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This paper presents a qualitative research project, funded by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA). The project was designed to contribute to understanding around the intersections of digital literacy with teaching excellence, across four disciplinary clusters in Higher Education (HE). [We explored these constructs of teaching excellence and digital fluency by examining](#) the attitudes, conceptions and practices of eight tutors, working in: STEM; Arts and Humanities; Health and Social Care; and Social Sciences.

The project involved two very different higher education institutions (Universities of Suffolk and Surrey) to identify commonalities and distinctions. Both Universities have interests in tutors' digital fluency, [in](#) ease and confidence in use of digital tools and environments, *and* in relation to professional development towards 'teaching excellence'.

Analytical framework

A desktop literature review considered the constructs of teaching excellence and tutors' digital fluency. We focused on highly personalised conceptions of teaching, [and](#) as relating to digital fluency. We considered the 'expert teacher' in offering some close association to, and similarity with, the notion of an excellent teacher.

Personalised conceptions of excellence associated with the individual tutor

Teacher excellence might be characterised in the practices of an individual tutor, in creating the conditions for optimal learning and for learning to thrive. Skelton (2005) identified 'psychologised' understandings of teaching excellence focused on transactions between individual teachers and students. Further, Skelton (2009) suggested excellence involves the reflexive development of a personal teaching philosophy and should be conceived as part of the whole of academic life.

Shulman (2004) suggested the expert teacher not only knows the subject matter being taught, but also how to transform the particular subject being taught into terms students can understand. Meanwhile, Kreber (2002) connected expertise to excellence, in 'scholars of teaching', sharing knowledge and advancing knowledge of teaching and learning in ways that can be peer reviewed.

Weavers (2003) described the excellent teacher as one maximising each students' learning, utilising a wide range of teaching and learning approaches and supporting materials and encouraging students to experiment with different learning approaches. An awareness of specific student needs is identified as important, as well as the need for actively seeking feedback to critically analyse and take actions to improve.

We noted confusions between excellence in teaching and 'good enough' teaching (eg Gibbs & Habeshaw, 2002; Glasner, 2003). Gunn and Fisk (2013) identified a lack of sophistication in conceptualisations to accommodate changing expectations and roles across an academic career. Furthermore, they identified a lack of representatively diverse conceptualisations to mirror the differentiated nature of the HE sector, instead creating '*a normative universalising of teaching excellence*' (p7).

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Cashmore, Cane & Cane (2013) suggest the need for a flexible framework of criteria for teaching excellence, aligned to levels of seniority and stages in an academic career. Similarly HELTASA (HELTASA, 2015 p1-2) assert:

An excellent teacher is a reflective practitioner who has grown more effective over a number of years in relation to increasing knowledge of teaching and learning, experience in teaching and the facilitation of learning, and systematic observations of what happens in the classroom with a view to improving student engagement and learning outcomes. An excellent teacher has a clearly articulated teaching philosophy informed by educational theory and appropriate for the university context.

Gunn and Fisk (2013) identified emerging themes on teaching excellence since [the](#) CHERI report (Little *et al*, 2007) including: active research-teaching activities (Brew, 2007; Jenkins & Healey, 2007); dynamic student engagement and notions of student partnership; flexibility of provision and access to provision (Nichol *et al*, 2012); Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and the need to be evidence-based (Gibbs, 2008; Kreber, 2013) with SoTL involving students seen as ‘particularly’ excellent (Gale, 2007); and on leadership, both hierarchical and distributed.

Excellence in relation to digital literacy or fluency

JISC defined digital literacy as those capabilities which equip an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society (Beetham, McGill & Littlejohn, 2009). In the same JISC-sponsored report, Professor Peter Chatterton privileged pedagogy to inform practice in a digital age:

‘in a complex and fast-changing technological world, we must always remember that there are enduring principles of good teaching and ways of engaging students which transcend different media and technologies’ (Beetham, McGill & Littlejohn, 2009)

According to Skelton (2005), teaching excellence is inescapably connected to broader social and technological changes, highlighting the use of technologies as one of the significant innovations in teaching and learning (see also Hannan & Silver, 2000). Teachers confident with digital tools/environments can make a real difference to students’ learning and working collaboratively, interacting globally and facing the challenges of “supercomplexity” (Barnett, 2000). Beetham (2016) offers a set of digital capabilities as six interconnecting elements: linked to proficiency, information literacy, digital communication and digital identity. Devlin & Samarawickrema (2010) suggest engagement with changing technologies should be integral to claims of excellence. Laurillard (2012) emphasised a connective perspective between teaching, learning and technology, in the construct of teaching as a ‘design science’.

Methodology and method

Qualitative case studies are the basis of our research strategy, [exploring](#) how academics in a range of disciplines describe and experience teaching excellence and digital fluency, and how they make sense of them, within their natural settings (Geertz, 1973). The constant comparative method facilitates a systematic analysis for insight into differences and similarities across disciplinary clusters and at different kinds of HE institution. Moreover, the case study approach enables triangulation of multiple sources of data or methods (Denscombe, 2010).

Rich, thickly descriptive responses (Geertz, 1973) have been gathered from which elaborate case studies are being created. The case studies illustrate tutors’ unique development pathways towards digital fluency in relation to their own philosophies of ‘teaching excellence’: such as in the challenges encountered; and their individual conceptions of digital fluency in relation to their pedagogical practices. These are tutors who are using digital technologies and resources as part of their professional practice (Patton, 2002).

We augmented the interviews with audio-capture of five of the tutors using a ‘think aloud protocol’ (Eriksson & Simon, 1993) while engaging in authentic, design aspects of teaching involving digital technologies. The tutors verbalised their actions and reflections-in-action (Schön, 1983). Complementary data, has also been gathered in an open, online student survey at both Universities: on students’ beliefs and attitudes around teaching excellence and tutors’ digital fluency.

Conclusion

Within this study, we have foregrounded the importance of conceptualising teaching excellence linked to digital fluency, but in nuanced ways: eg across contexts of learning; as well as in individualised approaches. We acknowledge teachers' practical wisdom as situated, social, dynamic, and contested. We recognise teachers' conceptions need to be examined in relation to their sense of professional identity, and in their espoused beliefs and practices in teaching. Our study has also investigated the extent to which individual tutors' excellence might be mapped to digital capabilities as *transaction* with a focus on content; or as *transformation* with a focus on students' learning and conceptual change. The case studies assist in the recognition of digital fluency as an integral aspect of aspiring to teaching excellence at both universities.

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