

Professional Learning, Professional Development and Academic Identity of Sessional Teachers: Underpinning Theoretical Frameworks

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Abstract : This paper explores the theoretical frameworks underpinning professional learning, professional development, and academic identity. The focus is on sessional teachers (also called tutors or adjuncts) in architectural design studios, who may be practitioners, masters or doctoral students and academics hired 'as needed'. Drawing from Schön's work on reflective practice, learning and developmental theories of Vygotsky (social constructionism and zones of proximal development), informal and workplace learning, this research proposes that sessional teachers not only develop their teaching skills but also shape their identities through their 'everyday' work. Continuing academic staff develop their teaching through a combination of active teaching, self-reflection on teaching, as well as learning to teach from others via formalised programs and informally in the workplace. They are provided professional development and recognised for their teaching efforts through promotion, student citations, and awards for teaching excellence. The teaching experiences of sessional staff, by comparison, may be discontinuous and they generally have fewer opportunities and incentives for teaching development. In the absence of access to formalised programs, sessional teachers develop their teaching informally in workplace settings that may be supportive or unhelpful. Their learning as teachers is embedded in everyday practice applying problem-solving skills in ambiguous and uncertain settings. Depending on their level of expertise, they understand how to teach a subject such that students are stimulated to learn. Adult learning theories posit that adults have different motivations for learning and fall into a matrix of readiness, that an adult's ability to make sense of their learning is shaped by their values, expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgements, and they are self-directed. The level of expertise of sessional teachers depends on their individual attributes and motivations, as well as on their work environment, the good practices they acquire and enhance through their practice, career training and development, the clarity of their role in the delivery of teaching, and other factors. The architectural design studio is ideal for study due to the historical persistence of the vocational learning or apprenticeship model (learning under the guidance of experts) and a pedagogical format using two key approaches: project-based problem solving and collaborative learning. Hence, investigating the theoretical frameworks underlying academic roles and informal professional learning in the workplace would deepen understanding of their professional development and how they shape their academic identities. This qualitative research is ongoing at a major university in Australia, but the growing trend towards hiring sessional staff to teach core courses in many disciplines is a global one. This research will contribute to including transient sessional teachers in the discourse on institutional quality, effectiveness, and student learning.

Keywords : academic identity, architectural design learning, pedagogy, teaching and learning, sessional teachers

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