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## Promoting change: professional development to support pedagogic change in sessional teaching staff

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### Abstract

The use of sessional academic staff, contracted semester by semester, has become a characteristic of the Higher Education landscape across the world, and it can be argued that this type of employment, in itself, disadvantages staff in taking up formal and informal professional development. Academic staff employed on a sessional basis often have extensive experience in teaching and bring with them practices and approaches they believe are 'tried and true', and, depending on their career stage, their enthusiasm and willingness to interrogate their own practice and adopt changes to their pedagogy may be low. When UTS:Insearch sought to introduce a new pedagogic approach to deliver content to students it was discovered that, in addition to developing changes aimed at students, implementation of a new professional development model that addressed the issues surrounding the sessional nature of our academic staff's employment, their career stage, and their beliefs and values of teaching was required. This model is teacher centred and directed, uses student progress as evidence of efficacy of new approaches and actively supports and encourages involvement in professional development activities. While the program is still in its infancy, early indicators are that the approach is, albeit slowly, achieving its aims.

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## 1. Introduction

Like most Higher Education institutions in Australia, UTS:Insearch relies on sessional academic staff to deliver its programs to students. These teachers work on semester by semester contracts, and the amount of work they receive in any given semester is dependent on operational needs. Some teachers work exclusively at UTS:Insearch, while others undertake additional work at other institutions or within their own professional practice areas. This arrangement between an educational institution and teaching staff is not unusual and has increasingly become a characteristic of the Higher Education landscape worldwide. It is also viewed as contributing to a “deconstruction of academic professionalism” (Marginson in Courtney 2013) that leaves sessional academic staff disadvantaged in taking up formal and informal professional development opportunities (Courtney 2013).

In 2013 UTS:Insearch identified the need to embed technology enhanced delivery of content to students, and a crucial starting point for this project, which commenced in 2014, was the creation of a technologically innovative teaching culture amongst academic staff. Strategies were adopted to encourage them to learn about this more student-centred approach that was hoped would better and more ‘naturally’ embed technology enhanced learning strategies that engage students, and staff, enhance our students’ learning experience and more authentically prepare them for future study and work. While this was largely successful, this shift in approach was more the result of Subject Coordinators, who have responsibility for the day-to-day management of subjects, adopting the approaches and incorporating them into lesson plans. While paid professional development activities to support these approaches were a regular feature these appeared to be ‘tick the box’ activities for many of the academic staff who attended, with little or no evidence incorporation of new strategies into their face-to-face work with students.

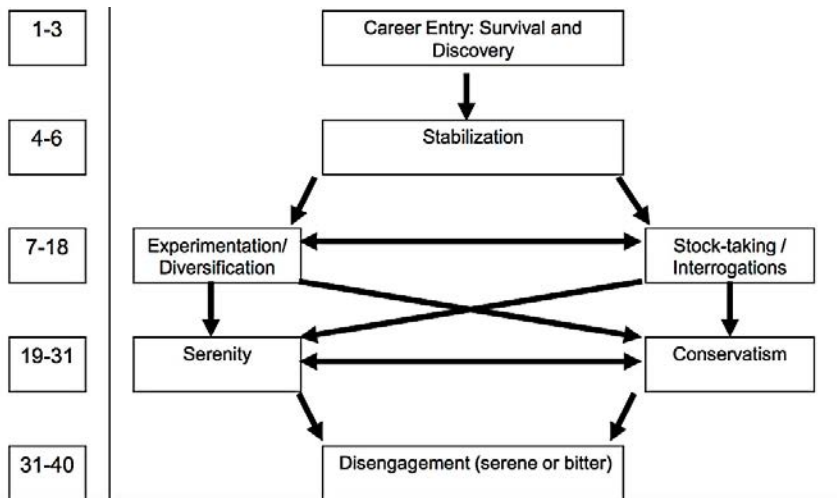
The challenge being faced in developing better professional development opportunities for staff are the competing needs of the organisation to implement new teaching strategies and approaches to content delivery, and the priorities sessional teaching staff place on professional development. The average age of teachers at UTS:Insearch is 47 years, with the average length of time worked at the organisation being eight years, in addition to previous teaching other organisations. For many of these teachers, work at UTS:Insearch falls towards the end of their teaching careers where some are unmotivated to learn new approaches. This is additionally compounded by the unpredictable nature of the teachers’ sessional employment which can create a tendency for some to feel there is little personal gain in modifying habitual practices or adopting new pedagogic practices.

## 2. Understanding the complexities

Understanding how to best situate an approach to professional development activities required understanding both our staff’s reluctance to take on new approaches to their practice, and their reluctance to engage with new technologies. Our initial approach was to use Huberman’s framework of teacher career development, however it was also important to understand the basic beliefs that may be driving teacher change, or reluctance to change, in relation to their practice and the uptake of new technologies. These understandings are important in framing the provision of future professional development opportunities for staff that support the innovative teaching culture the institution has sought to create.

Huberman’s framework delineates five stages that teaching staff move through during their careers.

**Figure 1. Huberman’s Five Stages of Teacher Career Development (Joerger 2010)**



When examining data on total years of teaching for individual teachers based on a survey of 66 teaching staff (44% of the total academic sessional pool), it becomes apparent that the majority of our sessional teachers are in phases 3 and 4 of Huberman’s framework.

**Figure 2. Survey of UTS:Insearch Academic Staff Total Teaching Years**

Huberman’s Phase	Number of UTS:Insearch teachers
1 ‘survival and discovery’ (years 1-3)	1
2 ‘stabilisation’ (years 4-6)	4
3 ‘experimentation/activism and stocktaking’ (years 7-18)	31*
4 ‘serenity’ or ‘conservatism’ (years 19-30)	23
5 ‘disengagement’ (30+ years)	7

\*of these teachers 73% have taught closer to 18 years in total.

Teachers in Huberman’s 3<sup>rd</sup> phase of “experimentation/activism and stocktaking” may have one of two orientations. They may experiment with teaching and assessment strategies and content and may seek to expand their involvement in education by seeking leadership roles. Alternatively, they may reflect on their inventory of teaching ‘accomplishments’ and consider whether or not they have the time in their careers to make any changes to their practice, with some exhibiting more negative attitudes towards professional development and change (Joerger 2010; Richter et al 2011).

As in the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase, teachers in the 4<sup>th</sup> phase of their careers may also have one of two orientations. Those who become ‘serene’ begin to lament the changes in their activism, enthusiasm and energy, but also have a strong perception of their professional ‘selves’. For teachers in this phase, intergenerational differences with students can also impact on their teaching and interaction with students. Alternatively, teachers may become more conservative, rigid and stubborn and exhibit great reluctance to accept innovation and change. Some become increasingly discontented with issues relating to the profession, such as institutional policies and what they consider to be the ‘commitment’ of other teachers and students (Joerger 2010; Richter et al 2011).

These findings, and the effects different stages have on teacher uptake of professional development and change, are further supported in a study by Maskit (2011) who developed a profile of teachers’ attitudes towards pedagogic changes that indicated lower attitude levels towards pedagogic change in the ‘Career Frustration’ and ‘Career Wind-Down’ stages (roughly analogous to Huberman’s ‘serenity/conservatism’ and ‘disengagement’

phases). Maskit (2011) concluded that:

“Teachers at these professional stages experienced a decline in professional satisfaction, as well as a lack of motivation and ability to accomplish professional tasks. These stages are characterized by decreased energy, limited professional activity and feelings of work-related fatigue and de-professionalization. These characteristics do not lead to a positive attitude toward implementing pedagogical changes.”

Understanding the teaching staff’s stage of career development and the possible impact on uptake of professional development was one aspect considered in devising a professional development model to engage teachers and encourage adoption of pedagogic change. Teacher beliefs, a valuable construct within teacher education (Kim et al 2013), are crucial when contemplating the creation of effective programs, as “teachers’ perceptions and beliefs are the most significant predictors of individual change” (Smylie 1988 cited in Opfer et al 2011). Opfer et al (2011) suggest that when teacher beliefs are important for practice they manifest as values representing what the teacher gives high priority to in their practice. Teachers are more likely to consider evidence and professional development that support their existing beliefs and orientations than they are to consider evidence and professional development that contradict them (Chin & Brewer 1993 and Tillema 2000 cited in Opfer et al 2011). These values are personal characteristics that each teacher brings to their practice, and, like values and beliefs in general, are resistant to change – change usually a result of a ‘gestalt shift’ (Pajares 1992 cited in Kim et al 2013).

Research has also found that teachers’ beliefs about learning are acquired through their practice and experience with students (Opfer et al 2011), with most teachers equating being a ‘better teacher’ with enhancing student learning outcomes rather than in terms of themselves or other criteria (Guskey 2002). Significant change in practice is more likely to occur with evidence of improvements in student outcomes, with the successful implementation of a new approach to teaching and learning, rather than the professional development itself, leading to changes in beliefs, attitudes and values (Opfer et al 2011) and ultimately changes to practice. Thus teachers look for “specific, concrete and practical ideas that directly relate to the day-to-day operation of their classrooms” (Fullan and Miles 1992 cited in Guskey 2002). Professional development is also better conceptualized as being delivered with teachers, rather than to teachers, situating teachers at the centre, empowering them to develop agency for continued learning, and adjusting to meet their beliefs, values and knowledge (Easton 2008; Webster-Wright 2009 cited in Poskitt 2014) rather than providing professional development activities that are isolated and where teachers are passively receiving information from ‘experts’ that they then implement in classrooms (Flint, et al 2011).

The final aspect to the professional development puzzle at UTS:Insearch relates to the uptake and integration of technologies by teachers. Kim et al (2013) found that even when teachers received substantial and sustained professional development, levels of integration varied widely. Hew and Brush (2006 cited in Ertmer et al 2012) delineated three barriers to the integration of technology by teachers: resources, teacher knowledge and skills and, significantly, teacher attitudes and beliefs. Research has uncovered patterns of teachers with constructivist beliefs using technologies to support student centred learning, while those with more traditional beliefs used technologies in a more teacher centred manner (Andrew 2007; Hermans et al 2008 cited in Ertmer et al 2012). Because the levels of technology integration are dependent on teacher beliefs about the efficacy of technology in addition to their basic epistemological beliefs about teaching and learning, change is unlikely to occur without ‘gestalt shifts’ where teachers can observe improved student outcomes as a result of the integration of technology into their teaching practice.

### 3. Discussion

UTS:Insearch’s preference for engaging long-term teaching staff may be considered a ‘double edged sword’ as these experienced teachers seem less likely to closely interrogate their own teaching practices and take on board information and practices from professional development activities. Additionally, the sessional nature of employment may influence some to prioritise short term goals that are achievable within the period of their employment (a single semester), rather than invest time in more long term changes to their practice. However, UTS:Insearch is strongly committed to creating a culture that will support a learning environment that fully prepares students for the digital age in which they live. This necessitates our teachers moving to a pedagogic approach to content and delivery that is not rooted in the ‘pen and paper era’ (Resnik 2015), even though they may feel little personal investment in changing their practices and adopting new technologies.

Research has shown that workshops and in-organisation training can leave teachers feeling disempowered and unable to direct their own learning (Flint et al 2011). The approach at UTS:Insearch was to provide teachers

with 'PD Days' where information, determined by the Scholarship and Professional Development Committee, would be presented, that was then expected to be taken on board and implemented i.e. a linear perception of teachers participating in professional development "leading to change in belief, change in practice and then change in student learning" (Desimone 2009; Guskey 2002 cited in Opfer et al 2011). This managerial and technical approach had little impact on teachers' adoption of the pedagogic approaches the institution sought to have classrooms, so the creation of a professional development model that was more collaborative, learning centred and related to practice (Flint et al 2011) was needed, making content more accessible and open to the "complexity, range, and variation of professional development based on teachers' self-identified needs and interests" (Timperley et al 2007 cited in Flint et al 2011).

With the various factors of teacher stage of career, beliefs about and non-linear changes to practice, willingness to invest in new learning and adoption of technologies, and the need for more teacher centred and directed professional development, a model was created that recognises that change will be gradual and difficult for some, ensures teachers receive regular feedback from student learning progress and will provide continued follow-up, support and pressure (Guskey 2002). This model has been fully in place from Semester 1 2016, however was partially implemented in late 2015.

During 2015 the content for Professional Development Days, usually held at the beginning and during mid semester, moved from being determined by the Scholarship and Professional Development Committee to being more determined by staff. When asked to nominate topics for the PD Days teachers were initially sceptical, one teacher remarking that "they (the Committee) must have run out of ideas", and were very slow to identify what topics they were interested in pursuing. During the first PD Day run under the model, only one quarter of the topics discussed were suggested by staff, however this had risen to two thirds by the last PD Day of 2015. The majority of topics nominated by staff were very practical and practice related and included topics as varied as 'How I use Nearpod in my classroom' to 'Helping second language learners understand lecture content'. While paid full day PD Days are still planned for the beginning of each semester, during Orientation Week, mid-semester PD days moved to (paid) lunch-time sessions over three days, with short sessions so that teachers can attend a number of sessions over the week. As the sessions are at lunch-time, the organisation also provides lunch for staff, creating a more collegial atmosphere.

UTS:Insearch has also been keen to support teachers in attending discipline specific professional development events outside of the organisation, including professional development offered by UTS faculties and interdisciplinary areas such as learning futures, which won the Hybrid Learning Innovation category of the 2015 Wharton-QS Stars Reimagine Education Awards, and First Year Experience. In 2015 the Scholarship and Professional Development Committee was given a budget to allow all sessional teachers, regardless of length of current employment, to apply for financial support to attend conferences and workshops in Australia, and overseas if they have had a paper accepted. In 2015 eight teachers took up this opportunity, with three teachers being supported to attend conferences overseas to present papers. As of January 2016, three teachers have applied to attend conferences overseas, and two have applied to attend domestic conferences in 2016. Teachers are also being encouraged to submit papers to both discipline specific journals and to journals related to teaching practice, then being invited to 'present' their papers to the appropriate UTS:Insearch teaching staff.

That the organisation is willing to provide financial support for all sessional teachers to attend conferences, provide payment for professional development days, and allow them to attend conferences during the semester, arranging cover for classes they will be unable to teach due to their absence, strongly underlines to teachers the value placed on professional development and on their knowledge being shared with their peers. Perhaps a little more 'managerially', teachers are also asked to record their professional development activities in a central register. This has caused some consternation with some teaching staff questioning whether or not their future employment will be based on what professional development activities they have undertaken. Many of the teachers asking this question are those who would fall in Huberman's fourth career stage and who express some discontent with the policy being implemented by the organisation.

From 2016 the organisation is more carefully mapping the career stages of our teachers, and gathering data from them to gain more information to assist planning of activities they feel meet their needs and interests. Student progress in classes where new approaches are being used will also be monitored so teachers can have tangible evidence of the efficacy of the approach and to support their change in belief about these approaches. An online suite of modules has been implemented, the Insearch Academic Staff Professional Development Portal, relating to both practice issues and theory which will use the pedagogic approaches to be adopted throughout the organization

to deliver professional development content. At present the modules have been determined by the Scholarship and Professional Development Committee, but it is hoped that after the portal is launched at the beginning of Semester 1, 2016 teaching staff will make suggestions about what they feel should be included. More ‘managerially’ again, teachers will be required to complete one module on the portal each semester. It is expected that when this is announced that some teachers will find this an imposition on their time, particularly as the modules have activities that need to be completed and submitted.

#### 4. Conclusion

UTS:Insearch has been striving since 2013 to build an innovative teaching culture that supports students to achieve the skills they need to participate in the digital age. Our initial focus was on the development of an innovative and student centred curriculum, where technologies and face to face teaching were seamlessly integrated, and this has largely been achieved, however is always going to be an ongoing project. The ‘missing piece’ was the uptake of pedagogic approaches to the delivery of content through the professional development regularly offered teaching staff, who are experienced, long-term teachers working on a sessional basis. Over 2015 a number of approaches to understanding our staff and how meaningful and targeted professional development that best meets their needs have been investigated. While some aspects of our model were put in place in 2015, the model was fully implemented from Semester 1 2016. This model of professional development is more teacher centred and directed and recognises that change will be gradual and difficult, will allow them to receive regular feedback from student learning progress to support their belief in the changes being made and provide continued follow-up, support and pressure to engage with their own development as teachers, regardless of their career stage.

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