Chapter 10

Arranging and Rearranging Practice in Digital Spaces:
Professional Learning amongst Teacher Educators

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ABSTRACT

The study that formed the basis of this chapter aimed to understand the practices mediating the quality of an online learning program from the perspective of educators in transition from face-to-face to online learning and teaching. A narrative community of enquiry was established for the period of the study, and seven academics from a single institution volunteered to participate in a six-month conversation about the sites for practice, challenges and curriculum decisions made while teaching online. A "practice architectures" perspective was adopted. The study found that "designing and redesigning" was not limited as supposed to a single transformation from face-to-face teaching to an online learning space. Rather, it was an ongoing professional practice, regardless of how novice or experienced and "tech savvy" the academic. The digital space is rapidly evolving, as are the professional learning demands of teacher educators. "Ambitious teacher practices" are permanently required.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade many studies have offered insights into the challenges of teaching online (Anderson, 2008; Conole, 2013; Salmon, 2011). By 2016 the field of elearning knew enough about itself to promulgate a "elearning maturity model" (Marshall 2013) as well as benchmarks such as those produced by the Australasian Council of Distance Education (ACODE 2014). On the journey towards maturity, some studies attempted to understand the process experienced by educators in transition from face-to-

face to blended and online teaching. Although slightly dated, these are important touchstones for this chapter and to understanding the nature of transitions of educators from face to face to online, blended and polysynchronous modes of learning.

Connolly, Jones and Jones (2007) argued that "e-Learning clearly creates new roles for teachers," and these new roles pose "challenging educational questions for pedagogy and the curriculum." These questions are "not simply a matter of taking traditional teaching materials and making them available electronically; instead it invites critical pedagogical, technological and organizational reflection and change" (p. 44). In their study of tutors transitioning to online teaching, Connolly et al., (2007) identified five categories of issues: Motivation for involvement, course design, role of the tutor, staff development, and issues associated with learning in higher education. The study concluded that:

The changes involved the development of teaching materials, discovering how to transfer and translate existing skills and knowledge into the online environment, understanding the strengths and weakness of the online environment, understanding and supporting the online learner and having to actively reflect on and act on personal pedagogic approaches to develop an appropriate blend (p. 54).

Redmond (2011) explored "the journey of two academics as they moved from face-to-face teaching to blended teaching, and then to teaching fully online courses" during the period 2007-2011 (p. 1050). Fundamental to this study was the view that;

[T]he transition to online teaching and learning from a traditional face-to-face approach challenges expectations and roles of both instructors and learners. For some instructors, when they change the place of teaching, they feel that their identities are under threat [and that] they are under pressure to re-examine their philosophy and their pedagogy" (Ibid, p. 1051).

The study concluded that "as the work of academics moves from a largely face-to-face mode to blended and online modes they should be provided with an opportunity to critically question their own practices and discuss with peers the adoption of new pedagogical practices for the new teaching spaces" (Redmond, 2011, p. 1085). This study engages with this position and recognises that the need to understand and build new teaching practices in the context of online and open learning sites remains acute; as professionals experiencing instructional transition need to interrogate the impact of digital practices on their personal and professional teaching lives and explore the opportunities for teaching and learning creativity that are available (Brennan Kemmis, 2006).

This Chapter values the tradition well expressed by Williams & Hayler (2016, p. 2) that "the collection of narratives from teacher educators who share their own varied and interesting professional journeys" contributes "meaningfully to the collective wisdom of the profession of teacher education". In the context of this Handbook, it might be assumed that narratives from teacher educators would be those not so much of a journey, but of arrival. After all, elearning is hardly new, and much has been written about it. However, those of us working in the heartland of academic development in the Australian context know this assumption to be in error. For some, the journey towards elearning has only just begun despite the maturity of the field itself. It remains entirely possible for an academic to teach using traditional methods without any recourse whatsoever to technology except perhaps a PowerPoint slide. It is therefore important for a Handbook such as this to resist the conclusion that educational practice concerning the uptake of quality elearning is at the same stage of maturity as those researching and writing about it –

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