Chapter 18

Potato, Pot–Ar–To.
Tomato, Tom–Ar–To:
Is Teacher Quality and Teaching Quality the Same?

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ABSTRACT
Research on school effectiveness largely relates to ways of measuring the quality of a school, which is often quantified in terms of students’ ‘academic’ achievement. The impetus for this research was the recognition that as a pre-university pathway provider, the lecturers at the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) face increasingly complex and divergent academic challenges stemming from its 98-100% international student demographic. An anonymous survey comprising two open-ended questions was distributed to EIBT staff for reflection. Rich narrative data from 10 respondents elucidates varied understanding(s) of the difference(s) between ‘teacher’ and ‘teaching’ quality, as well as recommendations for their own Professional Development (PD). It is the author-practitioner’s belief that institutional advancement requires greater attention to ‘teaching’ rather than ‘teachers’, and that PD is a collective effort that is fundamental to overall scholastic success.

INTRODUCTION
Teacher quality may be thought of as the personal traits, skills, and understandings an individual brings to teaching, including dispositions to certain behaviour(s). Indeed, teaching quality is a function of teacher quality. The traits desired of a teacher, however, may vary depending on conceptions of and goals for education. Thus, it may be productive to think of teacher qualities as those associated with what teachers are expected to be and do; ‘[e]ffective teachers can be seen, heard, and sensed’ (Stronge, 2007). On the other hand, ‘[w]e may define good [quality] teaching as instruction that leads to effective learning, which in turn means thorough and lasting acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and values the instructor or the institution has set out to impart’ (Felder & Brent, 1999, p. 10).

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According to Darling-Hammond (2009, p. 3), a ‘high-quality’ teacher may not be able to offer high-quality instruction in a context where there is a mismatch in terms of the demands of the situation and their knowledge and skills. In other words, a high-quality teacher in one circumstance may not be so for another. For example, an able teacher asked to teach subject matter for which they are unprepared may teach poorly; or a teacher who is effective at the elementary school level may be unable to teach at the secondary school level; or a teacher who is able to teach high-ability students may be unable to teach those who struggle to grasp concepts.

Even when a high-quality teacher faces obstacles such as: few opportunities for collegial collaboration; an inadequate or out of-date library; lack of equipment; limited teaching and learning resources; minimal opportunities for Professional Development (PD); overcrowded classrooms; and/or a poor curriculum, the quality of their teaching can be suboptimal (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Thus, hiring knowledgeable teachers, but asking them to teach out of field without the aforementioned tools, is likely to diminish their teaching quality and thus, student learning.

Background

The Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology’s (EIBT) mission is to support students to make the transition from a pre-university preparatory ‘pathway’ diploma to mainstream university and to develop their capacity to succeed at the tertiary-level. A 98% international student population enrol to undertake a Diploma in: Business; Information Technology; or Engineering packaged/partnered with The University of Adelaide or the University of South Australia. Approximately 40 ‘sessional’ and cross-institutional lecturers—ranging in age from their 20s (i.e., PhD candidates and early career researchers) to their 60s (i.e., experienced academics and/or business professionals)—deliver 40+ courses across three back-to-back trimesters (Velliaris, 2016a, 2016b; Velliaris, Willis, & Breen, 2015a, 2015b; Velliaris, Willis, & Pierce, 2015).

The partner university moderates diploma program delivery and grants advanced standing (also known as ‘credit’) for courses passed—equivalent to first-year—if students achieve a specified entry-level Grade Point Average (GPA) upon graduation. Lecturers are required, therefore, to maintain a close relationship with the partner institution’s Course Coordinator. Assessment activities in the diploma must be deemed equivalent in form and duration to those conducted in the partner university’s Bachelor’s degree program. In most cases, assessment items such as examinations are provided by the Course Coordinator, but where they are not, lecturers submit examination questions for approval. Annually, a sample of papers and final marks are moderated cross-institutionally.

As Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face the challenge of meeting increasingly divergent student needs, teacher professional learning for teaching improvement is identified as one answer. Significantly, students studying at EIBT embark on a lifelong journey of personal and professional growth, and their educators should lead by example by updating and renewing their own competencies. Throughout this chapter, the term ‘international students’ or ‘students’ is specific to individuals enrolled in EIBT on temporary Australian student visas and who are predominantly Non-English Speaking Background (NESB). For the purpose of this study, there is scant literature pertaining to pre-university ‘pathway’ programs. This work contributes to bridging that gap. Pathway institutions offer valuable partnerships for the HE sector and it is, therefore, advantageous to conduct research into avenues for strengthening the overall ‘[international] student’ experience.