

Is Flexibility Sustainable? The impact of intensive teaching practices upon teacher educators

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Abstract

Teacher education faculties throughout Australia have long been under pressure to maximize their and income by offering flexible modes of delivery designed to appeal to the widest possible domestic and international markets. This has given rise to a range of practices including teaching periods that span almost the entire year; short, intensive or compressed courses designed to fast track graduation and programs offered in 'flexible' delivery mode which allow students to choose the times and locations at which they engage with course materials and assessment tasks.

High levels of student satisfaction with an individual intensive teaching experience are easily used to justify the continuation (and expansion) of these modes of delivery. This fails to acknowledge, however, the impact that the work associated with stabilizing an innovation has upon the academics involved. This paper investigates data drawn from student evaluations of two different teacher education subjects delivered in an intensive mode. It begins by identifying the reasons students put forward to explain the high ratings they gave to the courses. It then uses actor-network theory to foreground the experience of the academic involved in the teaching experiences and raise questions about the sustainability of the range and scope of activities which are increasingly represented as natural and normal within discourses about quality intensive teaching.

Keywords: Intensive teaching, student satisfaction, actor-network theory

Introduction

The increasingly close connection between particular measures of university student satisfaction and the budgets of universities and teacher education faculties raises clear challenges for academics. The federal government relies heavily upon national survey instruments such as the Australian Graduate Survey and Course Experience Questionnaires to assess and financially reward so-called quality teaching. In addition, University measures of student satisfaction—collected by centrally administered evaluations of programs, courses, teachers and teaching—are commonly used in budgeting processes to advantage faculties or schools who achieve institutional benchmarks. In other words, data sets relating to 'student satisfaction' enjoy enormous contemporary significance and have a potentially serious impact upon teacher educators who are at the front line of the evaluation process.

The assumptions underpinning many student evaluation mechanisms have been critiqued in much literature (eg Richardson, 2005; Davies, 2006) but it is easy to understand why academics would be motivated by evaluation data to try and identify the specific characteristics of intensive teaching practices most likely to draw positive evaluations. However, this paper argues that many attempts to identify the hallmarks of quality intensive teaching draw attention away from more meaningful data about the actual amount and scope of work that underpins many such initiatives. In response, this paper has two goals. First, I will draw upon student evaluation data collected for two university subjects I have taught in intensive mode, both of which achieved good student evaluations and were regarded as commendable by relevant University management. After identifying what this data suggests might be

the factors that led to positive ratings, I will draw upon actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) to re-read the evaluation data in parallel with a diary I kept whilst working on both subjects. In keeping with the principles of actor-network theory, this paper makes no claims to generalisability or transferability of findings. Rather, it seeks only to better understand the ways that a ‘successful’ teaching initiative can look, feel and ultimately *be* quite different depending upon the data that is considered. The goal of this re-reading is to identify the intensive and often hidden work that goes into producing the appearance of a ‘stable’ and ‘successful’ educational innovation. This marks the first stages in an ongoing project that will involve academics throughout Australia.

Two ‘quality’ teaching experiences

The data discussed here was collected through anonymous, on-line surveys of students who completed one of two different units of study, within two different teacher education programs between 2007 and 2009. Subject 1 was an undergraduate unit within a Bachelor of Education. Although officially a full semester subject, it was offered entirely online, and was open to students in the second, third and fourth year of the program. These students had very different timetables and practicum commitments and it was necessary for this course to be designed so that it could be completed intensively over a time to be determined by individual students. Many completed the subject intensively in a 4 or 6 week period. Others followed a more traditional semester long timetable.

Subject 2 was offered in postgraduate teaching qualification that involved sustained periods of student placement in schools, coupled with regular, intensive, sessions at university. This subject involved three, two day periods of face-to-face contact between students and staff.

Both courses received good results within university administered student evaluation systems. Responses to four core questions are provided below:

Question	Subject 1 (5 point scale) 45 responses: return rate 45%	Subject 2 (5 point scale) 20 responses: return rate 31%
The unit was well taught	4.63	4.67
Course materials were of high quality:	4.42	4.64
I would recommend this unit to others:	4.58	4.73
Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of teaching from the teacher in this unit	4.84	4.68

Table 1: Student responses to survey questions

Students also had the opportunity to respond to the following prompts:

- What were the best aspects of your unit?
- Provide any comments they had about the teaching of this particular teacher.

These questions generated more than 100 positive comments from students. Analysis of this data identifies four recurring themes.

First, students consistently linked satisfaction to factors relating to course content (including perceived relevance). For example, they commented that:

- The content was of high relevance and the assignments were engaging. (Subject 1)

- It would be appropriate for this to be included as a core unit...as it is extremely relevant. (Subject 1)
- Demonstrated real life experience to teaching. (Subject 2)

Issues relating to flexibility also received positive feedback. Students wrote the following things about Subject 1:

- I was able to make my own time to read all the readings and catch up on work.
- The ability to browse through and explore content at your own pace.

One student commented that Subject 2:

- Delivered a very good unit in a fluid environment.

One of the most common themes related to perceptions about staff availability and the speed and tenor of responses to queries posted online. For Subject 1, comments included the following:

- Responded VERY quickly, which meant less stress and worrying
- Quick responses to online discussion was fantastic. It is understandable that this would be a very time consuming task, being online all day-every day but it really made the unit relaxing and enjoyable.
- Feedback to students was immediate and valuable

Students in Subject 2 noted that the lecturer:

- Responded promptly online to all queries; and was
- Always contactable if needed

The final category of comments are harder to define, but relate to characteristics attributed to the lecturer. Examples of these comments from Subject 1 are shown below:

- She was very caring and interested in us as students and made the subject a lot of fun
- I enjoyed her humour and encouragement each week
- Always willing to go the extra mile to help her students
- I appreciate her dedication.
- She was so enthusiastic, willing to help in any way and gave good advice and feedback.

Subject 2 produced similar responses:

- Her energy, enthusiasm and humour helped make all topics more engaging and interesting.
- Fantastic! Always upbeat, informative and engaging.
- Always caring and helpful.
- [She] was warm, fun, engaging

Read in isolation this data paints a picture of intensive teaching models capable of achieving high levels of student satisfaction. This can work to legitimate an ongoing commitment to these kinds of practices. In many ways, however, this data is the tip of an educational iceberg. It is certainly important, and needs to be noticed, but the bulk of the work that goes into ensuring that students provide this kind of feedback is lurking, unnoticed, beneath the surface. It is this hidden material that has the potential to impact most significantly upon intensive teaching into the future and looking beyond the closure offered by student evaluation data read in isolation, is, I would argue, a vital task. This is the goal for the next section of the paper.

Beyond the numbers: re-reading evaluation data

Actor-network theory—or the sociology of translation—can be broadly described as a framework for studying innovation (Latour, 2005). Studies of educational innovation that draw upon the resources of ANT look beyond the appearance of a successful, stable innovation—a practice which is regarded as unproblematic and is in ANT terms, black-boxed or able to be taken for granted—to identify the ongoing work of *socio-technical compromise* that is required to ensure that any innovation—such as an intensive teaching experience or a positive pattern within student evaluations—remains stable or durable (Bigum & Rowan, 2008).

An innovation in this sense can only be said to be stable when the actors that are attached to it (human and non-human) behave consistently in a desired way (Bigum & Rowan, 2008). In the case of the intensive teaching courses under analysis, the role assigned to the student was that of “satisfied-student-who-fills-in-the-right-form-at-the-right-time-with-the-right-numbers”. In order to ensure that students played this role the staff member at the centre of the network was involved in a constant process of negotiation. A stable network, in other words, is always a *process* rather than a *product*. As Latour (1996, p. 85) argues “anything can become more or less real, depending on the continuous chains of translation. It’s essential to continue to generate interest, to seduce, to translate interests. You can’t ever stop becoming more real”.

Whilst there is infinitely more to be said about ANT as a framework for studying innovation (Latour, 1993, 2005), the key point for this paper is that within this framework, emphasis shifts from trying to identify the key characteristics of a successful innovation, as though these are reproducible in other contexts, to identifying the processes through which any innovation was made—however temporarily—durable.

In this final section of the paper I will use actor-network theory to reflect upon a number of entries made in my professional diary during the intensive teaching periods conducted above. The key goal is to re-open the black-box of ‘good intensive teaching’, and ask different questions about the costs of the experience.

What’s in the black-box?

ANT draws attention to the moves and countermoves that underpin any socio-technical assemblage. In this framework, categories such as ‘responsive’ or ‘helpful’ or ‘flexible’ are positioned, not as *explanations* for an outcome, but, rather, as things themselves that need to be explained. This draws attention to quite different data. An example is provided by one reflection on the evaluation data received for Subject 1:

I just read the comments for this subject...and for 5 minutes felt really happy. But it wasn’t long before I felt, really, kind of bizarrely *furios*. It’s not because I’m not happy with the comments. It’s because I worked myself into the ground for that course, and in this feedback process hours and hours and hours of work is reduced down to something ridiculous like “she was approachable” or “fun”. All that work is disappeared. Which means, of course, that a head of school would have few qualms about asking you to do it all again because, hey, obviously we’ve got it nailed down and know what quality teaching involves and if you did it once how hard can it be to do it all again?

A key point here is the importance of looking beyond simple explanations for ‘success’. A related point is the risk of assuming that any particular individual or network has *innate* capacities to which the outcomes of an innovation can be attributed. From an ANT perspective, the only inherent attributes of

an actor are the capacity to negotiate with other actors in forming relationships. Bringing negotiation and the work it entails to the centre of analysis draws attention not to the end result, but to the process:

With this wholly online course (which most students had never before experienced and many actually weren't looking forward to) I wanted to ensure they felt there was a connection between me and them. So I put together a welcome movie on our Blackboard site. But some students didn't have the bandwidth to play it; so I put it up as an audio file. And then some couldn't download it is an mp4 file so I did it as an mp3. And then some can't do that either because they didn't have the right software or whatever so instead of saying "just work it out!!" or "go to the library and listen to it!" I had to transcribe it and put that up too...So it is never a case of one idea replacing another: it is usually this AND this AND this AND this as well.

This quote emphasises that a network is always in the process of being made real, and that every move made by students demands a counter move by staff. This emphasis on work and negotiation leads to a third key point. Latour (1993, p. 23) has argued that "nothing happens between two elements [in an innovation] that the engineers aren't obliged to relay through their own bodies". In other words, innovations are always performed *and* embodied (Mol, 2001). A diary entry about Subject 2 captures this point:

In this intensive class I spent hours doing things like dragging suitcases full of equipment around, because the 'flexible' timetable meant we couldn't have a regular teaching space and didn't have the same access to computers and screens and data projectors etc. My chiropractic bills were enormous. Students were with us for hours on end so we had to provide tea, coffee, hot chocolate and snacks. It's easy to think that all you need is good content and a nice personality. But what really makes a difference is the ability to respond to the moves of the students; so when they say 'what about x?' we have to say 'oh, sure! Here it is!'

As illustrated here, every durable network is based upon the embodied work of individuals for everything is relayed through their bodies. This is a vital point, because acknowledging not just the constancy of negotiation but also the embodied nature of this negotiation raises a different set of questions about the costs of repeated attempts to operate in an innovative, intensive framework.

This leads to the final key point. Not only does an ANT perspective draw attention to the value of looking beyond the closure offered by positive student evaluations to the embodied and ongoing negotiations required of academics seeking to create stable or durable socio-technical assemblages, it also shows that this work does not lessen over time, or with the repetition. There is no evidence to suggest that the successful enrolment of students in one network that led to good teaching evaluations will carry over into another network. Rather, the whole process needs to begin again. A further diary entry captures this point:

Everyone who doesn't have to *do* it thinks intensive teaching is great. Teach a lot for a few weeks and then free time. Teach online...manage your own time! The reality is flexibility means something different to every student. They want flexibility on *their* terms. They want to decide when they are ready to learn, and they want us to be there—alert, friendly, helpful—when it suits them. It's like we're remote control toys that must leap around and perform every time someone pushes a button. It doesn't matter if we've finished the same performance 5 seconds earlier. If someone pushes that button, off we go again.

Read together these diary entries paint a different picture of the ‘successful’ innovations associated with intensive teaching, and highlight the fact that intensive and flexible teaching frameworks can make serious, ongoing demands upon academics. This does not mean the innovations are not important. However, to make judgments about how and when they should be used, we need to acknowledge that each innovation requires academics to live in the middle of a complex socio-technical assemblage and the embodied nature of the negotiations that result has consequences that extend well beyond the period of teaching.

Conclusion

Data from students offers only one set of insights into the outcomes of a particular intensive teaching innovation. This is not to suggest that this data has no legitimacy or that students’ opinions should not matter. Indeed, much of my work over the past decade has aimed to produce exactly the kinds of comments reported above. This, of course, is the key point. Focusing only on the percentage of apparently happy students draws attention away from the amount and the nature of the work associated with these outcomes. To be meaningful as a planning device, student evaluation data must be read alongside other material that indicates the short and long term impact of any innovation upon the academics involved. Only then is it possible to make any judgments about the extent to which a particular approach to innovation is likely to be sustainable in another, different, or new context.

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