

Enabling transitions:

How a centre for teaching and learning enhances teaching quality at a research-led university

Francois Cilliers, Hanelie Adendorff, Nicoline Herman, Karin Cattell, Susan van Schalkwyk, Brenda Leibowitz
Centre for Teaching and Learning, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

This paper highlights the role that the Centre for Teaching and Learning plays in enhancing individual practice, departmental approaches to teaching and the teaching culture at Stellenbosch University, a research-led university.

Our Centre undertakes three types of activity aimed at achieving individual and institutional outcomes. These are: providing growth opportunities for academics; enhancing departmental and institutional regard and reward for teaching; and creating an enabling environment. We also seek to understand how academics grow as educationalists, and factors that facilitate and hinder growth and good practice. Individual academics follow a trajectory along a continuum of growth in teaching practice and achievement that ultimately results in both contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning and providing leadership in the teaching arena.

Thus with a clear strategy and initiatives targeted at individual and institutional level, a centre for teaching and learning can identify, promote and reward good teaching practice.

Key

Growth opportunity

Regard, recognition, reward

Enabling environment

Results of our research

Paper (2946/2500 words)

In March 2007, Prof Althea Jacobs attended a dinner hosted by the Rector of our university. In November 2008, she received an award and in July 2009, she presented a paper at an international conference in Rotorua, New Zealand. These may seem rather unexciting events in the life of an academic, but I'd like to share why I believe they are meaningful, how they came about and how this highlights the role a centre for teaching and learning has played in enhancing quality in the practice and culture of teaching at a research-led university.

For the record, this is a synthesised case study of a fictitious academic, but it is based on actual events at our university. Initiatives and activities that identify, promote and reward quality teaching and which enable the transition of academics along a continuum of growth in teaching practice and achievement will be highlighted. So, please join me in a review of some of the highlights of Althea's journey.

Althea attends a dinner

This first part of the story highlights initiatives aimed at facilitating the transition of an academic from less to more reflective practice in their teaching. It ends in March 2007 when Althea attended the *Rector's Prestige Dinner for Top-Performing First-Year Students*. The top-performing first-year students in each faculty are invited by Stellenbosch University's Rector to attend the dinner, an initiative of our Centre. Each student is required to nominate, in writing, a lecturer that has had a profound influence on them. These academics are also invited to attend the dinner, where their nominations are read out. Althea's tutorials and her use of e-learning were two of the things highlighted by the student who nominated her. Things didn't always go smoothly in Althea's classes, however.

She was appointed as an associate professor in the Biology department in 2005, having taught for five years at a university in England. We first met her when she attended the Centre for Teaching and Learning's **Professional Educational Development for Academics (PREDAC) Programme**, in January 2005. This programme was established in 1999, when **policy was also established** determining that all newly appointed academics should attend the programme.

Althea attended the programme under much protest and despite several attempts by her to get out of doing so. However, after telling us at the start of the programme that she was only there because her head of department had forced her to come, she came to us at the end of the programme and shared not only how much she had enjoyed the programme and had learned, but also that she would encourage all new staff joining her department to attend, whatever their rank.

She subsequently tried several of the techniques discussed on the course but with disastrous consequences. Her **student feedback** at the end of the semester was very bad, with extensive and varied complaints from students in the feedback and to the head of department. Several parents also complained to the head of department. Our Centre **runs the student feedback system** for the university, and leads periodic **reviews of the policy** in this regard, which presently requires that feedback be taken at least once every two years for each module and each lecturer.

But I digress. Althea was very emotional when she **consulted** with an educational adviser in our Centre, all the more so for the fact that she had always received reasonably good feedback at her previous university. That consultation resulted in amended plans for the next semester. She also invited an adviser to come and do a **classroom observation** and attended a specialised **presentations skills workshop**. Althea also read various "**snapshot**" **case studies** highlighting good e-learning practice in the web-based, in-house journal **Teaching Matters** (get the pun?) we run. At the end of the year, she attended a series of workshops on teaching at our annual **Spring Teaching Academy** (STA).

Implementing ideas from these various initiatives resulted in considerably improved student feedback by the end of the year, and her confidence as a teacher was growing in leaps and bounds.

We *interviewed her* for the **research project** we are currently undertaking to better understand how academics use student feedback to promote good teaching (Petersen 2008). We discovered that she now regularly obtains in-class feedback from students and actively engages with results of her formal student feedback.

In May 2006, Althea attended the inaugural university in-house **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Conference** that our unit conceptualised and implemented. She attended various presentations on teaching by fellow academics. She was particularly inspired by the **international guest speaker** that year from the United States, who focussed on the topic of teaching first-year students. This again led to further refinement of her teaching.

In the mean time, our Centre had submitted a **proposal to the University's Committee for Learning and Teaching (ComLT)** to hold a *dinner* each year honouring top-performing students and academics nominated by them who had had a particular impact on them. This was part of the **First Year Academy** initiative that is run out of our Centre. The Vice-Rector for Teaching, who chairs that committee, approved both the proposal and allocated additional funds for the dinner in our subsequent budget. Althea was, then, a member of the first group of academics honoured in this way in 2007.

A moment's reflection is in order, before moving to the next part of Althea's story. Initiatives that contribute to the transition from less to more reflective practice such as PREDAC, the Spring Teaching Academy, the SoTL Conference and student feedback are typically targeted at a mass market. We have averaged around 420 attendances annually over the past three years across PREDAC, STA and the conference. These initiatives are also expected to be of lesser impact, although, we have some evidence of lasting and meaningful impact on teaching practice (Cilliers and Herman Submitted).

Althea awarded the Rector's Award for Teaching Excellence

This next segment of the story highlights how initiatives can facilitate an academic's transition from reflective to scholarly teaching practice. It ends in November 2008, when Althea was again honoured by the Rector of our University, this time when he awarded her the *Rector's Award for Teaching Excellence* in her faculty. This award has been made annually since 1994. According to the **policy in this regard**, academics can be nominated for this award by colleagues or students. Althea was nominated by a group of her students. While different faculties take different approaches, in her faculty, Althea had to **prepare a teaching portfolio** and make a presentation about her teaching to the faculty's award committee. Her portfolio and presentation were notable for the degree to which they evidenced a scholarly approach to teaching, rather than the descriptive approach that characterises the portfolios that many nominees submit.

Her approach to teaching had not always been scholarly, though. Her practice at her previous university had been based more on her own experience and intuition, flavoured by advice from colleagues. She had been thrown in at the deep end when she was appointed and expected to teach

an undergraduate and an Honours course in her first semester of teaching. After her somewhat shaky start to teaching at Stellenbosch, one of the things Althea did in 2006 was to become involved in a **collaborative research project** run with national grant funding secured in a competitive process by our Centre. This project investigated the teaching of large first year classes. Althea investigated ways to improve her tutorials and, wanting to know more about running effective tutorials, for the first time started **reading some literature** on teaching.

The literature was given to her by one of the advisers in our Centre. She found the papers difficult to get her teeth into, as the articles were written in a style and with a vocabulary that were very foreign to her “natural sciences eye” (Adendorff 2008; Adendorff 2008). However, after some months of working closely with an adviser from our Centre on the project, her understanding of the logic and discourse of educational research grew.

In May 2007, Althea *made a presentation* on her tutorial work at the SoTL Conference. Her paper was more “show and tell” than scholarly, but did link her work to existing “how to” literature. We subsequently invited her to be part of a *panel of academics at PREDAC* in July, sharing their thoughts about good teaching practice with newly appointed academics. Althea was quite anxious about making a presentation to colleagues at PREDAC and spent more time reading about teaching to support her presentation.

By this time, she was familiar with certain key educational constructs and more comfortable reading reviews of educational literature. As her interest in tutorials developed, Althea decided to apply for funding from the University’s **Fund for Innovation and Research in Learning and Teaching (FIRLT)**. This competitive, internal grant system emanated from the **Strategy for Teaching and Learning** at the university that had been approved by Senate in 2001. It took a further three years of negotiation before funding was approved however. From an initial amount of €22 500, this grew to €72 000 by 2008. In November 2007, Althea was awarded a FIRLT Grant. Two of the conditions attached to these grants are that grant holders must report in writing to the FIRLT Committee and must make a public presentation on their work, preferably at the university’s SoTL Conference.

Her approach to tutorials was also the subject of a *“snapshot” case study* published in *Teaching Matters* late in 2007. When the Vice-Rector (Teaching) asked for suggestions about academics to participate in the **working group reviewing of the university’s Learning Materials Policy**, we nominated Althea.

When she was nominated for the Rector’s Award, Althea contacted one of the advisers in our Centre who had made a presentation on teaching portfolios at PREDAC. After an initial **consultation**, she attended a **workshop on compiling a portfolio**, based on which she created her portfolio working, on our suggestion, **with an academic from the Department of Chemistry**, who had previously compiled a portfolio and who guided her

development of the portfolio. When considered by the faculty's awards committee, her portfolio received great praise and the decision to give her the award was unanimous.

Before moving on, what principles underlie this second segment of the story? Initiatives such as collaborative research projects, individualised consultations around research project design and appropriate literature and preparing portfolios are targeted at fewer academics and are more resource intensive than other of our initiatives, yet we hope that the impact on teaching and learning will be the more profound for that. We are in the process of implementing a new initiative, the **Auxin Project**. An academic is invited to share their experience on a specific topic with other academics at a *lunch-hour seminar*. If the interest is there, these academics form a **focussed interest group (FIG)** that meets regularly under the guidance of a CTL adviser to read papers on their topic of interest and discuss their own efforts, possibly even undertake collaborative research. This should enhance access for these academics to the educational literature and help enhance their educational research skills. We are also collaborating on a regional initiative to run a post-graduate diploma in higher education. This should also help deepen academics' knowledge of relevant educational topics and develop their educational practice.

Althea presents at an international conference

This last part of the story highlights how initiatives can facilitate an academic's transition from scholarly teaching practice to generating scholarship and providing leadership in the teaching arena. It ends in July 2009 when Althea read a paper at an international conference. Now, it may seem odd to highlight the fact that an academic made a presentation at an international conference. However, bear in mind this is a biology professor presenting at an international teaching and learning conference.

By 2007, Althea was enthused for her teaching task and highly motivated by the results she was achieving. She was intrigued when we put a proposal to her that she undertake a year-long Teaching Fellowship at the CTL, funded by us as a pilot project. (This initiative is currently in the process of being formalised as a University-funded and supported initiative). Interested as she was in teaching, though, Althea was very reluctant to take time out of her disciplinary research programme to undertake the fellowship and lose momentum with her disciplinary research. While everyone in her department, including her head of department, was supportive of her educational endeavours, the pressure to deliver research outputs was substantial. This pressure was particularly acute since the university's decision to position itself as a research-led institution. Nonetheless, her intrinsic motivation to teach well and to understand why what she did did or did not work, was equally high.

Research projects our Centre is busy with shed some light on this. One project exploring how academics get involved in generating teaching scholarship has highlighted the role that three factors play i.e., expanding professional identity beyond a merely disciplinary identity; the lack of reward for teaching; and difficulty accessing educational discourse (Adendorff 2008; Adendorff 2008). Other projects have highlighted the role that intrinsic motivation (Leibowitz, van Schalkwyk et al.

In press; Cilliers and Herman Submitted) plays for academics who choose to devote considerable attention to teaching despite pressures to produce disciplinary research outputs.

What finally decided her to undertake the Fellowship was the *implementation by her Faculty of a new set of guidelines for the appraisal of teaching* during annual performance appraisals. These **guidelines were drawn up at the behest of the ComLT**, under the guidance of an adviser from the CTL as part of the **Stature of Teaching project**. This project was one of the projects of the Vice-Rector (Teaching)'s **Teaching Management Plan**, that replaced the **Strategy for Learning and Teaching** that had previously guided teaching and learning at the university.

The guidelines for the appraisal of teaching were distributed by the ComLT to faculties for scrutiny and utilisation at their discretion. Implementation was thus not regulated by the University's policy on appointments and promotions. Nonetheless, the Dean of the Faculty, who has a keen interest in teaching, encouraged all heads of departments to utilise the guidelines during annual performance appraisals. As a result, various aspects of teaching other than the overall impression mark given by students in student feedback were, for the first time, considered during appraisal discussions.

The quality of Althea's fellowship proposal was the result of numerous other activities. Once she had committed to applying for a Fellowship, she **attended a workshop on researching teaching** ran by an adviser at the CTL. She also had **intensive discussions with another adviser**, who shared her background in the natural sciences but had been working in educational development for some years. Her contact with a biologist at another university who had published about his teaching, whom she met after a presentation he gave on his teaching at the annual national Biology Conference, helped her refine her ideas. Althea also applied for and received additional FIRLT funding to undertake her fellowship project with.

As her various projects generated results, we invited her to *co-present a workshop on tutorials* at our Centre's annual **Spring Teaching Academy**. This resulted in her doing more concentrated reading on tutorials. At our invitation and expense, she also attended a **writing retreat** and the annual **Conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA)**, where she *presented her work to a national audience*. She made a similar *presentation at the annual national Biology Conference*.

Althea made a further *presentation on her work at our internal SoTL Conference* in May 2008, where she won the *award for the best paper*. This award funds attendance at an international teaching and learning conference of the award winner's choice. This resulted in her presentation to an international audience in New Zealand in July this year.

So there you have it. Four teaching years in the life of an academic. This final part of the story illustrates how initiatives like the Fellowship can only be targeted at much smaller numbers of

academics. Supporting those few academics that choose to undertake master's and even doctoral study in higher education falls in a similar category. The intention is to provide a transformational experience and cultivate more profound educational change at the university.

Enabling transitions: Our approach

What I have tried to illustrate with this story is the intertwined threads of our approach to enhancing the quality of teaching practice and culture at our university. With these threads i.e., providing growth opportunities for academics; enhancing regard, recognition and reward for teaching endeavours; and creating an enabling environment to allow academics who want to grow their teaching to flourish, we try to help academics' transition along a continuum of growth. This continuum stretches, we believe, from non-reflective teaching practice through reflective teaching practice to scholarly teaching and finally contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning. We do not aim to move all academics to the point of contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and would be satisfied if the majority of lecturers become at least reflective, perhaps even scholarly, teachers.

In addition to enhancing the quality of individual practice, it is becoming evident to us that our endeavours are helping some academics play a leadership role regarding teaching and learning in their departments, their faculties and in the university more broadly. We have some tantalising hints from our research as to the impact our initiatives have had on individual academics. At present, we are exploring providing more overt support in this regard in the future and hope this will help our Centre further enhance its impact on teaching quality and culture at our university.

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