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Embracing Innovation

The Agile Teacher's DNA

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Master of Education – Research

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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In his book The World Is Flat (2005), Thomas Friedman refers to the emergence of a world in the twenty-first century that will be vastly different from the one in which we (current education practitioners) were ourselves, educated. We are made aware of the need to provide learning experiences that prepare students for a globally competitive future, where problem solving, divergent thinking and the ability to be flexible in learning approaches are key components of "success" (Jacobs, 2010). It is considered that students will learn best in an environment where "best" practices are integrated into the classroom and where teachers develop a high sense of adaptability (Cook, Bell, Nugent, & Smith, 2016).

Abstract

In the 21st century, the focus in education should be on the provision of learning experiences that prepare students for a globally connected future, where problem solving, divergent thinking and the ability to be flexible in learning approaches are key indicators of success. Students are thought to learn best in an environment where innovative practices and opportunities for critical thinking are integrated into the classroom; and where teachers develop a high sense of adaptability, engaging students in creative and innovative learning activities (Buchanan, Harlan, Bruce, & Edwards, 2016). How teachers adapt to change and embrace emerging technologies and pedagogical innovation have been topics for debate for some time (Zimmermann, 2006; Sappey & Relf, 2010), with much emphasis on the impact of external influences, access to resources and demographics and less on the characteristics of the individual and their adaptability.

This research study investigated the characteristics of educators who appear to embrace innovation and change, tolerate ambiguity and have a broad sense of perspective. It considered those who seemingly thrive amongst the chaos of learning, giving students what they need, when they need it - the "*seize the day*" or "*agile*" teacher. The focus was primarily from a socio-cultural perspective, exploring practices, social, cultural and environmental factors affecting agile teachers.

The study considered the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of "agile" teachers?
- Who are the "agile" teachers?
- Why do "agile" teachers teach the way they do?

- Are “agile” teachers “great” teachers – and “great” teachers “agile”?
- Do technologies impact on how “agile” teachers teach?

The research design was qualitative, using a grounded theory approach to identify and describe the characteristics of teachers, who demonstrate this adaptability. The study explored the factors that influence the emergence of “agile” characteristics and practices, the methodologies and strategies that influence adaptability, and the relationship between the development of agile characteristics and the use of emerging technologies. The foundation for the study was the interplay between technology, pedagogy and innovation, focusing on the premise and understanding that innovation is the renewal or creation of processes that are effective and add value to existing practices.

The study investigated the diversity in the characteristics exhibited by “agile” teachers. And sought to elicit the narrative of the agile practitioner, using visual metaphor as a stimulus for discussion utilising asynchronous online interviews and teacher reflections. Participants reflected on personal practices, pedagogical implications and the influence of technologies, reflecting the connections between experiences, practice and agile adaptations.

The findings of the study reveal the complexities of identifying the characteristics of the agile practitioner and the implications for practice and educational professional learning. In particular, they reveal the personalised understandings and reflections of agile practice, beliefs of others about the “agile” teacher and the association of social perceptions towards “great” teachers. This study has identified a new descriptor for the exemplary teacher, the term “agile”, and has given insight into how and what the agile teacher or practitioner *thinks,* as well as what they *do* and *say.* The agile teacher generates an autopoietic practice where re-engineering and reconceptualising self occurs, enabling adaptation to changing pedagogical contexts, emerging digital technologies and the individual learning narrative of students.