Ongan & Gosper, 2000; Talay-Ongan, McNaught, Edmonds & Gosper, 2002). This review discusses some qualitative evidence based on student and teacher online messages which support a pedagogical framework of ongoing evaluation inspired by reflection on lived experience, learning while doing, constructivism and situated learning in a learning community in which social and emotional support were amply available. This journey has been empowering, shaping and re-shaping the often-intertwined university teacher and pre-service teacher identities. Thus, for the purposes of this review, action evaluation methodology is in the forefront: the focus is on the development of professional graduate attributes, and professional identity in learners and in their teacher, derived more from pedagogy and relationships, with content contributing to these constructs to a lesser degree.

TEACHING AND LEARNING CONTEXTS

Students

The participants are pre-service early childhood (Bachelor of Education) teachers at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney. Of all our students, between one third to half are externally enrolled in the distance mode in each unit. While most of them reside in New South Wales, some are interstate students. Almost all of them are mature-age women with work as well as family responsibilities. Compared to their internally enrolled on-campus counterparts most of whom are high-school graduates with relatively high university entrance scores, academic rigour and computer competencies of these mature age students may be somewhat less polished. Each unit would have a yearly total enrolment of 150-200 students.

Aspects of Online Teaching

Online unit delivery allows both internally- and externally-enrolled students to access lecture notes prior to the lectures, to have prompt availability of digital recordings of the lectures through the unit web site, and participation in online communications in addition to basic course and assessment information, a schedule of weekly events and requirements

through the unit outline. These innovations already make the experience of external students fairly close to those of the internals, particularly because online materials were presented in addition to the regular two compulsory on-campus school days. Pedagogically, however, the most significant attribute of the online learning experience were the communication platforms through the bulletin boards and a private mail facility.

The bulletin boards were designed such that the function of the main/collective bulletin board, accessible to all, was to keep students abreast with the official weekly announcements made by the unit convenor, while all the participants were free to use it to make inquiries, share and/or respond with comments and items of interest to the community. The online tutorial bulletin boards, on the other hand, had groups of 30-45 students, each mediated and facilitated by a tutor. The students were expected to make their weekly application and reflection entries, which were framed by the case studies, vignettes and thinking points prepared each week on the online tutorials, to their online tutorial forums. Students were also encouraged to respond to each others' reflections to attempt to build arguments in connected discourses. A private mail facility allowed for personal e-mail communications between students and staff.

Characteristics of the Units

The two undergraduate core units equip students with particular skills and competencies in a) being critical consumers as well as producers of research (Teachers as Researchers), and b) becoming effective members of early intervention teams and teaching children with additional needs (Developmental Difference and Disability). The student perceptions, evidenced by anecdotes and propagated myths, indicate that both of these units are difficult and highly demanding learning experiences. As the unit convenor, I agree with students, although most understand only in the fullness of time that these are very carefully organized, minutely calibrated, delicately and progressively scaffolded, and collectively orchestrated learning experiences which provide students with essential, generalisable and transferable professional skills.

Instructional design and pedagogy. The conceptualisation and instructional design of both units were driven by principles of sound pedagogical practice such as constructive alignment (Briggs, 1999), collaborative and constructivist learning and teaching (Walker, 1995; Grabinger, 1996), contextualised and problem-based learning (Schank, Fano, Jona, & Bell, 1994; Herrington & Oliver, 1999) and integration of generic information and communication technology skills and information literacy skills into the academic preparation of university students (Bruce, 1998; Candy, 2000).

Instructional design allowed the students to submit a series of small-scale assessment tasks, each one forming the base skills and knowledge for the next. Accomplishments in successive steps with progressive feedback supporting the building of the major collaborative project meant growth over time, a framework for dynamic, scaffolded, mutually-constructed competencies. The students in both units had to produce an applied research project as a part of their assessment. The student research projects systematically analysed an aspect of the processes involved in constructing their knowledge and skills in the units as they negotiated their identities of 'researcher' and 'interventionist'. This initiative also allowed the students to learn by doing, as well as collect real-life evidence for their analysis and reporting. They were also asked to produce written records of their reflections at various stages of these projects as they matured.

The hands-on research projects integrated collaborative learning by having students work in three-member teams. Collaborative activities included online communications through the bulletin board and private mail geared to seeking clarification from other members of the community, data collection, electronic research, sharing of drafts, and face-to-face meetings where practicable. The team members assumed different but complementary responsibilities in collaborative inquiry and documentation efforts. In a process of multi-layered collaborative teaching and learning, a community of learners evolved, in which both the teachers and the learners were valued for their learning and jointly constructed the 'researcher' and 'interventionist' identities (Wenger, 1998). In both cases, the teams presented their reports to the larger group in conference days.

Although collaborative teams were reported to pose more difficulties for distance education students, online communication was the single most effective facilitator. Additionally, a voluntary on-campus 'collaboration day' was instituted for distance students for whom lack of adequate meeting opportunities hampered efforts in obtaining optimal outcomes. The travel time and effort were perceived to be highly worthwhile for these participants, who then continued to compile, analyse and produce their joint project online.

Empowerment: Content and Relational Contexts

Empowerment is a frequently used term, and usually suggests the ability of individuals to become aware of their powers to be a capable decision maker and feeling in charge, often facilitated by personal experiences and interpersonal relations. It can readily be argued that knowledge is power, and thus universities, among many other contexts of knowledge construction, are vehicles for empowerment for all students. Indeed, the content-specific information students acquire in one unit enables them to undertake academic study successfully (Teachers as Researchers), while the other prepares the early childhood teacher to assume the coordinating role in multidisciplinary early intervention teams (Developmental Difference and Disability). Yet, we have found specific instances of student empowerment through participation in these online units.

This additional dimension of empowerment was achieved through validation of student perceptions, feelings, reflections and conflicts in a supportive emotional climate, and warm interpersonal relations as expressed in online communications; indeed, expressions of emotion and sharing of personal experiences relevant to the contexts of learning were modelled and encouraged. Students were also encouraged to persevere in the challenges presented by the units, recognised and supported for their affective states, and a collective spirit of humour and sharing of vulnerabilities was welcomed. A true spirit of community of learners was built, in which students and teachers mutually contributed to the construction of knowledge in a safe environment. Additionally, students supported and scaffolded one another's learning, presenting their queries in a spirit of camaraderie. We found that attending to the emotional agenda, the underbelly of all human pursuits, had a facilitative effect as much for the students as for the teachers. A climate of high intellectual demand coupled with high emotional and communicative support appeared to be a winning formula. Such communications and affirmations, we felt, instilled collectively-developed, respectful and appropriate professional values. These are further explored below.

Analyses of Online Communications

Following analysis of online communications of externally-enrolled students has been performed by a tutor in the first-year unit Teachers as Researchers² in 2001. They are summarised here as they seem to corroborate other evidence presented in this review. There were in excess of 3000 messages on the unit web site during the course of a 13-week semester, nearly half of which were provided by 98 distance students. Many messages had the function of fulfilling the requirements of the unit by responding to set tasks. Other functions focused on information seeking or providing, and acknowledging and/or giving emotional support and motivation.

Students seem to feel empowered by completing the online modules (information skills online and essay writing skills), especially after completing their assignments. Of the 227 postings to one tutor's bulletin board, 77 messages (i.e., 34%) voluntarily stated that 'after completing abc task, I can now do xyz' with particular reference to other units and their professional lives as contexts. Many third year students expressed their amazement at how they had survived without this knowledge thus far, and how helpful it would have been to their study had it been in their first year.

It was also noted that the earlier messages emphasised empowerment through online and ICT skills and appreciation of being able to share all aspects of the course. Student messages towards the end of the semester tended to reflect on research and critical thinking skills, and application of these skills to wider contexts. The excerpts below are from student responses to tutorial tasks, which they were asked to post weekly.

I have learnt so much in the last few weeks, this includes how to use the

internet and all the components of the online unit. I have also learned heaps about working as a team from miles away.. ..keep it online- it is a great way of communicating with everyone.

....the unit has made me become more positive, organized and prepared for other subjects... I no longer feel fear when I approach the database section of the library home page...I believe that this unit is excellent for external students as for the first time I feel up-to-date and part of the student body. I believe all uni subjects should follow this example...

Over the weeks, it was evident that students became more enthusiastic and confident about their research projects and the value of doing the course as a whole. They also reflected on various research issues (reliability and ethics being the predominant ones) showing appreciation and concern over and beyond their own projects. By the end of the unit, many students seem to have developed a cautiously confident image of the self as a researcher.

I feel that if I was to be approached by someone at my workplace to conduct a research study for an aspect of my place of work, I would now feel more confident ... I feel that I have gained skills that will assist me in my further studies and career

Increasingly throughout the semester, the students posted messages which indicated their surprise and appreciation for the warmth and the support they were given by their teachers, and openly and communally expressed their thanks. Many saw their teachers as mentors and the unit as a journey, through which they had achieved heights they initially thought were unlikely.

Additional Evidence

At the end of the semester, the students were invited to participate in an online unit evaluation, which included open ended questions on the best aspects of the unit, and how it could be improved. This evidence suggests that the students experienced a journey from a sense of being overwhelmed and anxious to accomplishment and empowerment through self-application over the course of the semester. The italicised segments below from 98 external student responses in 2001 (same cohort as above) illustrate the prevailing views.

It [the unit] extended my learning abilities: programming and time management of topic areas that spilled over into my other units and have now become a study habit...Despite its intense and challenging format the unit is incredibly useful; a solid foundation to future studies.

OCS [on campus days] were extremely helpful and nurturing, and step by step progression was great. Thank you for the support and scaffolding of the teaching team. Your enthusiasm and motivation have helped me through what initially seemed to be an overwhelming subject.

...in Week 2, we were required to 'fake it till we make it' with [an] academic piece of writing including research terminology. I enjoyed the challenge and rose to meet it; it benchmarked the unit for me. I really enjoyed this unit and feel that not only will I benefit from the epistemology of the unit content, but also felt appreciated in the way I was treated, as a student, but also as an adult learner.

The way we did our assessments in small chunks was fantastic! ... it seemed so overwhelming but as we did each small assessment we slowly climbed the mountain and now we have almost conquered it. Overall, it was a fantastic unit [I] thoroughly recommend it, skills I have gained are going to assist my further

university studies so much.

Although I was at first put off about the online aspects of the unit, I gradually looked upon online learning as favourable and informative during my studies. The Bulletin Board is a good way of staying in touch and up to date with unit requirements. ECH 120 is step by step hands on learning which helps us make sense of the unit material in a meaningful way.

Negative responses too, are noteworthy; two students felt that the unit was a waste of time and had no relevance to early childhood, several complained of the workload, and a few students felt that it was too early in their university career to fulfil the objectives of the research unit.

EMERGENT IDENTITIES

Furlong, Barton, Miles and Whitty (2000) claim that there are three concepts that are focal to the notion of traditional professionalism which would extend to formation of teachers' identities: knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. Indeed, central to the epistemology of early childhood teacher education is the fact that as professionals, they need to cultivate these attributes. As Furlong et al. (2000, p. 5) aptly state, professionals face complex and unpredictable situations for which they need to apply a specialized body of knowledge autonomously. Autonomy, however, necessitates responsibility as well as the development of appropriate professional values.

Additionally, teachers' identities are intertwined with various contexts and collaborative partnerships they encounter as practitioners. While their primary engagement may be with a specific enterprise, they are constantly challenged to unpack how this configures within a broader scheme of things. Teachers' professional identities are rich and complex because they are produced in a rich and complex set of 'relations of practice' (Wenger, 1998, p. 162). In our applications, the notion of 'relations of practice' extended to the realisation of a significant and often understated dimension of learning and teaching outcomes mentioned previously: students' feelings of empowerment as teachers-in-training, by gaining abilities to assume various and complex roles as integral parts of their professional identities.

Students And Professional Identities

The journeys the students undertook in both undergraduate units were also vehicles for them to construct complex professional identities which were not readily associated with that of an 'early childhood teacher' in the more traditional sense of the word. The socio-political context which contributes to the re- shaping of teachers' professional identities in Australia may be the federal initiative The Teaching Accord of 1993 (Sachs, 2001, p. 160) which actively encourages and provides support for teachers' professional development, curriculum assessment and teacher-mediated research. Such initiatives naturally affect the academic ethos of pre-service teacher training programs. Thus adjunct professional roles and identities of early childhood teachers have emerged for students to incorporate. Of these, identity usually encountered in the first year of study, is that of the teacher as a researcher, and the second, experienced in the third year of study, is that of the teacher as an early childhood interventionist. Traditional modes of distance education make student collaborations and joint construction of knowledge, which are pivotal to forging of such identities, nearly impossible. The introduction of online learning makes use of these pedagogies possible for distance students, shaping their 'becoming-a-teacher' identities, as evidenced from their entries on the online tutorial bulletin boards.

Professionally, ECH120 encourages the students to research findings and be an advocate for children and the profession. Personally, it strengthens my IT skills.

Research is crucial in the field of early childhood as it facilitates our knowledge, teaching practices and theory, and enhances our stance as teachers....The old saying you can't teach an old dog new tricks is a fallacy; it takes dedication, and an open mind and a yearn[ing] to

investigate.

The tools provided will enable lifelong informed learning providing access to the latest knowledge in my field. They also provide the framework for conducting my own research because I now see every child as a project.

At the beginning I was a little worried about what type of role research would play in our job roles as early childhood teachers. I now know that I already do types of research when I network with other professionals in my field...

Similar student evaluations and sentiments are consistently observed each year by the teaching team.

Journey into A University Teacher's Identity

As the convenor of these units, I would like to reflect on my personal experiences throughout this time period, as it has impacted on my sense of self and professional identity. As a developmental psychologist well familiar with principles of adult learning, I was able to see myself as the facilitator of knowledge construction in my university classes; however, my knowledge base of pedagogy of tertiary teaching and my skills in unpacking the meanings compacted therein had to go through a substantial renaissance. For many years, I was comfortable to keep abreast of the literature that was pertinent to my psychologist identity, and felt no urgency to explore pedagogy. The process of teaching and my identity as an academic/university teacher were securely wrapped in the fact that I knew more than my students did.

Early feminist literature had been a part of my formative years. As a woman, I wanted to be a role model for my students, the overwhelming majority of whom were women. I saw myself as being compassionate, somewhat cynical towards power, competent in treating children and assisting families and knowledgeable in many aspects of development. Importantly, I saw myself, as having an ability to transfer knowledge which was perceived to be complex and beyond my students' usual experience (most notably clinical language, developmental neuroscience and statistics) in a student-friendly vernacular. I believed that the professional identity of early childhood teachers would get a shot in the arm, as their perceived status would approach those of the allied health professionals and researchers they interacted with, often in key roles, if they were able to communicate with them in a shared knowledge base and common linguistic currency. 'Knowledge is power' I said and wrote in hundreds of online messages. Critical cultural perspectives suggested that experiential learning in a particular cultural space was shaped by the discourses and their semiotics, thus according differential authority to different groups, giving me a framework to justify my position. But I was not ready to relinquish my power base relative to my students as I was still the perceived source of information. (Not having made significant progress on this front, a redeeming feature nevertheless, may be that the discourse I use nowadays appears to be significantly more reflective and ambiguous.)

Other distinct streams of experience have affected my professional identity in this journey. Firstly, I had to evolve from a novice and reluctant technocrat to a fairly able one. Online teaching has enabled me not only to become ICT and WebCT-literate, but also to manage large numbers of students and their transactions, and unit content through the computer. Secondly, I was not familiar with the literature which now forms the framework of my teaching; from being intuitive about good teaching, I have evolved to reflecting on and being continually inspired by theorists whose business it is to think and write on these issues. Neither of these experiences would have come about as a function of my identity as a university teacher had I not immersed myself, albeit critically at first, in the process and research of teaching online. And thirdly, through online communications I developed a personal communication style substantially different from the formal and reserved academic genre, to that of an affective, intersubjective, humorous, humanitarian and tirelessly enthusiastic style. Below is a sampling of my responses to student messages on line.

Nick, your reflections are a testament to growth; super!

Kris, how fun to do the laundry while research is your muse...terrific; us women are infinitely resourceful; hip hip hurray!

Hey my lovely students, congratulations on the commitment and endurance you have shown throughout your projects...Thank you for all your kind comments; your sense of fulfilment is air beneath my wings.

**My precious students; our lovely community,
We went through a bit of a rough ride which turned out to be a platform for personal reflection for quite a few of us, me included, in this week's materials (on prematurity and birth defects). Thanks to all those who enriched us with their personal tales....**

My face-to-face students in lectures and tutorials had probably gleaned these attributes; however, written messages online have enduring power, and thus can be shared by many in not-so-fleeting time slivers, limited only by the duration of the unit online communications. This also provided an opportunity for the students to respond to my messages. The eight extracts from online student messages below have been drawn from the portfolio submitted to the committee that evaluated my eligibility for an outstanding teacher award in 2002.

Your organisational and motivational skills are contagious.

Do you know that your generosity with your time, patience and wonderful sense of humour is very much appreciated?

Looking forward to another semester of full of inspiration and emotional enlightenment.

Thank you Ayshe for sharing your incredible story... [Your daughters] are so blessed to have such an amazing woman in their lives and in their hearts.

Dearest Ayshe, thank you for finding time (HOW do you do it??!!) to answer our RSPV. I would love to talk to you one day, as you always give me strength and positive feelings.

So again thank you for being 'the footprints on the sand' when we needed support on our journey.

This year I have been challenged and inspired by your teaching and enthusiasm...thank you for supporting our learning and being a great friend.

Just wanted to say how grateful I am -you eased my panic attacks. Your teaching practice and bulletin board messages have been an inspiration and if I can take on a very small part of your dedication then I will succeed.

Thus was forged the identity of a teacher who establishes authentic communications despite distance, proximity or student characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Online learning has allowed us to design learning environments and instructional methodologies for distance students in line with design principles for developing desired attributes in students of higher learning in general (McLoughlin, 1997; 2000). These principles include student-managed / learner directed learning, learning by participation and collaboration, transformative learning, problem-based learning, learning how to learn, and contextualised learning. Another most significant contribution of online teaching has been the opportunity to build a community of learners (Wenger, 1998), bound by high degrees of individual, small group, larger group and communal scaffolds with emotional, social and affective support structures, overcoming many challenges of distance education. Online information exchange platforms have been demonstrated to be an outstanding tool for building morale, sharing experiences to support others, motivating the students for

achievement and making the process of learning and teaching both relevant, and pleasurable. The interaction and the interdependence between face-to-face and online learning to achieve such empowering outcomes for distance students are reflected in these students' final evaluations. When asked to rate the quality of their distance learning experience in comparison to those of the internally enrolled students over the past three years in both units, the percentage claiming that the online experience was not at all satisfactory peaked at 6%.

Online teaching has provided us with renewed opportunities to revisit our teaching practice, thus making reflections and revisions imperative, for students near and far. Through calibrating our practice, we have come to grips with most of the favourable pedagogical implications of online learning and teaching for distance students, while hopefully, becoming better teachers in the process.

Acknowledgments

1. My heartfelt thanks to all my team members who have contributed to these units throughout our journey. I speak for us collectively with a note of bottomless gratitude to those students who nominated me for an outstanding teacher award at Macquarie University; an honour granted to me in 2003.
2. A teaching team member, Dr Jan Tent, undertook this section of the analysis of online communications.

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Contact address of author:

Ayshe Talay-Ongan, Senior Lecturer, Macquarie University, Sydney

E-mail: ayshe.talay-ongan@mq.edu.au

Phone (office) +61 2 9850 9827

Fax: +61 2 9850 9890

Interests of author: Developmental disorders, relational contexts of learning and facilitation, online pedagogy.

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