

From Student to Teacher: Building Professional Development Resources for Sessional Teaching Staff

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***Abstract:** Sessional teachers are the front line of university teaching – the staff members with whom undergraduate students have most direct contact. The quality of sessional teaching is therefore crucial in determining the overall quality of students' learning experiences. In order to improve the quality of sessional teaching – tutoring, laboratory demonstration and marking – in key Engineering and related disciplines, we developed an induction programme that focused on helping sessional staff members approach their teaching roles professionally and develop relevant teaching skills. In this paper, we describe the structure of the induction programme, a set of flexible online resources designed to continue flexible skill development, and feedback from current sessional staff members. Preliminary results suggest an increase in sessional teachers' confidence and awareness of the professional requirements of teaching roles.*

Introduction

Sessional teachers play a crucial role within the University system, acting as the main point of contact with the University for many first year students, and providing the majority of one-on-one learning opportunities. However, they are often untrained and underprepared for their role. The work required of sessional teachers is complex, in that they are expected to transition quickly and accurately from being a student to being a teacher. They must provide appropriate support for our diverse classes, which include international and domestic students, high school leavers and adult learners, who are all dealing with their own transition concerns. Within this environment, they must offer both generic approaches to academic study, and discipline- and course-specific support. And in addition to mastering the pedagogical context of their discipline, sessional teachers are must also learn (and instruct on) how to use education technology within their courses.

This means that these junior staff members require a broad and complex set of skills. At the same time, whether as senior undergraduates or as postgraduate students, they also face the pressure of completing their own studies. This requires them to achieve a certain level of efficiency in their teaching activities.

In this paper we describe our experiences in developing an ongoing support program for sessional staff that takes a reflective professional development approach rather than an instructive one. This approach is based on the idea that the most important thing for sessional teachers to do is take ownership of their teaching responsibilities, and construct their work as tutors, markers and demonstrators as that of a professional teacher.

Background

Teacher training for sessional staff members has been common for some time in the US and UK. Historically, it has been less so in Australia and New Zealand. However, in the last ten to fifteen years

it has been recognised that sessional teachers – tutors, laboratory demonstrators and markers – are frequently the first and most prominent point of contact with the University for students, particularly first-year students, who are most vulnerable to poor teaching. In light of this, universities have begun to understand that sessional teachers need to know more than just their subject matter. They must also have strong, effective basic teaching skills that reflect the student-centred approach currently used in the tertiary sector (Kift 2003). To this end, universities have begun to develop training programmes for sessional teachers.

The most common format for such programmes is a formal, structured teacher-education course, involving an induction day followed by a series of meetings, tasks and evaluations, which sometimes leads to internal recognition of completion (Carbone, 1998; Stern, 1998; Barrington, 1999; Herbert, Masser & Gauci, 2002; Smith & Bath, 2003; Pavelich & Streveler, 2004; Harvey et al, 2005; Kirley, 2006). These courses can be university-wide or discipline-specific: in the late 1990s, the University of Auckland developed Tutor and Demonstrator Training Certificates comprising nine hours of mandatory training in small-group teaching skills, six hours of elective modules, and a requirement to seek formative feedback from students (Barrington, 1999); the Computer Science and Software Engineering Department of the University of Melbourne produced a similar programme comprising a mandatory Professional Development and Training day, a series of follow-up workshops focused on teaching skills, peer and co-ordinator observation of teaching, and SET feedback from students (Kirley, 2006). Some training programmes are also supported by formalised hiring procedures (Kift, 2003).

While such programmes usually receive positive feedback from sessional teachers, and improve teaching skills, they also have some drawbacks: sessional teachers, as HDR students or practicing professionals, can have difficulty attending training sessions due to study and other work commitments; attendance may be hindered by a department's inability to pay sessional teachers for attendance; and generic training can be regarded by the target audience as inappropriate or inapplicable for a given discipline (Anderson, 2007). Some groups have therefore trialled more flexible, but equally effective, approaches that focus on professional development rather than training (Coombe & Clancy, 2002; Rice, 2004; Anderson, 2007; Rainsford & Ng, 2009). We therefore decided to combine elements of the two approaches to produce a structured induction programme concentrating on the immediate transition to the professional role of teacher, and a set of sustainable online resources that aims to develop teaching skills and increase new sessional teachers' sense of ownership of the professional role.

Method

After completing a literature review and deciding on a format of structured induction session and flexible online support resources, we ran a series of focus groups with experienced sessional tutors, demonstrators and markers from relevant discipline areas to inform the development of both resources. Experienced sessional teachers from Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, Mathematics and Mechanical Engineering were invited to participate, with 6 to 9 from various areas attending each focus group. Participants were asked a series of 10 structured questions, with key questions designated as:

1. How did you feel when you started teaching?
6. What do you wish you'd been told when you started?
9. What things would you tell new tutors, based on your own experiences?
10. If the Faculty were to develop more support resources for sessional teachers, what sort of things would you like to see included in them?

The discussion was recorded and a rough keyword analysis was used to identify common responses.

- Responses to question 1 focussed on nervousness, uncertainty and fear (especially of not knowing the answer to a student's question, and of what to do if challenged on OHS issues).

- Responses to question 6 focussed on preparation issues (particularly the amount of time needed to prepare adequately for content issues, and the need to plan delivery).
- Responses to question 9 focussed on preparation, the need to draw on one's own memories of being a student to inform teaching, and the need for access to resources to prepare adequately (e.g. a chance to do pracs before a lab session).
- Responses to question 10 included: a formal induction into the teaching role and information on job parameters; classroom management advice; tips on self-presentation; a 'dry run' or role-play scenarios with the course co-ordinator; knowing what to expect; ways of dealing with OHS issues; and content delivery techniques.

When asked improvised probe questions on the characteristics of 'good teaching', these sessional teachers also gave responses that correlated strongly with student-centred teaching practices:

One of my interesting experiences in tutoring in Puzzle-Based Learning ... is to say, 'No, I don't know the answer, but let's try and solve it'.

...draw on what you know is going to happen in the course in the future: 'this is what you see now but wait until two weeks' time and you'll see this'.

You let them know they can ask any questions they want to ... I make sure that I go through things thoroughly, and not necessarily [assume] that they know stuff.

This was also the case when the exercise was repeated with new sessional teachers later in the project.

Finally, the focus groups identified a need for ownership and an understanding of their responsibilities as a teacher. In clearly stating the need for sessional teachers to feel respected by their students, and detailing how this can be achieved through preparation, reflection and development of teaching techniques, they also articulated their own need to respect their students and the job that they were performing.

To enhance sessional staff members' degrees of ownership of and engagement with the program, we adopted the following key principles in its design and development:

- to include sessional teachers in the design and development of as many resources as possible, thus creating an environment in which experienced sessional teachers could assist commencing teachers in understanding and developing their roles, and share context-specific knowledge; and
- to integrate as many resources as possible with discipline content, providing real examples that are directly applicable to the day-to-day work of sessional teachers.

Induction Day

Induction or professional development days for new sessional teachers tend to focus primarily on teaching skills, with information about professional roles and responsibilities presented in a short segment focused on Occupational Health and Safety issues. However, this paradigm conflicted strongly with the feedback from our focus groups, which suggested that as new teachers, they wanted the initial focus to be on the responsibilities of their professional roles, and the transition to teaching. We therefore focussed the induction session on the information and skills that would be most relevant and useful to new sessional staff members in their first few weeks of teaching.

The induction day comprised three parts. The first part was a general introduction to the role and responsibilities of a sessional teacher; the second part was a set of workshops focused on teaching skills relevant to particular roles (tutor, laboratory demonstrator, and marker), each of which was run twice; and the final part was an informal lunch with lecturers and experienced sessional teachers. Additionally, a handbook for sessional teachers that summarised the material presented during the day and listed some key tips and basic teaching techniques identified as helpful by the focus groups was prepared and a copy given to all participants.

The introductory session began with an icebreaker activity and a discussion of the parameters of the roles of tutor, lab demonstrator and marker, and what activities fall outside of their limits. Particular

attention was given to points where a student's expectations about what a sessional staff member can do might conflict with the actual limitations of their role – for instance, in the ability to grant extensions on assignment submission deadlines. The introductory session also included basic information on Occupational Health and Safety responsibilities (and liabilities), and Equity and Diversity responsibilities, as well as general administrative information applicable across the University.

The second half of the introductory session outlined some basic teaching strategies, particularly focusing on the issue of preparation. The new sessional teachers were encouraged to consider the rationale for teaching particular content, and the need to make the course a coherent, meaningful experience for students. However, relatively little attention was given to specific discussion of student-centred learning techniques or specific educational terminology. This was partly because, as mentioned above, the new sessional teachers were already aware of these teaching and learning techniques and familiar with them as the paradigm of 'good teaching'. However, the strategy was also chosen as a way of demystifying teaching and avoiding overloading new teachers with technical vocabulary and complex ideas.

The session closed with a series of scenarios designed to explore the application of these new techniques and role parameters (these were not presented in 2010 due to time constraints; however, two example scenarios are illustrated in Figure 1).

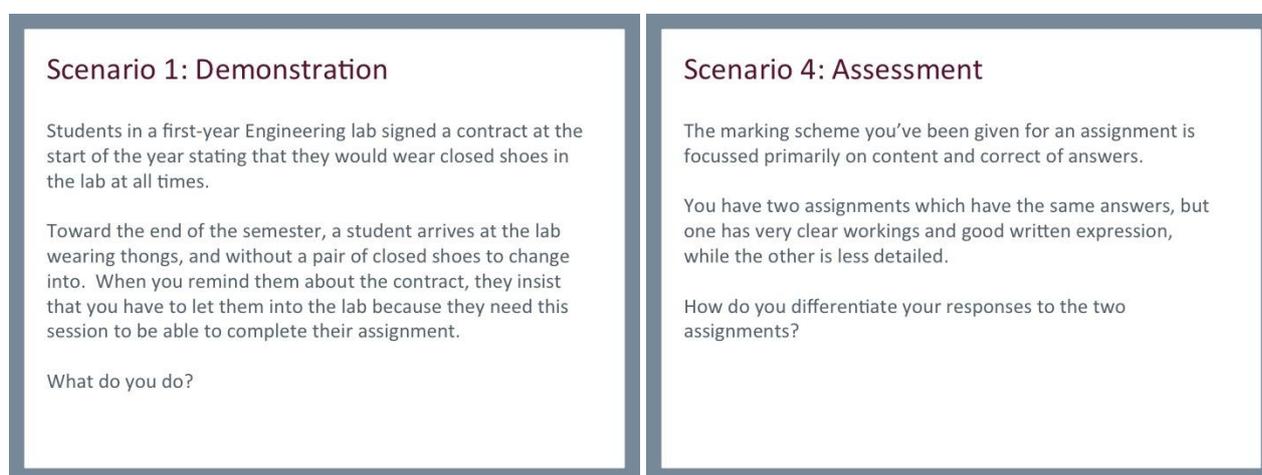


Figure 1: Example Scenarios from the Induction Session

Following the introductory session, the new sessional teachers divided into groups based on their teaching roles – tutor, demonstrator or marker – for workshops presented by lecturers and experienced sessional teachers. The tutors' workshop focused on role-play exercises and tutorial planning; the demonstrators' workshop focused on one-on-one interaction and questioning techniques; and the markers' workshop focused on constructive marking methods and giving feedback. Each workshop was then repeated so that sessional staff members whose work covered more than one role could attend another relevant workshop.

At the end of the induction session, the new sessional teachers completed an SET form. Results indicated that they felt that:

- the content and teaching materials presented in the induction day were valuable and relevant;
- the sessions developed their teaching potential;
- the workshop was taught at an appropriate level;
- the sessions should be longer and the amount of content in each should be increased; and
- the workshops should always be presented by teachers with expertise in the specific subject areas.

The new sessional teachers also appreciated:

- the chance to talk with other tutors and demonstrators;
- the chance to see that 'my difficulties are normal difficulties';
- the chance to see things 'from a teachers perspective rather than a students' [*sic*]; and
- the focus on what teachers are for (i.e. not just giving answers).

As a result of this feedback, in 2011 the induction session will be run again, with the introductory session and workshops lasting 90 mins each. It will include more and more detailed content, but this will still be presented in lay language.

Online Resources

The online resources developed to complement and follow on from the induction session have been designed to provide ongoing opportunities for sessional teachers to reflect upon their teaching, explore basic self-presentation and classroom management techniques and – perhaps most importantly – share their own knowledge of what works within their classrooms and disciplines. They were informed by comments from focus group participants regarding the type of support materials they would prefer. The focus groups identified a need for education in basic classroom management techniques – particularly skills that would build teachers' confidence and enable them to deal with problems in classroom behaviour or unexpected directions that their classes might take. Common concerns included "*remembering what I had to teach*" and "*being outclassed by the students*", and classroom management:

"I would've liked to know about how to manage behavioural difficulties in classes as well, because it actually made me really stressed out the first time that I was tutoring"

The focus group participants and induction SET responses also identified the importance of learning from peers, and being able to discuss teaching difficulties and concerns with other sessional staff members. As one participant stated, "*That's what I would have liked to do – see someone who does it well, and then you can learn strategies for how to handle the class...*"

The final key issue identified within the focus groups was the need for preparation, including preparing lesson plans covering how material will be presented to the class and what activities the class will undertake. The focus group participants clearly identified the role of preparation in offsetting potential classroom difficulties and building teacher confidence.

These points were used as the basis of a set of online resources for markers, tutors and demonstrators. Some of these support resources are generic – applicable to all four disciplines involved in the project – and some are specific to various disciplines and roles. Generic resources were frequently presented as lists of 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs) focussing on areas of concern common to new teachers, such as classroom management and student engagement. However, they also included a library of tutorial plans written and submitted by experienced sessional tutors, which were intended to be used, adapted and added to in turn by new sessional teachers.

Discipline-specific resources were designed to be more interactive. The resources developed for tutors included not only FAQ lists, but also:

- a tutorial-planning resource designed as an online story, allowing tutors to respond to common classroom scenarios, and then reflect on their decisions and the consequences of those decisions for their students;
- a short video on how to develop and present mini-lectures (a key skill for tutors in Electrical and Electronic Engineering and Maths), supported by photo-essays on effective whiteboard use; and
- an introduction to the 'crash course' tutoring technique (Willis, 2009).

Specific resources for demonstrators included:

- a series of video clips illustrating common scenarios in Computer Science laboratory sessions, and possible responses to them, performed by current laboratory demonstrators (shown in Figure 2); and
- a set of protocols for conducting Computer Science practical exams, written by current Computer Science laboratory demonstrators.

Markers are commonly the largest group of sessional teachers within a University; however, they are also the group least likely to be engaged with or given support resources in training programs.

Accordingly, we developed several resources focusing on marking techniques. These include:

- advice and tip lists based on marking advice given by course co-ordinators;
- an interactive resource allowing new markers to try marking 'constructively' (i.e. by giving marks up to a pre-determined total based on correct elements of the answer) and 'punitively' (i.e. by subtracting marks from a pre-determined amount based on errors), and comparing their results for each style;
- examples of marking short-answer questions, with a focus on how to respond to an answer in which the student offers contradictory information; and
- advice on how to mark using assessment matrices (i.e. comprehensive marking rubrics).

These resources will be made available to all sessional teachers in the Faculty via a Moodle forum, which gives them the ability to contribute their own comments, feedback and resources to the project, and to discuss any teaching issues they experience with their peers in open discussion forums.

Conclusion

While our induction day and online resource collection are still developing as support resources for sessional teachers, the response to them so far has been positive. Feedback from sessional teachers involved in the early stages of the project is promising: those who have contributed resources to the project appreciate the ability to pass on their knowledge, while those who are starting to work as sessional teachers feel both less alone and more prepared for their classroom activities. New sessional teachers have also indicated an appreciation for being able to build upon the knowledge and resources generated by experienced sessional teachers, rather than being expected to 'reinvent the wheel' for themselves. The project has therefore assisted in developing a culture of professionalism and respect among sessional staff members. An ongoing issue, however, is the considerable amount of time and effort required to work with sessional staff member to produce resources. Accommodating this will be an ongoing requirement in order to continue to produce relevant and appropriate resources.

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