



Educational Designer social influence: changing teaching and learning practice

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In the current neoliberal agenda, universities require Educational Designers (EDs) to establish influence and ensure the improvements in education for the benefit of graduates. The preservation of high-quality teaching is fundamental in connecting educators with students, which was crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the influence of EDs on affecting a change in teaching practice has not been adequately explored. This case study collected qualitative survey responses from seventeen EDs in one Australian university, and used inductive thematic analysis to explore how they attempted to influence academics to change teaching practices. Results indicated a definitive need to collaborate *with* academics to implement the desired changes. Moreover, strong professional relationships with academics, effective communication, and creating a favourable environment were important to the EDs' influence attempts. Cultural challenges within the university was an interesting discovery regarding influence capability. These findings provide key insights into how EDs support a change in educational practice within the university environment.

Keywords: educational designer, social influence, influencing change, university teaching practice

Introduction

In Australia, Educational Designers (EDs) have been an integral part of influencing effective quality teaching (and learning) practices in universities for over a hundred years (Seeto & Herrington, 2006). Yet, their role and positioning are often invisible or even camouflaged (Akerman, 2020). While empirical research into this occupational group has increased, the perspectives of EDs and how they affect change in academics' educational practices has not been adequately established. This research investigates "*How do Australian EDs who practise in a university setting influence academics to implement changes to their teaching practices?*".

Who are EDs and what are their roles in universities?

Within the Australian higher education context, EDs operate under a variety of titles, including educational designer, instructional designer, learning designer, and academic developer (Bisset, 2018). In the university under study, 'educational designer' has been exclusively used to describe the role responsible for the "effective uptake of new educational approaches, educational technologies, and the use of learning spaces" (University Position description, n.d.). Hence, the acronym 'EDs' will be used to describe the participants' role and practice.

There is an ever-growing body of literature that describes the practices of EDs in Australian higher education. Bisset (2018) proposed that EDs "operat[e] at the intersection of research, theories and practice in instructional design and academic development, yet these professional orientations are themselves fluid and evolving" (p. 73). Alena et al. (2019) stated that EDs are influencers who inspire positive changes in practice. Furthermore, they distinguish that EDs demonstrate leadership by "modelling the way", and "enabling others to act" (p. 362). Similarly, Slade et al. (2017) found that influencing academics was amongst the highest ranked work that learning designers do on a daily basis. However, there is a call for "urgent research...to validate the findings and inform professional identity" of this emerging group (Alena et al., 2019 p. 362).

To optimise the students' learning experience, there is a conspicuous desire by universities to ensure the quality of teaching practices. However, resistance to teaching and learning enhancement due to time pressure, resource constraints and student numbers (Knapper, 2016), continue to impact the implementation of change and quality improvements. Quinn (2012) contends that teaching is being under-valued, teaching development is unnecessary or driven by compliance. Changes in educational-technology affordances and diverse ways of learning have also

created great disruptions to the university landscape (Pelletier et al., 2022). Consequently, these various changes and challenges have highlighted the need for EDs to lead and facilitate while simultaneously serving as change champions in the transformation of teaching practices (Altena et al., 2019).

Methodology

Social influence is defined by Pratkanis's (2007) as being linked to processes such as "conformity (creating or changing behaviour or belief to match the response of others), persuasion or attitude change (change in response to a message, discourse, or communication), compliance (change in response to an explicit request), yielding to social forces (change in response to the structure of the social situation), or helping (change in response to someone's need)" (p. 17). Pratkanis proposed four broad categories of non-coercive social influence tactics, (1) landscaping, (2) credible and social relationships, (3) effective message tactics, and (4) emotional tactics. Further to this, Cialdini (2009) argues that reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity can increase one's influence on another's decision making. Pratkanis's (2007) work was chosen over Cialdini's (2009) on social influence as this study's theoretical foundation, as Pratkanis's specific influence tactics and detailed explanations enabled the researchers to appreciate the distinct parallels between the literature and the collected data. Furthermore, the social influence lens supports a contemporary visibility into EDs' practice, hence addressing some gaps in the literature.

The philosophical positioning of social constructivism played an integral part in this study. It enabled the insider researchers to obtain a deeper understanding of how other EDs understand their own reality (Cohen et al. 2011), in a research-intensive university. Considering the potential ED's diverse locations, time constraints and limitation of resources, it was determined that data was best collected via a qualitative survey rather than via individual interviews. Furthermore, given that EDs were in the midst of supporting the rapid move to online teaching due to COVID-19, conducting individual interviews might have decreased the anonymity required and further increased what is now colloquially known as Zoom (video conferencing) fatigue.

As EDs themselves, the research team had access to the internal community of practice (CoP) member list, and other communication channels including emails and the Google Hangouts chat platform. Once ethics approval was granted, an email was sent to thirty-nine listed colleagues in April 2020 via the generic ED CoP email address to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The email contained the mandatory information about the study, and the first survey question required consent before proceeding with the remaining questions. Participants had approximately two weeks to complete the survey and during this time there was one reminder sent out via the aforementioned email address.

The survey questions focused on eliciting relevant professional information about the participants, including position title, position classification, education qualifications and career backgrounds. Informed by Pratkanis's (2007) social influence framework, two open-ended questions were also included for participants to elaborate on their understanding about influencing practice and make comments about their influence attempts on changing educational practice within the university environment. Eighteen responses were yielded (46.2% response rate). One response was excluded, due to the participant's work being described as 'developing' educational technology rather than supporting teaching and learning practice. Among the seventeen respondents, most are professional staff (Professional: 16, Academic: 1). The majority hold or were working towards postgraduate degrees (PhD or PhD in progress: 5, Master or Master in progress: 9, Graduate certificate/Diploma: 1, Bachelor: 2). Nine participants had their highest education qualification in Education, with respondents having worked on the current ED job for an average of 3.29 years (SD=2.57).

Braun and Clarke's (2012) inductive approach to thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. As insider-researchers, the research team could "draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues with whom normal social interactions of working communities have been developed" (Costley et al., 2010, p. 20). In particular they could "study a particular issue in depth and with special knowledge about that issue, ... hav(ing) easy access to people and information that can further enhance that knowledge" (Costley et al., 2010, p. 22). However, ensuring participants' anonymity and researchers' impartiality are among the greatest challenges in insider research (Costley et al., 2010). This study was no exception. By coding the colleagues' responses individually and re-theming the codes collaboratively, the researchers believe that they minimised the impact of reflexivity in the research.

Findings

The following sections highlight the thematic findings from the survey data: (1) relationships - trust and credibility; (2) effective communication; (3) creating a favourable environment and; (4) navigating cultural challenges. The first three themes highlight how EDs influence change in academics' teaching practice and thus have an impact on connections with students. The fourth theme showed the impact of cultural challenges on the EDs' ability to influence academic staff's teaching practices. All aspects are fundamentally intertwined. Survey responses did not demonstrate a connection to Pratkanis' fourth category - that of "...emotions to persuade." (Pratkanis, 2007, p. 19). The reason for this is unknown, and one possible reason is that the survey questions did not allude to any of Pratkanis' (2007) influence categories.

Relationships - trust and credibility

To influence and, in turn, change teaching practice, the EDs in this study disclosed that trust and credibility must first be established with their academic colleagues. They alluded that the most important aspect was to first be recognised - by others - as having expertise and being able to practice, within the educational field. This study highlighted that participants have the expertise and knowledge in the discipline of education. Existing research indicates that EDs enter the position from "...diverse professional, theoretical and educational backgrounds" (Bird, 2004, p. 123). Knowledge and experience in the field of education was necessary to establish credibility and a trusting connection between EDs and academic staff. Additionally, several participants noted that while academic staff are content/discipline experts, they may not necessarily have a formalised teaching qualification.

Most academics are not professional teachers so they need a lot of guidance in how to do that part of their job and we are the best to help through research, peer work, and what others do. We are professional, qualified, experienced and understand their issues, we build trust and work one on one to improve the academic and the student experience. (P-13)

Yet, expertise and knowledge appeared to be insufficient in influencing a change in practice. Pratkanis (2007) proposes that to establish influence, there needs to be "a social relationship that facilitates influence between the source and target of influence" (p.30). EDs encounter many opportunities to build social relationships with academics, and indirectly with students. These encounters include one-on-one consultations, facilitation of professional learning, and building resources, where examples of evidence-based practices can be shared and facilitated with academics. Several participants indicated that they undertake these activities to establish a relationship with academics. As P-5 indicates, they build this through an "audit tool...for the purpose of providing comprehensive, constructive feedback to academics regarding how they can improve their students' engagement and learning". Others discussed resources which they themselves have built and/or found "to assist academics in developing their educational practice" (P-8). While previous studies have described the role of EDs as being responsible for supporting academic staff, designing and delivering professional learning, and managing projects (Mitchell et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2007), very few have evaluated these activities' effectiveness on influencing teaching practice and/or engagement with students.

Effective Communication

In any relationship, effective communication and the use of a common discourse is important; and the studied participants echoed the same sentiment. Not only did participants engage in local (school/department) communication strategies, they were also instrumental at a central level (faculty/university) for affecting change in teaching practices. Pratkanis (2007) posits that an "effective persuasive message is one that focuses the targets' attention and cognitive activity on exactly what the communicator wants them to think about" (p. 41).

The participants indicated that effective messaging (through effective communication) supported their roles and when environmental needs changed, they increased their publications as indicated by P-5 below:

Communication - a conduit for clear, regular, relevant communication is required to help build a sense of community and shared knowledge. We send a monthly teaching and learning newsletter for this purpose. This was increased to weekly during 2020 to cater for the increased need for communication and community. (P-5)

Other participants discussed how they supported communication through documentation and evidence.

When I started in my current role in 2015, I developed a holistic and strategic approach to facilitating faculty-wide curriculum transformation. I saw the need to document the curriculum at the program and major level, and share that back to teaching teams to start a conversation about change, as there was clear evidence of poor practice that was not being addressed. (P-14)

Creating a favourable environment

The neoliberal agenda facing universities has resulted in changes to traditional practices and a blurring of practice boundaries (Whitchurch, 2015). In this study, EDs were well aware of the impacts that such an agenda has on influencing and ensuring that quality teaching practices are upheld within the university. Pratkanis (2007) advocates for ‘landscaping or pre-persuasion’, creating favourable situations in which “the target is likely to be receptive to a given course of action and respond in a desired manner” (p. 20). Participants discussed many opportunities in which they established favourable climates to influence, especially during the recent and rapid move to online delivery due to COVID-19. EDs discussed building human and non-human resources, establishing communities of practice and evidence-based practices through collaboration, as well as contributing to the university’s strategic needs. The resources which they created, shared and/or showcased bridged the gap between colleagues who may “never otherwise talk to each other and share ideas” (P-9). These unique circumstances enabled EDs to create a favourable environment in which teaching practice(s) were celebrated, shared and demonstrated - enabling others to learn about what can be effective within the teaching space, and in connections with students. One participant also narrated that her contribution to the course redesign team, in a 3-year redevelopment project, was “adopted” and is “still guid[ing] the skill development across the course” (P-12) today, ensuring a direct connection for students with real-world experiences.

Cultural Challenges

This participants in this study have alluded to cultural challenges that directly impact their ability to enact social influence. These challenges were evident when discussing individual teaching practices; including a lack of evaluative procedures (once change had occurred) and an intrinsic reluctance from academics to alter their practices. EDs are responsible for providing academic support and facilitating a change from traditional and sometimes outdated teaching practices. The responses from participants suggest that the historical cultural nuances of the traditional university ontology, where the academic is seen as the source of all knowledge, may have a direct impact on social influence. Participants’ responses at times demonstrated frustration with their own attempts to bring about social influence. As seen below, although they provide opportunities for change, there is little if any evaluative outcomes to determine if the change(s) have occurred.

We run regular training sessions for our teaching staff - participants usually identify these as informative and that they would do something with what they learn. However, it is difficult to establish how well this translates into changed teaching practice. (P-4)

The twenty-first century university setting is said to be one fraught with a lack of clear boundaries and many “fault lines” (Rowland, 2002). This study has demonstrated that building relationships with others (based on trust and credibility), effective communication, and establishing a favourable environment are fundamentally entwined when EDs influence a change in teaching practice. In achieving this, EDs can indirectly impact the ongoing connections that educators have with students. However, the studied EDs are challenged by the university’s cultural nuances related to their positioning and academics’ reluctance to alter practices.

Limitations

It’s important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, participants were recruited solely from one university, and this was the same university in which the researchers were employed. This has implications to the validity and impartiality of the research. Furthermore, neither interviews nor focus groups were organised to gather in-depth insights about participants’ influence attempts. In the future, focus groups using key questions framed according to Pratkanis’s four categories could be beneficial in addressing the fourth category of emotional influence tactics that did not appear in survey data. Nonetheless, the research findings have indicated that further investigations into how EDs influence change in universities and beyond, is necessary.

Conclusion

High-quality teaching practices are fundamentally important in the ongoing connections between students and educators, with EDs playing a strategic and surreptitious role. This research aimed to gain an understanding of how EDs influence academics to implement improvements in their teaching practices, in an Australian research-intensive university. Through the lens of Pratkanis's (2007) social influence tactics, the data demonstrated three aspects of how EDs influence a change in teaching practices and thus reconnect with students. These included: (1) building relationships - trust and credibility, (2) effective communication, and (3) creating a favourable environment to enable a change in teaching practices. Status quo in teaching practices and the lack of consistent evaluative evidence of impact were repeatedly noted, and these cultural challenges were perceived as inhibitors of EDs' influence attempts. Future research is needed to extend our understanding of how EDs influence a change in teaching practices and inadvertently reconnect and build the student-educator relationship.

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