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Early career academics' teaching intentions and practices during a worldwide disruption: initial findings from a longitudinal study

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Abstract: Rapidly shifting university teaching online during 2020 raised significant challenges for educators. This paper sets out to explore educators' experiences during this period, particularly how they navigated the move and the potential consequences for their teaching development. As such, it asks: How are early career academics' teaching intentions and practices affected during a period of unforeseen instability and upheaval? It draws on multiple interviews with 15 early career academics at a single research-intensive Australian higher education institution, from the first stage of a longitudinal study. An initial analysis of the data suggests the emergence of four key themes: a problematic experience of the disruption; significant adaptations to practice; a challenging experience of teaching online; and an espoused maintenance of prior intentions. The paper suggests that the period was largely focused on survival and that assumptions about practitioners' growth in online teaching should be viewed cautiously.

Paper: Introduction: The advent of covid-19 had outsized implications for the experience of university teaching and learning during 2020. For university educators, this involved a rapid transition to a fully online campus in the early months of the year, requiring that educators adapt to and deploy new technologies and tools to teach in an online-only space. How did this sudden shift and its complex circumstances influence how educators translated their teaching, and how might this experience shape their approach to teaching? This paper presents the initial findings from a qualitative PhD study exploring the experiences of early career academics (ECAs) during this period of disruption.

Literature: For ECAs, who may be at differing levels of confidence and intentionality in their development around teaching (Åkerlind, 2003), such circumstances may provide mixed opportunities. Being forced to employ new tools and modes of delivering content may create a climate conducive to reflective practice, encouraging educators to review and revise their intentions (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). However, we also know that informal learning remains random and unpredictable (Eraut, 2004; Slotte, Tynjälä, & Hytönen, 2004); faced with overwhelming demands, individuals may avoid meaningful reflection and prefer more survival-oriented approaches to teaching (Korhonen & Törmä, 2016). Complicating this are the personal and emotional aspects of teaching, the contribution which one's teaching identity plays in influencing work practices and teaching decisions. Critically, university educators may locate themselves within a virtuous moral discourse (Fitzmaurice, 2013), espousing an exacting aspirational vision of practice around teaching

work built around intense obligations to the profession and one's students (Archer, 2008; Calvert, Lewis, & Spindler, 2011). Such narratives, where adopted, have the potential to frame teaching through a prism of sacrificial commitment and self-subjugation that can be detrimental to an individual's wellbeing.

These forces, taken together, are of particular interest given the spectre of covid-19, where many teaching staff were asked to make significant adjustments to practice in little time. Meanwhile, their perception of their personal agency set against perceived structural constraints or norms may shape the adaptive choices they make. This raises the question: How are ECAs' teaching intentions and practices affected during a period of unforeseen instability and upheaval?

Methods: This question was explored through a qualitative study involving multiple semi-structured interviews with 15 early career teaching academics at a research-intensive Australian university during July-August 2020 and September-October 2020. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted using adaptive theory (Layder, 1998), which revealed four emergent themes: a problematic experience of the disruption; significant adaptations to practice; a challenging experience of teaching online; and an espoused maintenance of prior intentions.

Findings: The majority of participants were largely influenced by their pre-covid teaching intentions, seeking to maintain or replicate aspects of on-campus teaching, often driven by a desire to preserve a particular type of experience for students. However, there were elements of continued adaptation of practice, with several adjusting teaching significantly in response to student feedback or assessment. This included providing additional support sessions, adjusting time spent on topics, and providing more opportunities for student-student interaction. Educators often held mixed or negative views about the experience of teaching online, emerging partly from the shifting boundaries and loss of the interpersonal connection with students. Here, frustrations around student disengagement were pronounced, including the discomfort of being unable to monitor students and gauge their responses:

Most of the students now put their screens on black, which I understand... but without having that feedback it is really hard to talk into a black box for three hours at a time. (*Participant 13, Applied sciences*)

The findings suggest that participants' experiences may have surfaced pre-existing challenges around engagement, though few believed they had time, space or agency to meaningfully reflect or act on these issues. While most expressed growing comfort in using online tools, none believed that their underlying teaching goals or intentions had shifted.

Conclusion: This paper suggests that ECAs' experience may have been detrimental to their own teaching development in the online space. Even though the adaptation process was intended as a temporary workaround, many educators came to rely on their in-person expectations as a marker of the ideals and limits of what online teaching should resemble. Should these stopgap measures continue, there may be a disconnect between the ECAs intentions for online teaching and what universities believe they can do. This potential dissonance is important for universities seeking to continue and even expand the use of online teaching, especially in equating ECAs' survival teaching during 2020 with online teaching expertise.

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