

Cultivating Faculty: Early career educators' journey towards excellence

Claire Goode, D. Prof. Prac.; Yvonne Thomas, PhD; and Elizabeth Martin PhD
Otago Polytechnic at Te Pūkenga, New Zealand

Introduction

Early career educators, following transition from professional practice, must develop skills and practice to become autonomous in content development and delivery, as they build confidence in supporting and assessing students' skills.

The 'Keys to Teaching Excellence' model is one outcome of Claire's doctoral research (Goode, 2021), investigating the stories of national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees, including their trajectories and professional practice. The study identified five over-arching keys to teaching excellence, each made up of characteristics inherent in a teacher's personality, and skills which can be developed through practice and reflection.

Findings: Four Preliminary Themes

Theme 1: Blending Identities

Participants had brought their professional passion and identities into the teaching role. They felt able to use their professional skills in their new role, and saw this as an extension of their professional role and qualities.

"my teaching probably comes from my [profession] and I've adapted what I've learned in working with others, empowering others, ... sharing our passion, enabling everybody to feel safe." (P3H)

They talked of a gradual adoption of the educator identity, blended with their professional identity, as they became more established in their educator careers.

"this is where I want to be and I'm actually thinking of myself as an educator... and referring to myself as an educator... I'm thinking about it as a career and longevity." (P10)

Theme 2: Authentic Roots - Self and Stories

Participants strongly related to being authentic in their relationships with learners, and used their experiences from practice in their new role. There was acknowledgement that being authentic involved being vulnerable, especially in acknowledging their lack of expertise in some areas.

"being authentic for me is like one of my teaching tools... leading with vulnerability and authenticity... we're all just figuring this out on this journey. Yeah, it's one of my teaching tools." (P4H)

Sharing stories from practice and sharing passion from other aspect of experience provided examples from which students can learn.

"I tell stories, like relevant stories to what we're teaching, obviously. So that gives a more personable approach." (P2D)

"So just sharing my passion and my experiences with students first. Get them excited and involved as well, yeah." (P5H)

Theme 3: Cultivating Facilitation Skills (safe space)

Participants were committed to engaging students and finding ways to make learning accessible and enjoyable. Creating the right environment for students to be able to learn was an important part of being a good teacher.

"the teachers that you loved or the lecturers that you loved were the ones that created a fun learning environment in which you almost didn't even realize that you were learning... So I would say I try and create that space all the time and bring energy." (P2H)

They developed learning activities that encouraged engagement and discussion, whether they were working in classrooms or online.

"if you are creating opportunities to use the learning in a safe place, then that empowers them. So I spend a lot of time making up activities and you know that enables them to do that." (P2D)

Theme 4: Growth through Learning

Participants recognised they were journeying towards excellent through their own learning, and that they were learning alongside the students.

"So I'm learning at the same time as my students and I'm able to bring that... that learning... the mistakes, the triumphs... into the classroom with them, to show them that... I'm actually... in it with them." (P10)

This was closely linked to their love of learning and determination to improve as an educator.

"always looking for ways to do it better ... part of really enjoying learning... myself and really enjoying the process of learning and teaching. They're kind of intertwined to me." (P20)



Research Aim: To investigate how a teaching excellence model impacts on early-career teachers' practice and on their identity as a teacher.

Research Question: How do early career teachers perceive their identity, development, and practice in relation to a model of teaching excellence?

Methods: A qualitative descriptive method was used to investigate the perceptions of early career educators (with 3-5 years' experience), across three tertiary institutions.

Three focus groups were conducted, with a short video introduction to 'Keys to Teaching Excellence' model provided at the start, followed by an opportunity for participants to reflect and apply the model to their own teaching practice.

12 Participants: including 11 employed in Health Colleges or Faculties



Discussion

Overall, participants were positive about the model, finding it simple to use, achievable, and very useful as a reflection tool for their own practice.

Characteristics were recognisable to participants as ones they already had, were working on, and/or aspired to. Links to their practitioner/professional experience were evident; participants felt they carried several characteristics from practice into their learning and teaching.

References

Goode, C. (2021). An excellent adventure: Investigating the stories of Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees [Doctoral thesis, Otago Polytechnic]. <https://hdl.handle.net/10652/5480>