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Supporting casual teaching staff in the Australian neoliberal university: A collaborative approach

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue for a collaborative approach to online education as a corrective to many of the challenges of contemporary tertiary teaching. The recent intensification in online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that articulating an effective model of online teaching is judicious. While the model we propose is apposite for all teaching staff, we focus on its benefits for casual staff due to their increasing share of teaching responsibility yet limited access to institutional support.

Using a collaborative auto-ethnographic framework, we analysed reflections from past and present members of our teaching team. We contend that collaborative teaching counters teachers' typical experience of isolation and facilitates personal and professional learning. By providing institutional support for regular productive interactions, staff wellbeing is promoted, and the precariousness of contemporary university teaching is reduced. These aspects of collaborative teaching speak to its sustainability both for staff and the institution. We conclude that it is in the university sector's best interest to implement similar collaborative teaching models.

Introduction

The neoliberal turn in higher education has changed the very nature of academic work (Connell, 2013). Among the effects of sector restructuring are the development of a competitive workplace culture with an emphasis on measurement and assessment and a concomitant decline in collegiality between academics (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Hartman & Darub, 2012; Sparkes, 2021). The widespread casualisation of the workforce has produced an academic precariat (Gill, 2014; Hartung et al., 2017; Ivancheva, 2015; May et al., 2013) of which the authors of this paper are currently members.

As a corrective to neoliberal reforms, in this paper we examine a team-teaching model for online education that we have found to be collaborative and rewarding. We are a team of casual academics from diverse disciplines who have developed a community of practice (Canty et al., 2020) to guide our joint teaching and iterative development of an online undergraduate course on cultural diversity at a regional Australian university. Our experience of working in a collaborative teaching team points to a collegial and sustainable model of online delivery that can address some of the challenges of contemporary tertiary teaching. The rapid escalation in online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020) suggests that articulating an effective model of online teaching is judicious.

Context: The neoliberal university and COVID-19

The intensification of academic life resulting from the structural transformation of universities has been well-documented (Gill, 2014; Hartung et al., 2017; May et al., 2013; Sparkes, 2021). The neoliberalisation of universities has produced working environments increasingly characterised by corporatisation, privatisation and managerialism (Hartman & Darab, 2012). For example, Price et al. (2015, p. 685) identify three interrelated themes of early academic career experience: "lack of job security; high workload pressures, including a constant pressure to publish; and a sense of professional and personal isolation". Subsequently, workplace camaraderie and academic collegiality have declined (Dugan & Letterman, 2008). Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 89) argue for the "conviviality of thinking together" as an antidote to the isolation that characterises work in the neoliberal university. The present study takes up their prompt for creating a collaborative model of creating content and teaching together.

Casual academics teach up to 80 percent of the first-year teaching load (Baré et al., 2021; Kniest, 2018; Ryan & Bhattacharyya, 2012). The challenges of working in the neoliberal university may be amplified for casual staff who often feel "isolated" and "invisible" (Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017, p. 88; see also Brown et al., 2010; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009). Casual academics report issues such as high administrative burdens and a lack of on-campus office space (May et al., 2013). Moreover, pre-determined, by-the-hour pay schedules mean that casual academics may feel too time-poor to attend workplace events which can render them invisible to colleagues and reduce opportunities for developing peer relationships. The career progression of

casual academics is hindered not only by their exclusion from happenstance peer interactions (Price et al., 2013) but also formal career development opportunities (Crimmins et al., 2017; Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017; Ryan et al., 2013). Exclusion is likely to be more acutely felt by those in the humanities and social sciences than in the natural sciences where research is often team based (Price et al., 2013). Our teaching model offers a way of supporting academics by countering the isolation that many academics experience (Dugan & Letterman, 2008). Crucially, while the model is relevant to all academic teaching teams, it is one of the few models which focuses on casual academics. These aspects of our teaching model speak to its sustainability. Nevertheless, this study does not address other problematic aspects of the neoliberal university, such as job security and pressure to publish.

Teaching online

The first wave of COVID-19 had dramatic impacts on 'business as usual' for the university sector (Elers, 2020; Lau et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2020). A key change was the widespread shift to teaching using online platforms (Hodges et al., 2020). While distance learning in higher education had been growing worldwide in the preceding decade (Canty et al., 2020), physical isolation requirements associated with COVID-19 led to a sudden escalation in this trend. This upheaval spawned extensive discussions, not only about the effectiveness of online courses and online learning, but the quality of the online teaching experience (Burbules, 2020; Johnson, 2020). As Canty et al. (2020, p. 3) note, the shift to online delivery "presents many transformational challenges to institutions in the ways in which they strategically plan for, develop, resource and deliver education that meets the changing needs and preferences of today's higher education students".

Online learning carries a stigma of being lower quality than face-to-face teaching; moreover, many academics rate online teaching as unrewarding and exhausting (Brookfield, 2015). One reason for this is that educational material is often prepared in isolation, with teachers and students engaged online in their own spaces (Taverna et al., 2015). However, echoing research in the field (Hodges et al., 2020), we argue that online teaching can provide fulfilling teaching experiences — provided teachers are given adequate support, and that dedicated online teachers can be deeply invested in creating effective online learning experiences. As Canty et al. (2020, p. 3) state, the increasing range of online technologies can provide "high-quality distance learning that is engaging, interactive and increasingly personalised". This study investigated the online teaching experience for members of our teaching team. Our aim was to support each other as academic staff and share our model with the teaching and learning community. While this project did not examine the impact of our teaching model on student outcomes, research in this field consistently asserts that team-teaching has positive outcomes for students (Benjamin, 2000; Colburn et al., 2012; Dugan & Letterman, 2008; Hoare et al., 2008). For example, team-teaching expands students' contact with experts, creating a stronger sense of academic community (Yanamandram & Noble,

2006). Student attention is heightened due to exposure to different teaching styles, while the contrasting viewpoints observed encourages independent thinking, active participation and improved interpersonal communication skills (Buckley, 2000). Similarly, Little and Hoel (2011) show that team-teaching is beneficial for changing student attitudes and expanding their worldviews. As Buckley (2000) concludes, team-teaching boosts student satisfaction which improves recruitment and retention. By and large the focus of the literature pertains to face-to-face teaching practice, with little or no consideration of the specifics of the online milieu. In contrast, our concern lies with online learning and teaching as a site of collaborative team-teaching.

Collaborative teaching practice

While there is a wealth of scholarship on collaborative learning and a consistent vein of scholarship about collaborative research teams, there is less scholarship devoted to collaborative teaching practice. We address this gap. Members of our teaching team argue for the effectiveness and resilience of this form of delivery citing its benefits for camaraderie, teacher satisfaction and professional development.

The various terms in the literature that describe team-teaching — including cooperative teaching, collaborative teaching, and co-teaching — tend to be used interchangeably. They reflect an ethos of sharing responsibility for planning, instruction, and evaluation of students (Fuller & Bail, 2011; Williams et al., 2010). However, there are marked differences between co-teaching models in which labour is shared but teachers work independently, and collaborative models characterised by mutual engagement. For example, Bedwell et al. (2012, p. 130) define collaboration as an “evolving process whereby two or more social entities actively and reciprocally engage in joint activities aimed at achieving at least one shared goal”. From this perspective, collaboration is an emergent process based on dynamic, adaptive and interdependent interactions between parties in which a team of experts becomes an expert team (Salas et al., 2000). Following Fuller and Bail (2011, p. 73), our model of teaching is “not just a division of labour but a synergistic effect and expectation of mutual engagement to provide greater clarity and interaction with students”.

For Salas et al. (2000, p. 341), the difference between loosely aligned ‘groups’ and synthesised ‘teams’ is the presence of teamwork — “dynamic, moment-to-moment behaviours and interactions”. In teams, interactions are optimised by co-operative behaviours, such as providing constructive feedback and resolving dissent, underpinned by “shared situational awareness” — a common understanding of the team’s internal and external context (Salas et al., 2000, p. 341). Requisite interpersonal skills are also noted in other scholars’ work. For example, Kelly et al. (2020, p. 217) state that effective research teams have a “clear and shared purpose...a commitment to shared outcomes, good communication patterns, social sensitivity, teamwork skills and capacity to integrate knowledge...diverse team members [and] good interpersonal skills”. In reference to teaching teams, Benjamin (2000, p. 193) argues that key

aspects of collaborative practices include “sharing new and untried ideas, critiquing ideas in order to improve them, and being comfortable with confrontation and cooperation”.

The aim of this article is to summarise our model of team-teaching by responding to the question ‘what are the critical elements of effective and sustainable collaborative teaching praxis for online tertiary education’.

The course

Our course on cultural diversity is based on a combination of constructivist and experiential learning approaches (Kolb, 1984), resulting in an emphasis on reflection as a learning method. The course is offered twice yearly to students from multiple disciplines. Course content is delivered as a series of web pages, structured as three modules — individual behaviours, systemic issues, and strategies for equity (see Figure 1).

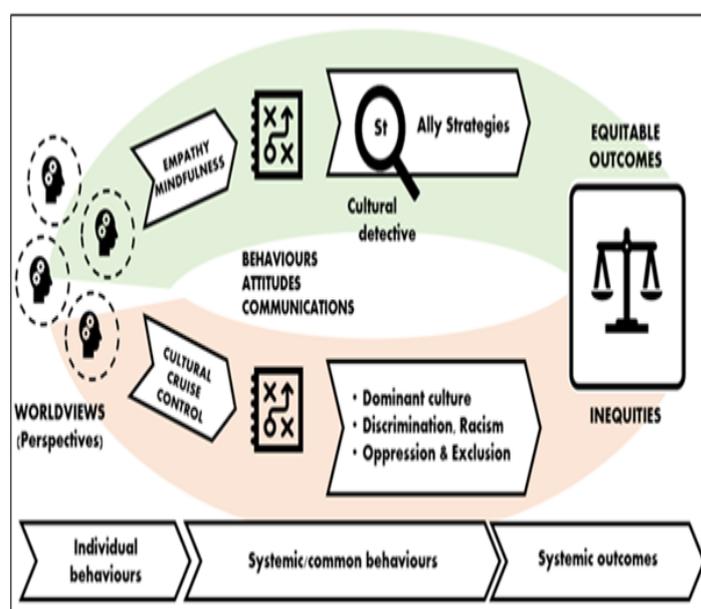


Figure 1. Pictorial representation of course progression.

Each webpage encompasses a short lecture, readings, videos, activities and reflections on an essential concept, such as ethnocentrism or allyship. Students work asynchronously, completing an average of one web page per week over 13 weeks of semester (see Figure 2). While we deliver a weekly online tutorial to provide direct, synchronous contact and peer learning, attendance is not compulsory, and students can listen to the session recording in their own time.

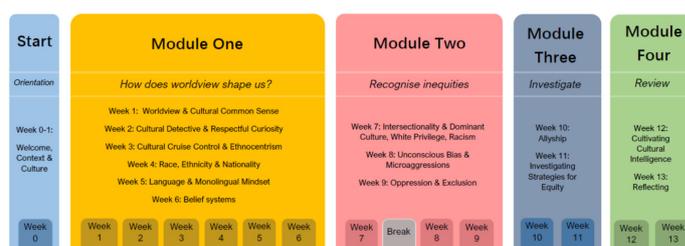


Figure 2. Course structure.

The teaching model

Course content is mostly compiled, curated, and updated prior to each teaching semester. This enables the teaching team to focus on student interactions and feedback during delivery. Members of the teaching team take 'ownership' of webpages or other content, such as assessment tasks, depending on their expertise, interest, or availability, with input and review from the whole team. This structure facilitates collaboration while avoiding doubling up on workload. Leadership is diversified; one team member handles most strategic and administrative matters and has overall responsibility for 'coordination,' with another staff member taking an active 'co-pilot' role. Those in the coordinator roles are consultative, with decisions discussed in meetings. During semester, the teaching team meet online at least weekly to share information, prepare synchronous sessions and moderate assessment tasks. Suggestions for amendments or improvements are recorded and brought to an in-person review day held twice yearly (following each delivery).

At its inception, the course was conceptualised as a cross-faculty collaboration, developed in response to the university's prioritisation of 'Breadth Units' (see Brown & Phegan, 2015). While the course has since been integrated within a particular school, the teaching team continue to represent multiple disciplines, including Fine Arts, Health Sciences and Social Sciences. Over time, the teaching team has transitioned from full-time tenured academic and professional staff to casual academic staff and PhD students. To the best of our knowledge, this transition has been organic rather than orchestrated. Changes in the employment status of the teaching team may reflect the workload pressure felt by tenured academics (Sparkes, 2021) and the rapidly escalating share of the university workforce with casual or fixed-term employment (Baré et al., 2021; Kniest, 2018).

Methods

This article examines the experiences of 11 teaching staff of an online undergraduate course at a regional Australian university. Our aim is to describe a model of collaborative online team teaching that is sustainable in the contemporary neoliberal university environment. By researching together, we also hope to extend and strengthen relationships within our teaching team (Kelly et al., 2020).

Given the collaborative nature of our teaching model, we were drawn to collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a research method. This method is "simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17). Whereas autoethnography "uses the researcher's personal experiences as primary data" (Chang, 2016, p.108), CAE is a co-constructed research design in which two or more researchers 'pool' and jointly analyse and interpret their autoethnographic data (Hernandez et al., 2017, p. 251). Although autoethnography is commonly written in the first person (Denshire, 2014), we use collective pronouns to signify our collaborative approach.

Collaboration enables more rigorous data analysis and deepens researcher relationships. In addition, this method has the potential to amplify previously silenced voices (Denshire, 2014), which reflects our enquiry into how to support casual academics in neoliberal universities. Nevertheless, CAE has been criticised for being non-accountable, non-generalisable and non-representative, with "the potential for narcissism and self-indulgence" (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 388). While we were drawn to autoethnography because it addresses the ethical issues of speaking for others (Chang et al., 2013; Lapadat, 2017), we were acutely aware of the possibility of our project being self-congratulatory. Consequently, we supplemented our autoethnographic data by inviting participation from staff who were previously involved with the course as tutors, lecturers, advisors and coordinators. Incorporating this data returns us to the situation of speaking for others. However, including additional voices offsets the potential for self-commendation and provides a broader insight into our teaching model. Given that the research team comprises members of the current teaching team, extending our sample also facilitated appraisal of the unit over a longer period. We did not want to give the (false) impression that we had designed our collaborative model; the inclusion of past team members helped prevent this.

Data collection

Following ethics approval, all past and present members of the teaching team (n = 26) were contacted by email and invited to participate. Those who agreed to participate (n = 11) submitted a consent form and short answer questionnaire (42 percent response rate). The questionnaire prompted participants to reflect on their experiences with the teaching model in comparison to their other teacher experiences (Kelly et al., 2020). We chose questionnaires for data collection as written responses allow participants time for reflection and self-editing to provide data rich responses (Jones et al., 2015; Keightley et al., 2012). Open-ended answers allow for a nuanced understanding of past and present teaching team members' perceptions of both the course and their teaching.

Sample

As Table 1 shows, our sample is fairly homogenous in terms of age and monolingualism. Seven participants identified as female. Six participants were employed as casual academics and, of these, three were early career researchers. Two had not taught in a university setting prior to joining the teaching team. However, as noted in the introduction, diverse disciplines are represented within the sample, while 'years teaching at university' (column 4 below) suggests participants bring varied work and personal experiences to the university sector. To protect anonymity, we delinked some information from pseudonyms in the table below, such as identification as Aboriginal. Similarly, we have chosen not to name the course or the discipline in which it is situated.

Table 1: Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years teaching at university	Languages spoken	Member of research team
Astrid	40-49	F	6-10	1	N
Betty	50-59	F	11-15	1	N
Brett	40-49	M	0-5	3	Y
Jason	40-49	F	20+	1.5	Y
Phillipa	50-59	F	6-10	1	Y
Pip	50-59	F	16-20	1	N
Poppy	<30	F	6-10	1	Y
Possum	50-59	M	20+	1	N
Rudy	40-49	M	0-5	1	N
Ruth	50-59	F	16-20	1	N
Sophie	50-59	F	11-15	1	N

Data analysis

Analysing open-ended answers may be onerous for large samples, but it is feasible for the number of participants in our study. Questionnaire data were analysed thematically following Boulton and Hammersley's (2006) method which offers a three-step process for rigorous analysis of qualitative data: 1) familiarisation with the data, 2) reading data to identify significant categories, patterns and aspects and 3) comparing and contrasting these categories to identify data segments. Lionnet (1990, p. 391) argues auto-ethnography 'opens up a space of resistance between the individual (*auto-*) and the collective (*-ethno-*) where the writing (*-graphy*) of singularity cannot be foreclosed'. Following Lionnet (1990), we began step one of the data analysis working individually before collaborating for the last two stages to prevent singularity of analysis.

Author two fulfilled the research assistant role for the project, anonymising responses by replacing names with participants' chosen pseudonym. She then forwarded one-four questionnaires to other members of the research team to analyse individually. In the initial data immersion stage, we (individually) noted any striking words, phrases or themes arising from the data. After sharing our individual analyses with the rest of the research team, we met (virtually) to discuss our preliminary analysis. We identified learning, relationships, support and limitations as the most striking themes in the data.

The next stage of analysis, in which we analysed each theme in depth, was completed collaboratively in pairs. These analyses were shared with the rest of the research team who provided critical feedback on the initial interpretation of the data. We discussed crossovers among the themes, variations within the sample and how the data corresponded with the research aims.

There are two key methodological implications to our design. First, the collaborative nature of data collection and analysis means there is potential for data to be re-identifiable. Participants are academic researchers who are aware of the risks involved. Moreover, respondents chose their own pseudonyms. Secondly, there is the risk of context collapse, where participants may be identified by readers of subsequent publications. The issues of compromised confidentiality and context collapse were explained to participants in the information sheet and addressed in the consent process. For example, participants had time to review and redact their questionnaires transcripts prior to

data analysis. They were also offered the option of vetoing any of their anonymised quotes prior to publications (such as this) or presentations.

Thematic analysis

Our thematic analysis is structured as two related themes, followed by a discussion of limitations of our teaching model. Firstly, we explore critical attributes of productive collaborations and, secondly, we unpack elements of our collaborative teaching model that relate to its sustainability. Theme One highlights aspects of the model which were valued by our participants. In line with the literature, we posit that basing collaborative teaching around regular interactions supports professional relationships, encourages broader knowledge, and leads to professional and personal growth. Theme Two, support and sustainability, refers to the potential longevity of the model for both staff and the course. We define sustainability prosaically as bearable or able to be continued.

Theme One: Critical attributes of productive collaborations

Collegial relationships

Echoing scholars in the field, we found that collegial relationships are a critical element of effective collaborative teaching for online education (see Bywater & Mander, 2018; Richardson, 2021). The development of peer relationships helps to counter the professional and personal isolation experienced by staff in the neoliberal university. In this section we describe what Bedwell et al. (2012, p. 137) refer to as "relational collaborative behaviors", or how relationships are developed and maintained in our teaching model through shared activities. We then investigate how these activities facilitate peer learning which benefits participants' personal and professional lives. We examine the interpersonal qualities and skills that facilitate productive collaborations.

The importance of collegial relationships is juxtaposed with the fact that our unit is run wholly online, which means that neither staff nor students need be based locally. This can increase employment opportunities for academics and make online teaching more financially viable for universities as demand for the provision of office and learning space is reduced. However, the recent intensification of online learning in Australian universities means that this form of teaching is new for many academic staff. Given casual academics are already under-supported in terms of professional development and tend to work in isolation, their professional wellbeing is likely to be jeopardised in the online teaching environment if supportive teaching models are not implemented (Hodges et al., 2020).

Joint activities

Bedwell et al. (2012, p. 134) observe that "all collaboration requires interdependent effort focused on joint activities". Similarly, Benjamin (2000) argues that effective tertiary

team-teaching relies on teams reflecting on, and evaluating, their practice together. This is a key difference between collaborative teaching models and those in which labour is divided but staff work independently. In our model, shared activities include development of course content and moderation of assessment tasks. These activities are facilitated by weekly online staff meetings leading up to and during each semester, supplementary ad-hoc online meetings, and twice-yearly face-to-face review meetings which sometimes include the wider course community (current, prior, interested contributors and instructors).

Participants identified regular meetings as vital to the maintenance of collegial relationships. Ruth valued *"the conversations that happened spontaneously — in moderating assessments, or re-designing content and rubrics"*. Similarly, Rudy appreciated *"interacting with the rest of the team"* and *"the great connection with everyone"* while Phillipa felt that her *"connection with other team members [was] extremely salient after these sessions"*.

The best thing about the model is the reflexive group activity. I highly value the staff meetings, the semester-by-semester review sessions, and the cyclic appraisal renewal of content. Meeting face-to-face with colleagues from time to time is brilliant. Jason

The weekly meetings help me to feel connected with other tutor members. Despite the unit and teaching being wholly online, the weekly catch ups during semester help to facilitate rapport and camaraderie. Poppy

In our model, embedding regular shared activities works to mitigate some of the challenges that academics experience in the Australian neoliberal university. For example, this sector has become increasingly defined by managerial practices in which many staff are excluded from active decision-making (Hardy et al., 2016). Collaborative models offer an alternative to a hierarchical structure in which tutors are deprived of participating in decision-making. In our approach, decision-making related to teaching, such as course content and delivery, is shared among the teaching team. The coordinator role is focused on external aspects, like strategic planning, brokering and administration, which relieves teaching staff of the high administrative burden felt by many casual academics (May et al., 2013).

I would describe the leadership model in [course] as democratic — decisions are made by leaders through a collaborative and consultative process involving all team members...All members of the teaching team contribute to decisions on included resources, lecture/webpage content, assessments, delivery of synchronized sessions, marking and sharing of ideas...It is distinctive in the expectation that all members of the team make significant contribution to the content, delivery and decision-making processes within the unit. Astrid

I think we strike a good balance between working independently and collaboratively, i.e. it could be really unwieldy if ever single micro-decision had to be discussed and agreed upon. Rather, we divide up tasks but invite comment/input from other team members. This model of working has developed organically rather than being planned, and it works really well. Phillipa

A particular type of high-level leadership needs to prevail to allow staff 'on the ground' to exercise their autonomy and best thinking, to experiment and take calculated risks. Jason

Reflecting on the review meetings, Possum outlines the decision-making process:

We would gather with a blank wall and map out the sequence and specific content...and we would have a lively debate about what is cutting edge, what is important, how to integrate each part, how to curate the enormous number of resources. Possum

Possum's reference to 'lively debate' echoes critical qualities of effective teams identified by Benjamin (2000, p. 193) — "being comfortable with confrontation and cooperation" in order to share and critique new ideas (see also McCormack & Kennelly, 2011).

Minett-Smith and Davis (2018) observe that allocating set tasks to staff can limit interaction, potentially undermining the effectiveness of team teaching. Again, our model offers an alternative, in which involvement is based on expertise, capacity and/or interest:

Some take on extra work, some demonstrate best practice in giving feedback, crafting lectures, finding relevant resources etc. Some research how the available technology can help improve our teaching, some advocate for the unit in their influence circles; some bring subject matter expertise. Brett

For Phillipa, recognising this opportunity required a shift in mindset from *"being a 'tutor' to realising that I could take the initiative and make a contribution beyond simply completing my allocated tasks."*

The dispersed leadership and decision-making features of our course model necessitate regular team meetings. This non-hierarchical structure means that these meetings are genuine collaborations in which ideas are discussed and debated. These joint activities, which are highly valued by the geographically dispersed participants in our study, support peer connections and help to counteract the potential for isolation and invisibility experienced by many academics. Joint activities are especially important for casual staff who are not provided with office space on campus. Full-time staff who work on campus can take advantage of happen-

stance meetings with colleagues or scheduled meetings with mentors or leaders to debrief and share issues. Casual staff and those who work from home have less access to these forms of support. Scheduling regular meetings fills this potential gap.

Scholarly cross-fertilisation

Collegial relationships enable an environment of peer learning. Participants in our study identified peer learning as a key strength of the model; one that contributed to a sense of connection and conviviality. Rudy attributed opportunities for learning to *"the collaborative approach to all aspects" of the course including "unit design, content development, assessment"*. Phillipa found *"collaborative sessions where we develop content, e.g. rubrics, have been really inspiring"*. Betty valued opportunities for *"learning from and with others"*. Similarly, Ruth said the unit was one of her *"best"* teaching experiences because she was *"learning the whole time"*.

Peer learning helps to counter the customary exclusion of casual staff from professional development opportunities. In Australia, casual academics teach up to 80 percent of the first-year undergraduate teaching load while having few opportunities to refine tertiary teaching skills (Ryan & Bhattacharyya, 2012; Kneist, 2018). Opportunities for professional development are an inherent right of casual teaching staff, yet casuals can feel uncomfortable seeking out opportunities to which they are entitled (Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017). Restricted opportunities for the professional development of casual staff not only limits their capacity to obtain more secure work in future but renders a key aspect of contemporary universities precarious, potentially undercutting the future of academic teaching (Ryan & Bhattacharyya, 2012). Collaborative teaching models, with embedded opportunities for peer learning, help to address this weakness.

Several participants were doctoral students or early career researchers and this subset especially valued opportunities to learn about more about tertiary online teaching (see Greer et al., 2016). Poppy commented she had *"learnt lots! There are many opportunities for extending my learning of university teaching"*. Rudy shared how his experiences moderating assessment items gave him confidence to pursue tutoring in other units. All participants indicated they had learned new online teaching skills including *"instructional design and online teaching tools"* (Brett), *"netiquette"* (Jason), and mastering *"different [online platform] features"* (Phillipa). Ruth felt it was a *"big learning curve about online learning design"*. Jason indicated online live tutorials were their *"weakest area in teaching"* and appreciated the opportunity to develop online teaching skills. Possum, Ruth, Jason and Brett were empowered to transfer these new skills to other units. More senior participants also appreciated this aspect. For instance, Sophie encountered *"new approaches to student management and delivery"*.

Notwithstanding the benefits of peer learning, it can also cause feelings of exposure:

It can feel vulnerable knowing that all your student feedback, discussion posts etc. are visible to the whole teaching team. However, I've learnt a lot from other tutors because of this. Phillipa

Feeling very vulnerable in my first semester-finding it difficult to settle in and feeling intimidated by the expertise of the teaching team, as well as a bit lost in what was expected of me. In my second semester, I was more aware of how the team worked and the expectations of me from other team members. I found my confidence and connection with the group increased the more I contributed, and felt supported as team members appraised my work positively. Astrid

Astrid describes how her experiences helped her process her initial feelings of vulnerability. A fundamental aspect of collaborative teaching is the inherent welcoming and accepting nature of the team environment, one where staff can express feelings of vulnerability which in turn enables them to feel connected and develop collegial relationships characterised by trust and humility:

I have noticed that sometimes team members act quite autonomously and responsively, and at other times there is a lot of consultation, and that both these approaches entail a lot of goodwill and trust (self-trust and trust in others). Jason

I felt very included from the start because my contribution to the unit (ideas for tasks, activities, resources, readings, etc.) had always been well received and I felt valued. Brett

We got personal about what all this meant to us, what we struggled with, where the gaps and challenges in my own knowledge were. Ruth

The extracts in this section indicate that participants in our study experienced learning with and from peers as supportive rather than challenging, suggesting that team members possess and/or acquire the requisite interpersonal and teamwork skills for effective teamwork (Kelly et al., 2020; Salas et al., 2000). Similarly, key aspects of collaborative practice identified by Benjamin (2000, p. 193) — *"sharing new and untried ideas...and being comfortable with confrontation and cooperation"*— are demonstrated below:

Working on revising rubrics was a great experience, I felt highly connected—it was all the more interesting because we contested each other quite a bit...all of the colleagues are highly talented, but portray a real willingness to learn, and I think all of the team members have had multiple and different work roles, so there is a flexibility and lack of defensiveness that characterises all the colleagues. Jason

We had the lofty ambition of 'changing the world' through tolerance and celebration of diversity. Possum

Casual staff are at the 'bottom rung' of academia and can struggle to be treated as serious academics (Kneist, 2018). While this can be challenging, it means that casual staff may be somewhat shielded from the competitiveness and performativity identified by Sparkes (2021). Arguably, this may make it easier for casual staff to demonstrate vulnerability and/or have their ideas challenged and be open to learning.

Members of our teaching team come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and, as part of course development and delivery, learn different disciplinary perspectives on key concepts, embedding peer learning into course delivery. Hoare et al. (2008, p. 477) indicate multidisciplinary teamwork supports "intellectual cross-fertilisation through the process of directing diverse specialist foci onto common issues". Nevertheless, when engaging with new disciplinary perspectives, tertiary teachers in Hoare et al.'s (2008, p. 477) study encountered "comfort-zone challenges". This was echoed by participants in our study, in which these challenges were exacerbated due to the consistent emergence of improved praxis regarding cultural diversity. In the context, Ruth felt vulnerable "*not feeling like an expert*". However, as Possum observes, these challenges create learning opportunities:

Working with other staff members from different disciplines was definitely memorable and highly valued. This took me out of my comfort zone...to appreciate a broader range of perspectives both in knowledge but also teaching styles. Possum

Participants reflected that collaboration led to improved course design and materials, suggesting benefits to students from collaborative teaching models:

Team-based, cross curricula (multi disciplinarity) allow for a much broader curriculum to emerge. Betty

We 'spark' off each other to develop content etc. that is far better than, I believe, we could have developed alone. Phillipa

In our teaching model, peer learning strengthens collegial relationships. Participants valued the chance to enhance skills in assessment, rubric design, content development and course composition — learning opportunities that casual academics typically struggle to obtain (Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017). The interdisciplinary nature of our teaching team enhanced peer learning. Our participants described learning about pedagogy, diverse disciplinary approaches to course content and benefits to students. Extracts in this section demonstrate the vulnerability and trust necessary for productive collaboration. Collaborative teaching supports further development of team members' interpersonal skills. This professional development was found to also benefit staff in their personal lives, as discussed in the following section.

Reflexivity

For Benjamin (2000), joint reflection and evaluation of praxis are key elements of effective teaching collaborations. The imperative to reflect is encouraged in our model:

While reflection is integral to my teaching generally, being a part of a teaching team encourages reflection on the possibility of learning new/other ways of doing things from others and how these can benefit my own teaching. Astrid

Despite the recognised value of reflexivity to academic teaching and learning, McCormack and Kennelly (2011, p. 515) observe that "over time, reflective conversations seem to have disappeared from the everyday practice of our colleagues". Clegg (2009) argues that the importance of reflective and rhetorical questioning to personal and collective professional development is under-utilised. This is counter-intuitive to a recent trend in Australian universities to offer interdisciplinary studies (Millar, 2016) in which academic staff must work collaboratively across disciplines.

Reflexive practice was augmented in our model due to the course's subject — cultural diversity. As we explain to our students, developing cultural intelligence requires self-reflection on one's own cultural location in order to manage one's cultural assumptions and behaviours. Participants in our study recognised that their immersion in course content encouraged development of their cultural intelligence, demonstrating the maxim that teaching is an effective way to learn (Cortese, 2005).

A great source of success for the unit [course] and the team is the imperative to consider different perspectives (worldviews), and practice humility: as a matter of fact, these are the very techniques that can be used to improve one's cultural intelligence. Brett

Notably, participants applied this learning to both their professional and personal lives. For instance, Possum observed that course teaching "*allowed me opportunities to reflect on my own cultural competence and how I deal with prejudice, discrimination and racism in my workplace and in the community.*"

I am continually experimenting and trying to become better at applying respectful curiosity to unravelling opinions in situations with intimates and new acquaintances when I have felt a major difference in opinions or values, especially trying to do so when I feel in myself a hostility, or defensiveness, or a will to stop having a difficult conversation. Jason

Overall, [the course] has taught me how to communicate complex issues to the general public with a focus on developing mutual understanding and empathy. Reading students' assignments and discussion board posts shows me 'where people are at' and teaches me how to empathetically communicate issues about racism, ethnocentrism, intersectionality etc. without feeling agitated or triggered when a student/friend/parent/in-law is racist or prejudiced - I focus on the win-win end point of understanding in a conversation rather than the journey which, through tutoring in this unit, I've learned is messy and complex. I think this community of peer learning, between staff and students, is a strength of the unit. I apply this to all situations with friends and family and peers. Poppy

I felt very supported by the teaching team generally, and senior members in particular ... Weekly meetings were an opportunity to raise issues within an environment of shared understandings of the challenges of tertiary level teaching, on-line delivery and confronting content. Astrid

I don't feel alone – there's always someone with which to discuss issues, give a second opinion. Phillipa

Overall, I feel very supported. I am generally able to take time off and team members will competently step up to cover my duties. I am confident team members know enough about my work so they can handle any emergency or issue in my absence. Brett

Collegial relationships are pivotal for productive collaborations. Hence, well-developed interpersonal skills are vital for effective teamwork (Kelly et al., 2020). All topics discussed in this section — joint activities, scholarly cross-fertilisation and reflexivity — depend on mutually supportive peer relationships characterised by trust and humility. Supportive peer relationships enable staff to demonstrate vulnerability and humility as they reflect on their teaching praxis. As our teaching team members develop their reflexivity and cultural intelligence, they are enabled to successfully negotiate challenging aspects of collaborations, such as the ability to withstand having one's ideas questioned (Benjamin, 2000). This enhances the resilience of the teaching team, as discussed in the following section.

In the extracts above, participants describe their experiences of our teaching model as supportive. For example, Brett shares how team members cover for one another as needed by stepping into different roles. This is distinct from the common experiences of casual academics feeling unable to take a break from tutoring for fear of being excluded from future opportunities (Richardson et al., 2021). Collaboration reduces the burden on individual teachers while ensuring continuity for the students and the course. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between team-teaching in which the overall workload is simply shared between members and our collaborative model which is "a synergistic effect and expectation of mutual engagement to provide greater clarity and interaction with students" (Fuller & Bail, 2011, p. 73). Team-teaching based on a division of labour would not necessarily leave teachers equipped to cover for one another. Our collaborative teaching model provides flexibility which is experienced as supportive. This can be contrasted with the 'flexibility' of insecure work lauded by neoliberalism (Gill, 2014).

Theme Two: Support and sustainability

In this section, we discuss sustainability by which we mean the potential longevity of the model for both staff and the institution. As discussed in the previous section, peer support is an in-built feature of collaborative teaching models, which centre an ethos of sharing responsibility for planning, instruction and evaluation of students (Fuller & Bail, 2011; Williams et al., 2010). In addition to the practical support from spreading the responsibility of teaching burdens and pressures (Buckley, 2000), participants in our study noted that their peer relationships increased their investment in the course. These features enhance the course's sustainability for staff. We conclude this section by discussing the institutional support that is crucial for sustaining collaborative teaching models.

Investment

Having a shared goal is an essential premise for successful collaboration: "without at least one shared goal or endpoint, there would be no reason for two or more entities to work together at all" (Bedwell et al., 2012, p. 134). Participants indicated that collegial relationships and shared goals helped them feel invested in the course and supported a sense of professional wellbeing. Participants did not discuss 'burnout' but highlighted ways in which they were invested in the unit:

Support

Relationships with peers enabled participants to feel professionally supported. Participants described the team as a "community of learners" (Brett) where "people pick up after each other" (Jason). Rudy felt "super supported" and Ruth noted her "trust in the team". These elements of support demonstrate a community marked by teamwork:

I found my contributions enabled increased feelings of being valued as an active team member, as opposed to simply delivering weekly content designed by a sole unit coordinator in a somewhat passive manner. Astrid

Astrid highlights that she felt more confident which increased her participation in the course. Jason felt a "high level of ownership of the model" and Ruth explained that she "felt invested in it."

The peer-to-peer learning and collaborative model of teaching where all members can have their say and are listened to and have the opportunity to develop content. Shared ownership of the [course] encourages tutors to care about it — this is crucial to collaboration and sustainability of the [course]. Poppy

In the extract above, Poppy explicitly links staff investment to the long-term sustainability of the course.

Institutional support

As discussed above, collegial relationships based on shared activities are crucial for productive collaborations. Institutional support in the form of allocated time and funding is vital to facilitate shared activities such as meetings. Our teaching team has been fortunate to be housed within a supportive school within our university and to have had a 'champion' (recently retired) who recognised and supported the course. In practice, this means that staff are reimbursed for the time they contribute, whether that is developing content, moderating assessments, conducting online tutorials, participating in review days and so on. This model can be contrasted with those where a set number of hours is allocated for specific tasks, such as tutoring or marking, with no allowance for course improvement or contingencies. Participants reported on feeling 'valued' as there was sufficient, remunerated time "to develop ideas and projects in collaboration" (Brett).

Collegial attitude of the team members is a key enabler — also the support of line managers to spend the time to collaborate in a way that quality curriculum is supported. Very supported by [university] and my faculty. We had funds to support the development and employ staff and space in workload to contribute. Betty

I feel very supported...The School...is also really supportive in terms of having a 'champion' and financial support for us to meet to collaborate. Financial support for the work we do is a literal way to show that we're valued. Phillipa

Coming under the School...is enabling. Unfortunately, politics and economics matter, the School...is a stable school and is happy to fund the teaching unit. Poppy

I think the support from School...— i.e. trusting the team to do the work — has been fantastic. Also that they supported paying for marking etc., it never seemed to be a problem. Ruth

Successful, sustainable collaborative teaching teams rely on institutional recognition of their strengths and financial support. When casual staff are financially reimbursed for their time, their work is incentivised in a way that is not always possible for full-time, tenured staff. As Possum explains, tenured staff juggle multiple responsibilities:

Getting quarantined time away from the other units I teach and my research and admin work of my substantive position can be difficult. It felt like that I was often doing [course] 'off the side of my desk'. Possum

As 'greedy institutions' (Currie et al., 2000), universities can leave staff exhausted, and can do far more to care for their employees (Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017), as asserted by Jason:

For me teaching into this unit has provided a curative or restorative experience...I earnestly believe that universities need to change radically to make good on their espoused values: this has to start with caring for people and placing value on collegiality. Part of this has to do with building in more reserves and redundancies and creating situations in which people can operate with genuine team spirit, with the appropriate skill sets for communicating openly and respectfully. Jason

Participants in our study observed that institutional support was foundational. Collegial relationships and peer learning would not be strengthened to the same extent without institutional (financial) support for collaborative activities. In addition to supporting staff, collaborative teaching models also help address the precariousness of teaching in the current university sector (Ryan & Bhattacharyya, 2012).

Limitations of the model

Our collaborative teaching model provides evidence of a sustainable and effective approach to supportive teaching and learning. However, time-poor academics may find the time taken to reach consensus frustrating:

While team-based teaching is a wonderful opportunity, sometimes reaching a consensus and progressing can be challenging. Betty

Another limitation is finding the time to collaborate: it requires coordination to enable synchronous meetings where a lot of the work happens. Brett

Yanamandram and Noble (2006) argue that the composition of the team is crucial for determining the success or failure of a team-teaching effort (see also Cheruvelil et al., 2014). Team composition has an additional complexity in our course on cultural diversity—multiple participants identified the lack of cultural diversity in the teaching team as a weakness:

We need to enlist more diverse team members and include some more content delivered by Indigenous colleagues. Jason

The other constraint I've felt is the 'people like us' nature of the teaching team — it was really hard to know how to recruit people other than people I/we knew...I think that's a problem. Ruth

It would be lovely to have a more diverse range of cultural backgrounds for the tutors and coordinators so as to bring in more diversity in a natural way. Sophie

As outlined by Ruth, the homogeneity of the teaching team is due to problematic recruitment processes — team members are usually invited to join, based on subject expertise. While we are fortunate to have team members who coincidentally have great teamwork skills, we argue that the environment into which new members are inculcated facilitates collaboration.

Conclusion

The impetus for this research arose from group reflexive processes that have become standard in our course delivery, in which we discuss student performance, moderate results and design and adapt the course together. These processes are predicated on our institution supporting us by agreeing to pay for this labour. We were motivated to go beyond our paid hours to extend our reflections in this study. The current team members had remarked to each other that, as well as enabling us to deliver our course effectively, our teaching experience has been particularly enriched from our membership in this team. Despite our diversity in terms of discipline, we share a critical reflexive approach, and commitment to both social justice and lifelong learning. Our enquiry into the experiences of previous staff members who have contributed to the course over the years corroborated the experiences of the current team members, with consistent themes emerging from the questionnaires we administered.

Thematically, the questionnaire responses indicate that the subject area we teach has impacted on how we teach and work together. Respondents commented that teaching about cultural diversity has made them aware of ways to keep working on their own their interpersonal skills. Values intrinsic to working effectively with cultural diversity — empathy, mindfulness, and reflexivity — inflect our communication and exchanges with each other and make for a highly constructive team environment in which ideas are contested.

Institutional support has been a vital contextual component for our team development and teaching satisfaction which ameliorates aspects of the precarity of casual employment. Working together developmentally has provided highly valued opportunities for 'on-the-job' skills acquisition and fortified our deep commitment to refreshing course content and adapting it for different student cohorts. Our future research will aim to draw on small group theory and to demonstrate links between effective collaborative teaching, casual staff satisfaction and good student outcomes.

In conclusion, we call on universities to respond to the experiences of staff in the neoliberal institution by prioritising their wellbeing. In particular, we urge an increased focus on members of the academic precariat. Universities should take urgent steps to remedy the structures that have created an underclass of marginalised academics. We argue that collaborative teaching models provide a blueprint for a teaching environment which is supportive and enriching for staff and beneficial for the long-term viability of the institution. Despite the advantages of collaborative teaching models however, we caution that they cannot address many problematic aspects of the neoliberal university, such as insecure employment. We are wary of propping up a crumbling edifice and contend that deep structural reform is imperative.

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