

---

---

**Developing and sustaining university teaching  
expertise in times of change**

---

---

**A narrative study with award winning university teachers**

**Cathi McMullen**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education, at the University of Technology, Sydney**

**February 2008**

## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

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 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.

**Production Note:**

Signature removed prior to publication.

Signature of Student

---

**To Kevin McMullen (1920-2006)**

**Lifelong learner extraordinaire**

---

---

## Acknowledgements

---

---

Many people have supported me in the production of this thesis. Special thanks go to Mark Tennant for his light but powerful touch throughout the thesis. Alison Lee played a significant role in the early stages of my candidature and later through her championing of the thesis writing group. My thanks also go to the members of the writing group who helped me bring my work out into a public arena.

The university teachers who participated in this project did so with passion, generosity and openness and I thank them for this. Without them there would be no study. Their willingness to share their experiences both good and bad, contributes a vibrancy to these research findings.

Throughout the doctoral process support from family and friends has been important, particularly Marion Burford, Mohammed Razzaque, Grant O'Neill, Julia Lynch, Janice Aldrich-Wright and Glenn Pearce. I am also grateful to Diane Edwards and Gwen Hodder for caring for my body across the years. Thanks also go to Joan Kent and Elizabeth Irvine for their careful proofing of this thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing support from colleagues at Charles Sturt University and UNSW and the institutional support from CSU, both study leave and financial support toward research costs for this project.

Finally, thanks to Ian Braithwaite who has been there for me every step of the way.

---

---

## Contents

---

---

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Exploring the development of university teaching expertise through narrative</b>	<b>1</b>
Purpose of the study	1
Defining expertise and excellence	3
Research questions	5
Challenges of change	6
Key changes in the Australian higher education system	6
How change has affected academic work	9
Mapping the conceptual territory: expertise, identity & narrative	12
Researching the development of university teaching expertise	15
Significance of the study	16
Thesis overview: orientation for the reader	17
<b>Chapter 2 Expertise: perspectives and issues</b>	<b>19</b>
Introduction to expertise	19
The nature of expertise: a cognitive perspective	20
The development of expertise: a cognitive perspective	22
Studying the development of expertise: issues and problems	23
The study of teaching expertise	26
Beyond individualism and stability in the study of expertise	29
Narrative and identity: an alternative approach	32
<b>Chapter 3 Narrative and identity</b>	<b>33</b>
Introduction to narrative	33
Why the turn to narrative?	34
Theoretical developments emerging from the use of narrative	35
Narrating the self in social context	38
Life history/life story in education	39
Issues with the use of narrative	41
Justification for the use of a narrative approach	43

<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Gathering stories of teaching expertise</b>	<b>45</b>
	Introduction to story gathering: setting the context	45
	Research design	45
	Selecting participants: background on university teaching awards	46
	Making contact with potential participants	49
	Eliciting teacher narratives through interview conversations	50
	Responding to stories of university teachers' lives	54
	From interview to research text: analysis of teacher narratives	56
	Weaving a research story	58
	Setting quality standards	61
	Introducing the 'characters'	63
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Reconceptualising the development of university teaching expertise</b>	<b>66</b>
	Introduction	66
	Developing teaching expertise: no end to the search for mastery	67
	Reconceptualising the development of university teaching expertise	71
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Personal narratives: the development university teaching expertise as lifelong learning</b>	<b>76</b>
	Introduction	76
	Narrative structures for storying the development of teaching expertise	78
	Developing expertise and lifelong learning: a progressive narrative?	80
	John's story: a working class boy struts his stuff	81
	Sandra's story: Loss and betrayal	85
	Restorying and lifelong learning	98
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Social narratives: the development of university teaching expertise as situated learning</b>	<b>99</b>
	Introduction	99
	Situated learning: an overview	100
	Understandings of teaching practice	101
	University teachers' own learning experiences	102
	Discourses around university teaching	109
	Understandings of teaching excellence	114
	Teacher-student relationships: the heart of teaching practice	119
	What makes a 'good' teacher?	124

<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Reflexive narratives: the development of university teaching expertise as identity work</b>	<b>125</b>
	Introduction	125
	Theorising identity as a reflexive project	126
	Implications of conceptualising identities as constructed and reflexive	128
	Constructing identities: an interactive process	130
	Joy: the Duracell bunny	132
	John: not like other academics	136
	Constructing ‘expert’ teacher identities	139
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Developing university teaching expertise: multiple layering of narratives</b>	<b>140</b>
	Towards a more complex view of university teaching expertise	140
	Understandings of university teaching expertise emerging from this study	141
	Rethinking professional development for university teachers	144
	Supporting the development of teaching expertise at sites of practice	146
	Practical approaches to supporting the development of teaching expertise	147
	Concluding comments	151
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>Email invitation to participate in the study</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>Guide for second interview</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>References</b>		<b>156</b>

---

---

## List of Tables

---

---

<b>Table 5.1</b>	<b>Differing perspectives on the development of teaching expertise</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Table 7.1</b>	<b>Positive learning experiences shaping views on ‘good teaching’</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Table 7.2</b>	<b>Negative learning experiences shaping views on ‘good teaching’</b>	<b>108</b>



---

---

## Abstract

---

---

Excellence in teaching and learning is currently a focus of much debate in the higher education sector both in Australia and worldwide. While the complexity inherent in defining and developing excellence is broadly acknowledged, there is limited understanding of how teaching expertise is developed and sustained in times of change. This study addresses this issue and explores the way university teachers engage in their own developmental process, fashioning and refashioning their identities to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing workplace characterised by a multiplicity of demands.

The use of a narrative approach opens up new possibilities for examining the development of teaching expertise, in ways that promote a more complex understanding of the dynamics of teaching and learning in the contemporary university environment. A narrative approach offers a number of advantages over traditional methods of studying expertise. It has the capacity to reflect the complexity of individual and social lives, the ambiguity and the contradictions. It can also elicit practical and personal knowledge stories that can be used to understand and communicate subtle aspects of expertise.

University teaching, like many professional areas, does not lend itself to objective measures of expertise. In this particular study, selection of six participants was based on an institutionally endorsed measure of expertise: receipt of an award for teaching excellence either at an institutional level or at the national level. Receipt of such an award reflects peer and institutional recognition of performance. Additionally, an examination of the structures, processes and practices involved in teaching awards highlights institutionally endorsed discourses of ‘good teaching’ and hence teaching expertise. Techniques used in life history interviews were used to guide the two sessions with each participant.

Working with stories of the development of teaching expertise, I constructed three subtly different types of narratives: personal, social and reflexive narratives. In presenting these narratives, I use three particular contemporary conceptual frames to

examine the development of teaching expertise; (1) developing teaching expertise as lifelong learning; (2) developing expertise as situated learning; and (3) developing expertise as identity work.

One of the key contributions of this thesis is a reconceptualisation of the development of university teaching expertise to better reflect its dynamic, situated and relational nature. The thesis concludes with discussion of three practical strategies to support the development of teaching expertise at sites of practice: private and public writing, in particular, writing groups; the development of learning communities; and the deliberative management of relationships with students.