Engaging postgraduate international students online: An autoethnographic reflection revealing lessons learned as an Early Career Academic

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Abstract

This article presents an autoethnographic account of a project implemented to increase online student engagement in a postgraduate organisational behaviour subject comprised predominantly of international students. Autoethnography provided a lens to critically explore my andragogical practice as an early career academic (ECR) engaged in teaching across multiple campuses and online in a regional university. Following Brookfield's (2017) process of critical reflection whereby the illumination of power is considered, my reflections are presented and the valuable lessons I learned are highlighted. This account aims to extend our sociological understanding of online student engagement and the challenges experienced as an ECR, while navigating the current higher education landscape. Practically, academics can benefit from the reflections and lessons learned from this study to stimulate their own learning and critical reflection of online teaching practices.

Key words*: Autoethnography; online engagement; early career academic identity; critical reflection.*

Introduction

The Australian higher education sector has undergone significant changes as a result of the uncapping of the volume of undergraduate student places (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013; Probert, 2016). This neoliberal approach presents challenges such as large cohorts of students who are not prepared for study at a higher level, the enrolment of students with low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores, low student retention, a reliance on sessional staff, financial challenges, and increased competition between universities (Probert, 2016). Both low socioeconomic student (SES) enrolments and overall student enrolments have increased suggesting that there is still a long way to go until parity in the share of higher education places is realised (Edwards, 2011; Naylor et al., 2013). Despite this positive impact on enrolment patterns some contend that the quality and sustainability of higher education is under threat, placing universities under pressure to identify policies and strategies that might support and encourage the continuous improvement of higher education (Edwards, 2011; Probert, 2016).

These changes to the higher education sector have also impacted upon academics as they are expected to innovate in their teaching, engage with global networks of scholars and with the commercial world while facing increasing workloads and the diversification of their roles (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011; Perkmann **Tartari, McKelvey, Autio, Broström, D'Este & Hughes**, 2013). Academia is now characterised as a highly competitive work environment and as tightly managed institutions concerned about accountability, control, measurement and impact (Aguinis, Shapiro, Antonacopoulou, & Cummings, 2014; White, Carvalho, & Riordan, 2011). This is viewed by some as breaking down the traditional culture of collegiality and collaboration. One paper describes the impact of the reformed neoliberal higher **education sector as the 'zombiefication' of academics, suggesting that academics merely** acquiesce to the corporatist line (Ryan, 2012, 3).

In response to the challenges, some academics are focussing on expanding the role of higher education to include developing students into employable graduates ready to work in a new world of rapid social and technological change (Business Council of Australia [BCA], 2011; Jackson, 2016; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008), while other research is suggesting academics are withdrawing to survive rather than organising action to these changes (Ryan, 2012). Probery (2016) insists on the need to re-conceptualise post-secondary education altogether arguing that in an era of universal participation teaching practices should be a central focus of the university **and with it the "development of academic skills and attitudes necessary for higher** education among these less well-prepared cohorts should be the focus of serious policy **review"** (p. 7). One way of preparing universities to demonstrate the quality of their learning and teaching is to provide academics with the tools to take responsibility for their professional development through supporting reflective practice in an ongoing and systematic way (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Probert, 2015). Reflective practice, critical reflection and or reflexivity has increased as it is now essential to responsible professional practice and can help academics take informed action, develop a rationale for practice, avoid self-laceration, grounds themselves emotionally, enlivens our classrooms and increases democratic trust (Brookfield, 2017, 22-26; Fook, 2007).

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, this study aimed to increase student engagement in a postgraduate organisational behaviour subject by using online tools. The second goal of this study was to convey through an autobiographical account an exploration and critical reflection of my teaching practices. Theoretically this study adds to existing knowledge about becoming a critical reflective teacher (Brookfield 2017). This is achieved by considering the illumination of power throughout the project. This study also adds to existing literature which follows an autobiographical approach to

examine their own teaching practices and provides lessons for further conversations. Through examining student engagement this study adds to existing research which considers how student engagement might be increased online while considering the interplay of social cultural elements (Kahu 2013).

Practically, academics can use the reflections and lessons learned in this study to stimulate their own curiosity and critical reflection of online teaching practices. For example, one of the lessons identified in this study was 'to turn the mirror inwards'. This means to put the 'you' back into the process of your teaching, remembering that your actions and beliefs can impact what is happening around you. The lessons learned detailed in this study can also be used to guide academics to examine the culture of their institutions and the impact this might be having on students.

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Literature Review

Autoethnography

Autoethnogrpahy is a qualitative research approach where the researcher is at the centre of the research process. Custer (2014) describes the method as reflexive and transformative whereby individuals explore their unique life experiences relative to social and cultural institutions. Used in disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and education, (Anderson 2006, Ellis and Bochner 2000, Etherington 2004, McIlveen 2008 and Roth 2005) autoethnography focusses on the lived experiences of the researcher as they embed themselves in the phenomenon being studied. Autoethnogrophy has a philosophical grounding in social constructionism where personal 'truth' is personal reality (McIlveen 2008).

Although autoethnography has gained some popularity as a qualitative research methodology, it is not without its critics. For those researchers stuck in believing that the only 'true' research is without bias or influence from the researcher, autoethnography as described by Ellis and Bochner (2006) is something they simply are not able to fully comprehend. Essentially, the users and readers of autoethnography are being asked to accept the fact that autoethnography requires examination of the subjective meanings of reality as constructed by the researcher and as such a single autoethnographic account "has no rightful purchase on generalisability", however, does have the potential to act as stimulation for profound understanding (Mcilveen 2008, 16).

Here in this research project I follow an autoethnographic approach to explore my teaching pedagogy by implementing a strategy to address an observed lack of student engagement in the online teaching environment and then critically reflect on my practice. In the following section, I have detailed 10 lessons learned from my journey to engage the reader in their own personal reflection. I chose this method for two reasons. First, this form of ethnography allows the research process to be very much about the expectations of the project as well as the journey of the researcher. Being an early career researcher, this gives me the opportunity to explore the observed issue of student engagement while critically reflecting on my teaching practices as they evolve with my career as a management educator. Secondly, with a large focus on critical reflection and a constructionist evocative approach to conveying my journey, this aligns with my view of and understanding of truth and reality.

To follow an autobiographical approach, I begin by having a conversation with myself and examining my current mental model about my teaching practice. Mental models are defined by Rook (2013, 42) as a "concentrated, personally constructed, internal conception, of external phenomena (historical, existing or projected), or experience, that affects how a person acts". A person's mental model should be constantly examined and re-examined as it can provide opportunities for learning

about our constructed realities and world view. In following my world view of online teaching pedagogy at the time, I implemented interactive discussion board tasks, and observed student participation. By reflecting in action about my impact on engagement throughout the semester I was forced to revise my practice. Following the process of critical reflection as described by Brookfield (2017) and keeping a diary of my journey through the project, I experienced a moment of realisation about the power of social context and personal beliefs on my actions. The ways in which academic's lives are being impacted by changes in the higher education sector is explored through critical reflection of my teaching practices, extending the sociological understanding of academia and online student engagement.

Reflection

Reflection in education is important for both teachers and students learning. For lecturers, it can provide links between what is to be taught and achieved and what is needed to improve student learning. Reflection in the learning and teaching context has been described as a process of turning experience into learning through "exploring often messy and confused events and focussing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them" (Boud, 2001, 10). Donald Schon (1984, 1987) argues that effective practitioners continually reflect on experiences and learn from them. Referring to this approach as 'reflection in action' he argues reflection develops practitioners as researchers in practice where reflection takes place on time so that there is still time to benefit and change the situation (Schon, 1983, 1984, 1987). This process has been recognised in the learning teaching literature as good pedagogical practice for professional development.

In applying Schon's thought to academia I can see links with Peter Senge's view of a learning organisation. Senge (1990,3) describes a learning organisation as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together". For me, bringing this view of organisations to academia will enable reflection in action to become a reality through the creation of a learning environment, and a vision for both students and lecturers to be learners. Senge further states that (1990, p. 14) "Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we reperceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life". This quote resonates with me and how I view the world. Through learning I believe that anyone can recreate themselves and that is what I am aiming to achieve in this project to continue to do through my career as an academic. Senge (1990) also describes a process of unlearning, I intend to put unlearning into practice through reflecting on my current thinking and approach to teaching so that I am open to unlearning my current views and relearning a new mindset. This will prepare myself for teaching in my future. This view is supported by literature in 'learning centred leadership' where the primary focus in on ensuring those that are responsible for student learning should be learners themselves, and preparing students for a changing world by understanding one's own learning (Stoll, 2001; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003).

Critical reflection

More recently the focus has shifted from 'reflection' to 'critical reflection' and understanding how this might be applied in becoming a reflective practitioner in education. While critical reflection has been defined in many ways Fook (2007) identifies two main ways of being critical with reflection. The first involves unearthing, examining and changing very deeply held assumptions (Mezirow 1991 as cited in Fook 2007). The other way of being critical is through recognising the role of power and how power

operates (Fook, 2007). The second approach to being critical is about considering how assumptions about the connection between oneself and society and the social context can function in powerful ways (Fook, 2007, 2016).

Brookfield (1995) writes on critical reflection and states that good critical reflection focusses on three interrelated areas. The first relates to the questioning and reframing of assumptions that previously were uncritically accepted (Brookfield, 1995). Secondly, the process through which adults take on an alternative perspective on previously taken for granted ideas, actions or ideologies. The last area relates to when adults realise "the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values and understand how self-evident renderings of the natural state of the world actually bolster the power and self-interest of the unrepresentative minorities" (S. Brookfield, 1995, 376). Adding the element of 'critical' to reflection in practice makes the process a whole lot more complex requiring deeper contemplation and in my view the ability to be open to unlearning and relearning.

Brookfield's (2017) updated edition of 'becoming a critical reflective teacher' goes into more depth on areas such as what constitutes assumptions of power and hegemony, while also including the social media landscape implications and the way in which reflection is endemic to effective leadership in the 21st century. It is the chapter on power that when setting out on my journey remained in the back of my mind. Critical reflection as the illumination of power is about recognising that the dynamics of power permeate all educational processes and that forces in wider society always intrude into the classroom (Brookfield, 1995, 2017). Brookfield (1995, 2017) describes classrooms as contested spaces made up of contradictory crosscurrent struggles for material superiority and ideological legitimacy. Critical reflection as the illumination of power is about unearthing the ways in which power invades your classroom and teaching practices through struggles of trust and equality in the student teacher relationship, through knowing when to remain silent in the learning process, in understanding how a teacher view of experiential methods might impact student participation and through knowing the power and respect for voice (Brookfield, 1995, 2017). It is these elements of power that are contemplated throughout my journey of critical reflection.

What is student engagement?

Student engagement has several different meanings and has been conceptualised from different perspectives. According to Kahu (2013) there are four dimensions to student engagement: behavioural, psychological, socio cultural and the holistic perspective. The behavioural perspective is the most widely accepted view of engagement as it emphasises effective teaching practices and student behaviour (Kahu, 2013). The psychological dimension views engagement as the psycho-social process within a student that evolves over time and takes into consideration the interplay of context and individual, between engagement and its antecedents including elements such as cognition, emotion and conation (Kahu, 2013). The socio-cultural perspective explores the impact of the broader social context on engagement including understanding the impact of disciplinary power, academic culture and a focus on performance on engagement. The holistic dimension has evolved out of a paradigm shift in education where practitioners are striving to draw together diverse strands of theory and research to understand student engagement (Kahu, 2013). Bryson and Hardy (2009) on the other hand describe that what institutions do is 'engaging students' and what students do should be called 'students engaging'. Kahu (2013) argues against this by suggesting that what is the process is a cluster of factors that can influence student engagement and the outcome is student engagement- 'an individual psychological state' (Kahu, 2013, 764). Student engagement is explored through my teaching lens and approach and considers each of these perspectives. I view student engagement from a holistic perspective and provide evidence for this through my reflections on my teaching practices using guided questions and tasks which draw together all dimensions including

my perceived impact on their engagement and the interplay of socio cultural elements including academic culture (Kahu, 2013).

Method

The Master of Business Administration degree attracts many students with a large percentage being international students. The degree is taught across many campuses as well as being available to external students online. Generally organisational behaviour attracts student enrolment numbers of around 200 each semester it is offered. This semester, semester 2 2017 there were 120 enrolled students.

To go through this journey, I chose to focus on the identified problem of student engagement in the online learning environment. To make the project manageable I have chosen to reflect on student engagement through their participation in asynchronous discussion board activities. Research has found that students value the connections made using the blackboard online discussion forums and that asynchronous nature of the tasks provide flexibility, self-directed learning opportunities and the ability for the students to interact frequently with each other and myself (Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah, & Beutel, 2011; West, Waddoups, & Graham, 2007). The discussion boards will be used to engage students through study groups. Brindley, Blaschke and Walti (2009, p. 9) found that through collaborative learning using smaller groups in the online environment a sense of community is created '…which has been shown to be closely linked to learner satisfaction and retention'. Students were put into groups online based on their enrolment location (campus) and were encouraged through regular announcements to participate in online discussion board tasks. The discussion board tasks included reflective questions, critical analytical tasks, and questions directly relevant and helpful for answering their assessment tasks. Some tasks were written by myself while others were drawn from the assigned textbook 'Organisational Behaviour Emerging Knowledge and global Insights' by McShane, Olekalns, Newman, & Travaglione (2015).

An autoethnographic approach

One of the main goals of **autoethnography is to 'offer lessons for further conversation'** (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 218). Ellis and Bochner (2006, 433) describe Autoethnogrphy as a journey where "collaborative sense making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning". According to McIlveen (2008) an ideal method of autobiographical narrative should meld together theory and experience to as to provide a comprehensive rendition of the authors experience, transform the author through self-explication and inform the reader of an experience that they either never endured, or have endured in the past, or are likely to endure in the future but, have been unable to share this experience with others. This is the aim of the research project. In light of the recent developments in higher education and the professional struggles I was experiencing, this research project was a method of fully embedding in the academy and making sense of my journey into the academy while also aiming to increase online student engagement. This is achieved through examining prior knowledge of my teaching practice, considering new understandings and critically reflecting on the changes to my teaching practices. I will construct new knowledge through the process of reflection, dialogue and inquiry. The overarching guiding question for my professional learning journey is: *What can I do differently in my teaching practices and approach so that students can be engaged?*

Several questions were used to guide the critical-reflection. These questions were developed using many different sources and may act as triggers for my critical reflection (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Driscoll & Teh, 2001; Heath, 1998; Kitchen, 1999; Michigan State Board of Education, 2017; Parsons & Brown, 2002; Schon, 1983; University of Sydney, 2017). When I was writing my reflective journal over the 12-week

semester I would review these questions would answer them relative to how I was feeling about my teaching practices at the time.

Results and discussion

Paradigmatic assumptions are assumptions that are deeply held within individuals and used to understand the world through ordering or categorising (Brookfield, 2017). Some of the paradigmatic assumptions that I hold about teaching are that there should be a good balance of didactic and student-centred approaches. Zhang (2004) supports this view and states that it is through this balance that students of different learning styles and teaching preferences are accommodated. While I strive to create a comfortable and interactive learning environment where students can engage with the material and are given the time and tools to learn and make meaning of material, I also believe that there needs to be a didactic transmission of knowledge and information. This means that my teaching practices are very much aligned with the learning theories cognitivism and constructivism. This is because I believe that people learn and make meaning of the world around us through interactions and experiences **with others (constructivism), and that when the teaching is 'student centred' students** can take on what is being passed to them so that they are building on prior knowledge and internally assimilating the new information (cognitivism). This is achieved through a combination of lecturing and workshop techniques where the student can listen and then question and learn. I use multimedia to represent real world problems and case studies that enable students to reflect on the applicability of the material in the classroom to situations outside the classroom including the workplace. I ask students to reflect on the material each week and consider how the content might apply to them personally and in the context of the workplace. In undertaking this project, I reflected upon my teaching philosophy, underwent a journey of unlearning so that I might find effective ways of engaging students and further developing my professional identity as an early career academic. This lead to my first realisation stated as lesson one.

Lesson one: unlearning is important for learning

Using the online learning software provided by the university I put students into groups based on their location and then I developed several interactive discussion board activities. As stated previous the discussion board activities varied in terms of interaction and each group had the same assigned tasks. Tasks included: critical reflection, activities to discover their own behaviours in management as well as organisational behaviour news articles and questions to force their connection with the subject material. These activities were asynchronous to allow students to participate frequently with other students and myself and to give students time to thoughtfully compose their responses before posting them online (Heirdsfield et al., 2011). Groups were established to create an online environment of collegiality and support within students (Brindley et al., 2009; Heirdsfield et al., 2011). Just after implementing my discussion board activities early on in week 5, I stated in my reflective journal how much of a positive attitude and enthusiasm I have toward this project:

> *Since beginning this task I have noticed that my own engagement has increased. I have found this both surprising and a good effect of what I am implementing. Because my engagement is increasing through implementing this action project, I feel that my teaching is better. By better I mean that I am more enthusiastic and proactive in finding new ways of explaining the content and examples for organisational behaviour theories.*

On the 22nd of August 2017, in week 6 of semester, I received a phone call from one of the Melbourne campus lecturers who stated because of my new activities he had

taken a proactive approach to the teaching of the unit. He said that because he could see I am trying to engage students in activities such as reflection, he has organised a critical thinking and reflection workshop at the Melbourne campus. I wondered if this could be the beginning of my impact on engagement, but rather than impact on students, I realised that my engagement in this process is going to have a broader impact, to the lecturers I work with at other campuses.

Lesson two: a subject coordinators engagement can influence tutor team engagement

Despite this positive feedback, my enthusiasm plummeted when I realised that my eagerness and motivation had not transferred to students as far as any increase in the number of posts on the discussion boards. My initial thought was that I was not **having the impact on student's behaviours as Kahu's** (2013) behavioural perspective of **student engagement might suggest. Reflecting on Kahu's** (2013) student engagement conceptualisation further, perhaps the student engagement online will evolve over time thus exhibiting characteristics of the psychological dimension.

The only group actively participating at this point in the discussion board activities by week 6 were the externally enrolled students. I started to think about why. In terms of my teaching practices, I had implemented and taken the same approach across all groups. Perhaps it is because external students crave extra interaction in the online environment as they are external and do not get the face to face attention that the other students have access to? A review of literature on student motivation in the online learning environment found that there are several factors that impact on a **student's motivation to participate in the online environment** including geographical location, communication and technology issues and a lack of support services (Lee, 2000). On the other hand, other research found that gender and age and partly ability play a role in the degree of activity in online bulletin boards but motivation was not (Hoskins & Van Hooff, 2005). I decided to send an email to the other campus lecturers encouraging them to show students the groups on learn line and explain how they can benefit from them. Perhaps face to face students prefer a personal approach to teaching and like to be shown and encouraged by their lecturers, not the coordinator through announcements coming from afar. I thought that this might mitigate the geographic separation issues and communication and technology concerns identified by Lee (2000).

By week 7 my frustration was growing. I went to a lot of trouble to develop interactive discussion board tasks that will genuinely help them. So why are they not **participating? Considering Brookfield's** (2017) description of prescriptive assumptions my assumption about this situation is that students should be participating frequently. In a way because I have gone to the trouble of making changes for their benefit I feel that students should be obliged to participate (Brookfield, 2017). External students are still the only group actively engaging with each other and the set tasks in the discussion board posts. The other students have barely engaged with the online discussion board activities.

To question what is being said and not being said and to examine what impact this might have I decided to have an open discussion with colleagues about the lack of engagement in my subject (Cunliffe, 2016). I spoke to colleagues from all disciplines in the business school (accounting, economics, law, management and marketing) asking them: In your professional opinion, why do you think students are not engaging in my discussion board activities? Their responses included:
1. If there are no marks involved students are less likely to engage
2. Students are lazy these days
3. Face to face students feel that they get enough engagement in class and therefore do not use the online environment
4. There is a distinct learning different between internal and external students

5. Academics need to stop focussing on engagement so much because it is not important if students are not attending class.
6. Discussion boards are impersonal
7. Students need to be shown the benefit of engaging.

While this feedback was not all positive I believe it was an important part of the learning process to have these conversation with colleagues. This lead to lesson three:

Lesson three: foster collegiality by exploring pedagogical practice with senior academics

A couple of these points have stuck with me and triggered some critical reflection in terms of my teaching views and the impact they might be having, but also the culture **within the business school itself and how this impacts students'.**

After all, as a management educator I know too well the importance of understanding culture and the impact it can have on my actions. The significance of this understanding was recently supported by Nahavandi (2016) highlighting the importance of culture being about developing a cultural mindset reflecting on the way people think about themselves, others and our actions. If my colleagues and the general culture within the school aligns with the points above, my colleagues and I are essentially projecting that students are not obliged to do anything. Lesson four therefore highlights:

Lesson four: culture within a business school can influence student culture

If I unpack this further, contemplating Brookfield's prescriptive assumption description it means that if as a business school academics assume that students are lazy, then as a lecturer there is no obligation or encouragement to undergo critical reflection and make improvements to our content and or ourselves (Brookfield, 2017). This means as school lecturers might be blaming students for being lazy rather than critically reflecting on our teaching practices. Another paper I reviewed found that **business school ethical climate can influence a student's unethical behaviour** (Birtch & Chiang, 2014). The researchers found that an ethical climate was a significant predictor of unethical behaviour. This is something that could also be applied to explain my context in that the culture of the business school including how the staff feel about the motivations of students impacts upon the way in which staff behave and ultimately our teaching practices.

I can relate to some of the points made by my colleagues. Relative to point 5, I have noticed a marked decline in my face to face class attendance so perhaps I do need to take a step back and look at attendance issues. My belief is however that students are adults and I believe that they can make the informed choice to attend and participate, so how do I overcome this?

Then it hit me while I was teaching a class, I was lecturing on the 'the self-fulfilling prophecy' theory developed first by Merton (1948). It is suggested that a self-fulfilling **prophecy occurs when 'our expectations about another person cause that person to act in a way that is consistent with those expectations'** (McShane et al., 2015, p. 84). In the context of this project it means that the expectations I have of my students, my perceptions of students can influence reality. Studies have also reported this self-**fulfilling prophecy occurrence in teachers' initial expectations of students and** the impact these had on the self-perceptions of those followers which can lead to higher or lower performance (Rubie - Davies, 2006). I believe that this self-fulfilling prophecy **also links to Brookfield's** (2017) **'critical reflection as the illumination of power' in that** power permeates all education processes, intruding into the classroom much like

teacher's thoughts and beliefs about teaching and students. My views of students being adults and self-directed learners means they are just acting in that way and are choosing not to engage in the discussion board activities. My thoughts have projected into the realisation that I am now facing, unearthing the reason for lesson five.

Lesson five: use management theories to understand your own practice

Relative to point 7, I did not think for one second that I would have to explain so explicitly the benefits of engaging as it seems so normal or logical to me as a lecturer. This view may also link with the fact that lecturers believe students engage more when discussion board posts are linked to grades as they could see the tangible benefit of participating. Research supports my thoughts as some studies have found a positive **correlation between a student's visible learning behaviours through participation in** online activities when linked to learning outcomes (Picciano, 2002; Wang, 2004). Brookfield (2017) suggests that critically reflective teachers will regularly try to see **what they do through the eyes of a student. So, when I put myself in a student's position and reviewed the work I have set with a student's eyes, I** realised you need a reason to fit more tasks or activities into an already very tight time schedule.

Lesson six: view your teaching pedagogy from the students perspective

I recall a discussion I had with a student on the discussion board about the role of lecturers and the university in helping students be flexible and adaptable future **employee. The student stated:'…Subjects are jam packed as they are, how** the different fields could **include these attributes into their schedule'.**
So perhaps the discussion board tasks are viewed as an extra work component with no benefit.

My moment of realisation came because of a phone conversation I had with a **colleague after the week 7 meltdowns. They bluntly stated, 'failing to get students** engage is never the students fault, it is the lecturers fault. You need to try some new **strategies. You need to experiment'. Up until this point I have solely focussed on** students not engaging and the reason why but the real focus goes back to what my original research question was - What can I do differently in my teaching practices and approach so that students can be engaged? In this moment of critical reflection, I realised that my mindset must change from blaming students for not engaging and focussing on myself for not engaging. Blaming students was enabling a self-fulfilling prophecy situation to occur. Alternatively, I began to wonder if it is my casual, laid back approach to instruction which might influence students to take this same relaxed approach and not participate.

Lesson seven: turn the mirror inwards

I spent some time reflecting and contemplating the words my colleague had said. For me this really means focussing on my teaching methods and my thoughts about academia. Reflecting deeper I believe that it is my approach and mental model about the challenging Australian higher education landscape and academic culture of which I am trying desperately to be a positive contributing member of that is having an impact. I think that it also must do with the interplay of power between my role as a teacher **and them being a student. My students' perceptions of my superiority are not something** that I can wish away for students (Brookfield, 2017) and so when I am actively contributing to these discussion board posts with them they may feel threatened. I believe **that these variables link well with Kahu's (2013) socio cultural perspective of** student engagement, which focusses on the impact of the broader social context on student engagement. Here I am also suggesting that the broader social context impacts on lecturer engagement which can then transfer over to a lack of student engagement through enabling self-fulfilling prophecy occurrence.

Lesson eight: the connection between oneself and society can influence our beliefs about teaching

Culture is generally thought of as the foundation of the social order and systems of the world people live in and the rules people abide by which can influence both individual and collective work practice (Schein, 2010). I can honestly say that this is not what I envisioned an academic culture would be like. The culture within academia is characterised by problems of accreditation, regulation, rankings, cuts to research funding, teaching and administrative support, the impact of online open access, the push for work integrated learning and stronger industry linkages along with the increased pressure to publish in high ranking journals and linking this with promotion possibilities leaving teaching at the bottom of some academics priorities (Aguinis et al., 2014; Jackson, 2016; Naylor et al., 2013; Probert, 2016; Wilson & Thomas, 2012). In my opinion, these place academic in either a fight or flight mode. Ryan (2012) describes my thoughts perfectly in her paper describing academics as zombies, the walking dead helpless in response to the overwhelming changes and uncertainty in the higher education sector.

Recently, in a special issue for the Academy of Management Learning and **Education business schools' legitimacy and impact was examined** (Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). The issue brought together research and essays which highlight challenges for business schools such as attracting and retaining the best faculty (Hong & Honig, 2016) the question of impact and closing the gap between management research and practice (Birkinshaw, Lecuona, & Barwise, 2016) the drive for sustainability education (Snelson-Powell, Grosvold, & Millington, 2016) and a call for business schools to lower their walls and engage more deeply and meaningfully with other faculties and departments as a way of building business school impact and legitimacy (Currie, Davies, & Ferlie, 2016). **In addition, Hall, Argawal and Green's (**2013) research found that in Australia business schools are facing insistent pressure to change internationally so that they become more dynamic, innovate and responsive to succeed. Reflecting on these points from the perspective that I am a management early career researcher in a small regional university, I personally felt that it is even harder to accomplish and address these challenges given the limited resources. This means greater planning is needed as more pressure is put on academics to take on extra work to fill gaps in administrative support. For early career academics, it becomes a survival of the fittest (Browning, Thompson, & Dawson, 2017). With the increased casualisation of the higher education sector, early career researchers have no choice but to but to juggle several casual contracts just to get by while publishing in the wings to get a foot in the door (Bazeley et al., 1996). After all it has been suggested that there are more exits than entries into academia (Ryan, 2012).

This all has an impact on my approach to teaching. Academia is evolving, and in my opinion, it is not for the better. A culture of collegiality is being replaced by self-interest, managerialism and an institutional focus on accountability, control, measurement and impact (Aguinis et al., 2014; Ryan, 2012; White et al., 2011). This impact upon my motivation and teaching practices potentially transforming me into a **surviving zombie (Ryan, 2012), perhaps it's at this point I should refer back to lesson** three- collegiality is not dead, I just have to continue my exploration of pedagogical practices with other academics. After all engaging is a team effort (lesson seven).

What can I do to make students engage then? I think it is going to be an ongoing journey of self-discovery to muddle through the impact that the current higher education climate is having on me. In the meantime, with all of this in my mind I decided to go back to what my colleague said that brought me all to this realisation, a lack of engaging is the teacher's fault. So, on the 25th of September, I decided to do something different, I gave the students an incentive. I created a forum in which

students must post to access two journal articles that will help them with their last assessment. I just hope that this will be enough incentive and motivation to get them to participate as I feel this goes against what I believe is effective teaching practices and I am sure it raises some ethical issues.

This is the point in my journey where I observe and reflect on my final attempt this semester to engage students through the online discussion boards. To gain access to two journal articles directly relevant to the last assessment for the unit, students were required to answer the question and justify their answer with examples- which do you believe comes first, strategy or structure? The students could have used what they had learned from weeks 9, 10, or 11 to respond. In total, there were four responses. This is a 3.33 % response rate. To say that my frustration had reached a new level would be an understatement. I was not sure of how to reflect upon this dismal response so I reviewed the list of guiding reflective questions I developed at the beginning of the project and one prompted my thinking: are my teaching methods appropriate for the students I have? Perhaps this is something that I have failed to appropriately consider in my teaching practice. Although my paradigmatic assumptions about teaching are centred on a balanced approach of didactic and student-centred approaches, being critical of my practices I do not believe that I have carried this over into my actions in this online project. The approach that I took to this online teaching project was that students are self-directed learners and therefore do not need didactic instruction. I think I was wrong the whole time. I believed that by using technology, students would response favourably. In thinking this I truly believed that the students would engage because they are adult learners. I have failed to examine the student cohort closely for the demographical components which could be impacting upon their motivation to participate. I have also realised that in my original assumptions about teaching I did not consider that I may need to consider that the online learning environment requires a different teaching approach pedagogically. I truly believed that using technology would **enhance a student's learning** experience, but it really only has the potential too, there are many other variables to consider. I was wrong and therefore note this in lesson nine.

Lesson nine: technology does not guarantee enhanced learning or engagement

The use of digital technologies in teaching and learning practices in higher education provides universities with the tools to connect to a global audience. From a sociological perspective e-learning can have an impact on the experience of learning and social learning perspectives (Brown & Adler, 2006; Laurillard, 2006), communication **practices and impact on individual 'life time'** (Selwyn & Facer, 2014). From a pedagogical perspective e-learning and digital technologies are influencing and changing the roles and responsibilities of both lecturers and students in the teaching and learning environment (Hedberg, 2011; Nworie & Haughton, 2008; Selwyn & Facer, 2014). Although contemporary digital technologies continue to evolve, a critical debate continues in the literature about the use of digital technology and e-learning in higher education and whether it provides value and guarantees learning. It is clear to me through my critical reflection that it does not guarantee learning or engagement. Learning is not guaranteed just by integrating or adding technology to teaching. There is value in digital technology and e-learning but its value is dependent on many variables. Variables such as lecturer and institution buy in, critical reflection of the appropriateness of different technologies for each course, and a framework for assisting lecturers to assess the value of different technologies and make informed choices on its efficacy for student learning (Bates, 2016).

Lesson ten: when using digital technology consider the benefits and potential problems of doing so

Despite the observed lack of student engagement in the discussion board activities across the semester, I received an email in the last week of semester that left me feeling more positive about my approach to teaching:

> *I requested you to check my assessment and see if there is a chance for improvement of my grades. I just want to say thank you. I am the same student whom you gave an appointment one day prior of the assessment submission day. You are the teacher who always sees to the point that each problem of the student is solved. You are always active online solving student queries for students like me. Mam, I am grateful to have a teacher like you who sets an example of how helpful a teacher can be. My grades are increased as a result.*

To finish this project with an email from a student giving me positive feedback has given me the motivation that I need to continue my journey of critical reflection for professional learning.

Conclusion

While I had good intentions for this project, the outcomes were definitely mixed. Never did I imagine that unlearning my current mindset about teaching would be so hard and yet so rewarding at the same time. This journey has enabled me to reflect upon my paradigmatic, prescriptive and causal assumptions (Brookfield, 2017) and explore the impact of the broader social context including understanding the impact of disciplinary power, academic culture and a focus on performance of engagement (Kahu, 2013).

Despite everything that I tried and the enthusiasm that I brought to the project students still did not seem interested in using the discussion boards. I unearthed an ugly problem of a spiralling self-fulfilling prophecy of the perceived negative social cultural aspects of academia described **as 'zombiedom' and a culture that is being** created out of fear, uncertainty and constant changes to the higher education sector. This ugliness invades our minds, views and ultimately our actions and through our beliefs about students and teaching it is transferred to the actions of those students that universities are attempting to shape into future managers. There were many lessons for further conversation to take away from this project. One I would like to reiterate is that the teaching philosophy and pedagogical approach I applied to my online teaching was my face to face classroom pedagogical that I now realise needs to be altered and developed innovatively for the online learning environment. This is something that I will endeavour to develop in my journey to becoming an effective and productive member of academia.

The project was in my opinion not all doom and gloom. Throughout the reflective process, I was able to identify areas for future research. Through my experience and the lack of student participation in the online environment, I recommend that future **research explore the variables that impact upon a student's decision to engage in their** university studies. Through critical reflection another gap was revealed in the lack of research understanding and measurement of the student motivations for participating in assessable and non-assessable activities. Linked with this, I believe is the need for lecturers to consider and understand the specific student cohort each semester so that they may completely understand how to increase their engagement and overall learning experience. These areas of future research just might give early career academics the best chances to adapt and get a head start in becoming the next leaders of academia.

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