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CHAPTER 5

Reflections from implementing a faculty strategy for academic professional learning during a global pandemic

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Abstract

Joining a new institution is challenging; doing so eight weeks before the advent of a pandemic was extremely challenging. Two new online learning specialists, together with the support of their manager, in a faculty's Teaching and Learning Centre at a South African university, reflect upon personal experiences that highlight the challenges and affordances of supporting professional learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The two online learning specialists had to establish personal relationships with each other, their manager and the broader institutional community, in addition to building networks with the academics they needed to support. The faculty team had to work with the central support unit, as well as with faculty teams in other faculties to support academics in their transition to remote teaching and learning. Adopting an ethic of care philosophy, the team conceptualised

and implemented various professional learning interventions for academics, while they themselves grew accustomed to the faculty and institution. In a short space of time, many academics in the faculty and institution looked at the team for advice, guidance and reassurance. Fortuitously, the period enabled the team to form/join support networks and communities of practice, both within the faculty and the institution. These experiences laid the foundation for a faculty support strategy for the future, and the design of short courses to further support the professional learning of academics and their capacity to develop and implement pedagogically sound blended and online offerings.

Keywords: academic development; ethic of care; online learning; professional learning; reflective practice

Introduction

In this chapter we reflect on our experiences of supporting academic professional learning during the South African lockdown at the end of March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are three staff members from the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) Teaching and Learning Centre who were required to support academics to transition to what became known as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) (Hodges *et al.* 2020). While a long-standing staff member at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), the Head of the CLM Teaching and Learning Centre (Author 2) had been appointed to this position less than a year before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, two online learning specialist posts were created in 2019 for establishing the CLM Online Learning and Teaching (COLT) Unit within the Centre. The motivation for creating these posts stemmed from the institutional strategic objective to expand online and blended

learning within the institution, particularly with the faculty launching fully online programmes. Consequently, one online learning specialist joined the faculty in January 2020 and the other joined in February 2020. Little did the faculty know how fortuitous these appointments would prove to be during the rapid transition to ERTL, going far beyond the initial focus on the expansion of online offerings within CLM.

By the time the university campuses had been closed and the country's first lockdown started in March 2020, the three of us had barely become acquainted. An urgent priority became finding ways to work together to prepare academics to resume the academic project within less than a month from the date when lockdown began. The faculty traditionally relied on professional learning from the central institutional teaching and learning unit, so the availability of faculty-based professional learning support was novel for all involved. Using the ethic of care as a theoretical framework and adopting a critical reflection methodology, we individually share reflections of our experiences during ERTL and what we learned from these experiences. Collectively, we then reflect on how this has influenced our practice and what can be done to improve future outcomes.

Theoretical framework and methodology

In this chapter, we draw on the work of both Noddings (1988; 2012) and Tronto (2005) about the ethic of care. Noddings' (1988; 2012) perspective of the ethic of care is used as a lens for our approach to the professional learning of faculty academics during ERTL. Tronto's (2005) dimensions of an ethic of care is used to consider the support provided by the manager to the two online learning specialists in the team during the same time. Noddings (1988; 2012) emphasises that adopting an ethic of care perspective recognises the relationship between

teachers and students (or academics and academic support staff). It involves "listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself" (Noddings 2012: 771). Correspondingly, Noddings (1988) proposed a model of moral education consisting of: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. For example, a teacher can *model* caring through adopting a broader or more holistic perspective than just academic achievement. Teachers can model ways of engaging in intellectual activities and ways of interacting with others. Teachers can encourage open *dialogue* that supports the development of trust and caring relations. Similarly, teachers can enable caring *practice* that creates opportunities to practice learning in a safe space, interact with other students and reflect upon learnings. Finally, teachers can practice *confirmation*, which affirms students through knowing them, developing trust and encouraging "responsible self-affirmation" (Noddings 1988: 222).

Similarly, Tronto (2005) identifies four dimensions to practicing an ethic of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. First, an *attentive* carer is aware of the needs of the cared-for, which is necessary to be able to provide care (Tronto 2005: 252-253). Second, a *responsible* carer assumes responsibility for the cared-for (i.e., taking the caring upon themselves), without which care would likely not manifest (Tronto 2005: 253-254). Thirdly, a *competent* carer is equipped with the relevant skills and abilities to provide the required care to care-receivers (Tronto 2005: 254-255). Lastly, care-receivers must be *responsive* to the care provided to be able to reap the benefits of that care (Tronto 2005: 255-256).

To guide the writing and analysis of our reflections, we adopt the critical reflection approach proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper

(2001). This consists of three stages of reflection: "What?," "So what?" and "Now what?." The "What" focuses on the problem or situation and the roles various stakeholders assumed. The "So what" focuses on the lessons learned from the situation and the associated broader issues, by linking theory and practice. Finally, the "Now what" focuses on what needs to be done to resolve or improve the situation and the broader consequences for future practice (Rolfe *et al.* 2001). Each of us used this reflective approach to "free write" about our experiences in supporting academics during the transition to ERTL. Our reflections are shared individually in the next two sections (the "What?" and "So what?"), followed by the final section (the "Now what?"), where we explore lessons learned and the impact of these lessons on future practice.

Reflections of Supporting Academics to Transition to ERTL ("What?")

Guiding two new team members in developing strategies for academic professional learning during ERTL (Author 2)

The biggest challenge for me was not so much getting to know the team members, but to support and guide them through the process of rapidly upskilling CLM academics for ERTL. My role was to co-strategise, provide support to the team, encourage and guide them where needed, and help with logistics and communication. This was not always easy owing to the sudden move to remote working, a lack of guidelines or exemplars for supporting new staff members to become accustomed to a new working environment during a global health emergency, and the fact that all three of us were still getting to know one another. I was acutely aware of the continuous pressure under which the team was working. They had to keep abreast with emerging developments regarding ERTL, develop and adapt resources for the CLM context, while they themselves were still getting to know me, one another, and the

faculty. They spent many nights and weekends preparing for daily webinars dedicated to the upskilling of CLM academics, all while dealing with the uncertainties of the pandemic and its impact on their lives and the lives of their families and loved ones. I was concerned about their personal wellbeing under pressured circumstances, the impact of social isolation on their mental health, and the increased risk of burnout (Gewin 2021) they were being exposed to as a result of this all. I felt a deep sense of responsibility to help in whatever way I could, both with the work that needed to be done, as well as providing collegial and emotional support during this period of immense disruption. Ultimately, the aim was to foster a sense of unity among the three of us and help them, where possible, to aid CLM academics with the rapid shift to ERTL.

Finding ways to manage the support required for academics to transition to ERTL (Author 1)

With the sudden transition to ERTL, there was limited time for planning and innumerable uncertainties to contend with. I just had to put my head down and do what I could to help others. I think being able to focus on work helped me to cope with some of the challenges associated with Covid-19. As a team, before university campuses were shut down, we had a few brainstorming sessions to discuss what knowledge and skills academics would need to be able to make the transition to ERTL and what professional learning opportunities we could offer. We quickly realised that in a faculty with hundreds of academics, we could not develop or offer everything that was needed in such a short timeframe. So, we purposefully adopted the approach of trying to reuse or adapt existing resources, where possible, such as Open Educational Resources (OERs) being made available by

universities and individuals in different countries. Using an ethic of care perspective and drawing from my own experiences, I tried to model good online learning and teaching practices. We created a support site on the institutional Learning Management System (LMS) and launched a series of webinars. We also made the conscious decision to use the support services and resources offered in the rest of the university, such as the institutional Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development (CLTD) and other faculty teaching and learning units. Being new to the university, we had met a few of the people in these teams before, but many people were unfamiliar to us (and we were unfamiliar to them). We liaised with those we knew and used their networks to reach out to others over time. We shared and pooled the resources that had been developed and invited CLM academics to the webinars from various other units that covered different topics.

Relying on experience to deal with the challenges associated with ERTL (Author 3)

Having worked for fifteen years in online teaching and learning as an LMS administrator, instructional designer and facilitator, I felt quite at home during the sudden move to ERTL that occurred at the start of the lockdown in South Africa. I had worked in a variety of situations under pressure that required quick thinking and a rapid response. These made the ERTL situation feel very much like 'business as usual.' Those situations, which required me to adapt quickly, find solutions to the various issues at hand and act swiftly stood me in good stead. It was the first time, in a long time, where I was finally able to use my experience and skills in a particularly practical, useful and purposeful way. Having said that, I was also acutely aware of the enormity of the challenge ahead of us. We had to reach and assist hundreds of

academics in a limited space of time. It was obvious, given the constraints at the time, that the only way to accomplish this was to do a series of short training sessions (webinars) via Microsoft Teams, supplemented by remote system and pedagogical support where possible. It was particularly encouraging that a large number of academics attended each session and that these academics were from a range of different faculties in the institution. Nevertheless, although our reach was far greater than one would have expected at our institution, I knew that there was a veritable "black hole" into which some of the academics in our own faculty had disappeared. They, and their students, were the ones that I was most concerned about.

Lessons learned from Supporting Academics to Transition to ERTL ("So what?")

Lessons learned from supporting the team using an ethic of care perspective (Author 2)

I feel that I demonstrated *attentiveness* by carefully listening to the needs expressed by the team, whether for information, to help garner input or advice, or to distribute correspondence. I also tried to create a sense of support and empathy through this *attentiveness*, which in time aided with the collegial bonds that would form among the three of us during this time. Drawing on Tronto's (2005) second dimension, I feel I demonstrated *responsibility*, as I was acutely aware of the pressure the team was under and felt an urgent need to provide support in whatever way I could. Moreover, I acted on this sense of responsibility by meeting with them frequently and offering help where needed. I believe I possess the *competence* required to provide care in the way Tronto (2005) describes it, as I worked as an Academic Advisor for approximately five years prior to becoming Head of the CLM T&L Centre.

That role aided me to develop and refine the requisite skills and abilities to care for others, which is what I drew on during ERTL to provide support to the team. Lastly, regarding the *responsiveness* dimension of an ethic of care as described by Tronto (2005), both the team members and I were implicitly and mutually responsive to one another, with them taking on board the support I offered to provide, and me being responsive to their expressed needs.

Lessons learned from the strategies adopted for supporting academics in ERTL (Author 1)

During the Covid-19 disruption we had to operate under unprecedented levels of uncertainty, which required a great deal of flexibility. It also required an awareness of what you can do and what you cannot do in these circumstances. Adopting an approach of utilising resources from elsewhere and relying on support services and resources created in other parts of the university, freed up our time to be able to concentrate on what we had to do and the resources we had to develop ourselves. It also helped us avoid working ourselves to exhaustion and exceeding our human capabilities during those initial weeks and months of the pandemic. Although we were incredibly busy and the first half of 2020 was an incredibly stressful time, we were still able to manage the situation to the best of our abilities in those circumstances. Feedback from academics indicated that many appreciated our availability to support them during this time. The experience also forced us to find ways of communicating and collaborating remotely. As a team, we met regularly to discuss our progress, plan for what needs to happen next and share information. As we were still new to the university and our positions, we were still in the process of "forming" when the pandemic affected us. It meant that

trust had to be established quite rapidly for us to support each other through the experience. My evaluation is that promoting the values of openness and sharing, as well as demonstrating that "we cared," enabled us to better support CLM academics during the crisis.

Lessons learned from supporting academics and the lack of engagement from some academics (Author 3)

Many academics felt that they would not need to do more than conduct synchronous lecture sessions and upload their lecture notes and slides to the LMS, without giving any further instructions, support or guidance to their students. The academics who had attended our online sessions and signed up to our online toolkit site (created to provide "just-in-time" help, videos, and documentation) had at least some idea of how to approach the situation. However, there were some academics who did not attend the synchronous training sessions and who never contacted us for help and support. These academics, their courses and their students are what concerned me the most, as we were not able to establish dialogue with them. Short-staffed as we were, there was no time to identify and reach out to academics who were not engaging with us or to undertake an audit of the existing LMS course sites in the faculty. Looking forward, the question becomes "How do we reach those academics who see an LMS as just another form of Dropbox or Google Drive, and who do not see the need to take a carefully considered approach in the online teaching environment?"

Future directions: Professional learning for academics ("Now What?")

This section highlights the collective lessons learned from the individual reflections, both for improving future support for academic professional learning and supporting new staff during a disruption.

The need for continuous learning

The rapid transition to ERTL necessitated the three of us to find solutions to unprecedented problems and required new and alternative approaches to professional learning and staff support in constrained circumstances. While this period undoubtedly placed huge demands on both staff and students, it was also a steep learning curve for each of us. It compelled us to reflect on our experiences regularly, in order to adapt and refine approaches and the resources provided to academics. This formed part of the continuous learning mind-set we had to adopt, owing to rapidly changing contexts as new information about the pandemic and approaches to ERTL became available. Consequently, adopting an ethic of care perspective to guide our actions during this time, helped us to think holistically about the support needs of the academics we worked with. Quite positively, this experience has resulted in novel and responsive ways of approaching professional learning for academic staff in CLM, which continues to benefit CLM academics as we move beyond ERTL towards more authentic blended and online pedagogies.

Extending the reach of academic professional learning

As we shift beyond ERTL, we need to find a way to extend our reach within the faculty in terms of upskilling academics in the use of technology in and for teaching. The conundrum is how to do this without being prescriptive or coming across as too forceful. The reality is that both online and blended learning will continue to be a reality for many educators for the foreseeable future, and there are approaches and skills that can be of benefit to both academics and their students. In this light, we will need to develop a gentle but persuasive approach to the introduction of blended learning in CLM that will enable us to

reach more academics than only those with an interest in online and/or blended spaces. Using an ethic of care motivates us to consider the support needs of academics holistically, rather than considering their pedagogical, technological and emotional support needs in isolation. As we transition beyond ERTL, we have adopted a different approach to staff professional learning in the faculty. Instead of the webinar strategy which was followed during ERTL, the team is developing and offering a series of short courses for this purpose. We believe this will help us build better relationships with academics and support them to make informed and meaningful choices about how they teach and incorporate technology in their course design, as promoted by Mihai (2021).

Forming team bonds to promote cooperation

For us, having to deal with the experience of the disruption enabled the rapid development of team bonds in a remote setting. Through a system of regular check-in meetings between the two online learning specialists and among the three of us (depending on the matter at hand) and regular communication via email, WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams, a sense of unity and collegiality began to emerge. As a result, the three of us now have established weekly check-in meetings. This inter-connectedness has not only strengthened collegiality among us but has also seen greater collegial bonds form among units within the CLM T&L Centre, which in itself is still quite new. As we continue to shift away from ERTL and towards more authentic online and blended pedagogies, the bonds forged, lessons learned, and experiences gained in 2020, continue to inform our approach to and strategy for academic professional learning in CLM. At its core, our collective strategies focus on holistic support and development that is responsive to the needs of

academics and others we work with, while an ethic of care also informs how we work with one another and others.

Forming communities of practice to encourage collaboration

Our experiences of sharing and collaborating with other academic support staff in 2020 resulted in the forming of an institutional learning design Community of Practice (CoP) at the start of 2021, with representatives from CLTD and all faculty teaching and learning units. The aim of the CoP is to share good practices, discuss challenges faced, and share resources developed, among other things. Our evaluation is that this CoP would likely not have started, or that there would not have been interest in contributing to it, without the shared experiences of and collaborative efforts during the disruption in 2020. It highlights the importance of community and collaboration in professional learning for academics and is something that continues to guide and inform the way the three of us engage and interact with each other.

Conclusion

It can be said that learning does not occur if it is not reflected and acted upon (Gibbs 1988). In this chapter we have shared our personal reflections as three individuals working in a faculty teaching and learning unit at a large research-intensive public university in South Africa. Our collective experiences highlight the challenges and affordances of supporting professional learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as supporting staff members new to a faculty/institution during a disruption. The two online learning specialists (Authors one and three), who were new to the university and faculty, had to establish personal relationships with each other, their manager (Author two) and the broader institutional community, in addition to building networks with the academics they needed to support. The

faculty team had to work with the central support unit, as well as with faculty teams in other faculties to support academics in their transition to remote teaching and learning. In a short space of time, many academics in the faculty and institution looked to the team for advice, guidance, and reassurance. This chapter is relevant to those who find themselves in new professional spaces in higher education contexts and provides considerations for the professional learning of academics in a post-Covid-19 world.

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