



PERSPECTIVES ON: SESSIONAL STAFF

Supporting sessional staff to reach their full potential

Jane Southall, Adjunct Faculty, Department of Management, Kingston Business School

About 'Perspectives On'

The '**Perspectives On**' series has been developed as an online resource to promote dissemination and discussion of contemporary issues in the business school sector.

The rationale is to provide an online resource which academics can access to find an informal overview of and informed discussion pertaining to a topical issue affecting learning and teaching at an international, national, university, faculty, department or module level. Although not 'research' papers, 'Perspectives On' submissions will be independently reviewed by the editorial team; to assist with writing submissions.

Views are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Chartered ABS.

The series of papers are available [here](#).

Perspectives On: Sessional Staff

Supporting sessional staff to reach their full potential

Jane Southall, Adjunct Faculty, Department of Management, Kingston Business School

Introduction

In many universities, in order to be able to teach larger numbers of students and be able to react quickly and cost effectively to needs and demands, a large amount of teaching is carried out by non-permanent, hourly paid staff, often known as sessional lecturers. In business schools, many such staff have industrial backgrounds but have transitioned to education, and are fully committed to improving the student experience and to delivering excellent teaching. Their new career path, however, is often restricted due to not being research active. Accordingly, they have little opportunity to develop an academic identity and are often marginalised from full time colleagues due to having heavy teaching loads with little time for networking and participating in other scholarly activities. In the UK, this separation from academic teams can also restrict professional development as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Professional Standards Framework (2011) states that Senior Fellows are likely to “lead or be members of established academic teams”. Indeed, it appears that the lowest level of Associate Fellow is intended for this group.

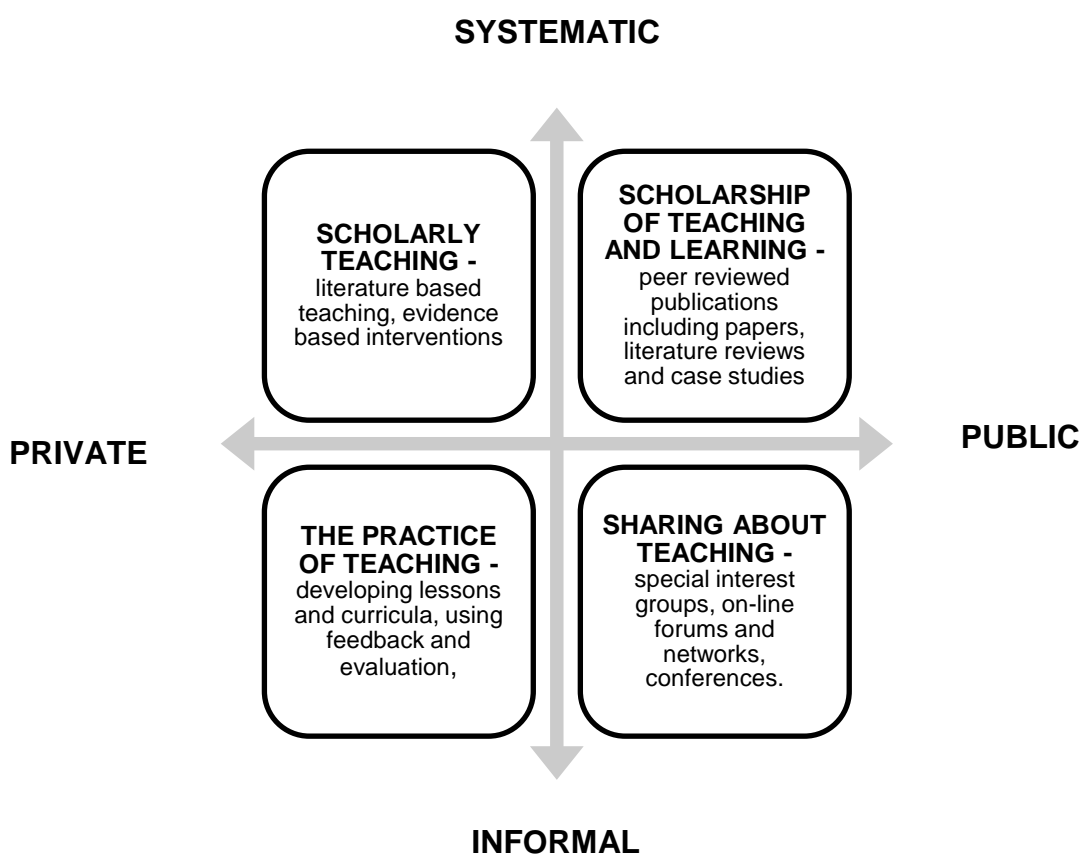
This piece argues that in treating these staff simply as temporary, cost effective and flexible resources, often restricted to working on a narrow range of roles and unable to develop professionally, business schools are missing an exceptional opportunity. If they provided support, they could develop excellent teachers, benefit and learn from a wealth of experience and create insightful and evidence based scholarly outputs from those who often spend the most time with students and so know them best. In contrast to others who have considered this group, it is written as a case study by a sessional lecturer and it aims not only to draw attention to the challenges faced by myself, and the potential that is not being fully developed, but also to illustrate a possible pathway that business schools, permanent staff and sessional lecturers themselves can follow, in order to develop more meaningful and higher quality relationships and to ensure better outcomes for all.

The DART Framework

I am a sessional lecturer working within the business school of a post-1992 institution in the UK. Proud of its practical and vocational approach to teaching business, marketing and law students, a number of sessional staff with in-depth industrial and practitioner experience are employed to teach all levels of undergraduates and some post-graduate students. I describe my transition from practitioner to educator through the lens of the Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching developed by Kern *et al.*, (2015). This is then summarised as a framework that can be applied by others looking to involve sessional staff in research or to get involved and so develop their academic identity. My ultimate aim is to ensure a stream of potential excellence is not overlooked.

Kern *et al.*, (2015) provide four useful, contrasting definitions which make up the Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching (DART) which are; the Practice of Teaching (classroom based), Scholarly Teaching (adapting practice as the result of the research of others), Sharing about Teaching (disseminating successful practice) and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (carrying out and publishing results of innovative practice). My progress appears to be best illustrated by using this model (see figure 1). The definitions revolve around whether an activity is informal or systematic, private or public and progress has seen me move from being a private practitioner of the Practice of Teaching to a scholar of teaching and learning, as my activities have become more systematic and public.

Figure 1. The Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching. Based on Kern *et al.*, (2015)



My journey

As an HRM practitioner who had a lot of experience of developing staff both as a specialist trainer and as part of my wider management responsibilities, I entered Higher Education and chose to work as sessional staff in order to maintain flexibility around my timetable, largely to deal with the pressures of being a parent. Once established and fully engaged in the practice of teaching, I started to develop my own

materials, design and run tutorial sessions and I developed innovative assessments and classroom based activities. Seeking out feedback and making changes as a result of it was a natural activity for me. I undertook a Post Graduate teaching qualification and was professionally recognised by the HEA. Clearly teaching such as this can be excellent and very effective but it is always an informal, private act witnessed only by students. I was fortunate that students did comment positively about my teaching in a variety of forums so colleagues were made aware of my practice via internal award systems, but it still remained largely a private exercise, confined to the classroom.

The next stage of the model, Scholarly Teaching, is based in the sources and resources appropriate to the discipline being taught but it is still private. I became involved quite naturally in this when starting to look for case studies and academic papers that reported on practical teaching interventions that I could implement to develop and extend my classroom practice. I found a range of interesting ideas reported in practitioner focussed journals and in academic papers, replicated some ideas and adapted others. Students enjoyed the experience and commented enthusiastically about what we had done when completing evaluation questionnaires and talking to other staff. The jump from these private activities to undertaking them in the public arena was, however, much more difficult. In common with other sessional staff, I had little line management input to career development and no close

supervision of my daily teaching activities. Often not invited to departmental and faculty-wide meetings and discussions about research activity, I was operating in an information vacuum as to what permanent colleagues were doing and how I might become involved.

It was at this point that becoming involved in an informal community of practice (Wenger, 1998) had a huge impact on my journey towards scholarship and on the development of my academic identity. Faced with an upcoming faculty-wide accreditation process, sessional lecturers were told that they needed to become involved in the traditional academic activities of research and scholarship and ideally, to get some output published they wished to continue teaching. Having never been involved in these areas, this seemed daunting at best and impossible at worst, and my emotions fluctuated between utter panic and complete bewilderment as to how this objective might be achieved. Help came in the form of research group working in the higher education arena which had been established by a small number of full time, permanent academic staff with the aim of providing support and practical help to each other as they too worked towards developing research skills and producing work of publishable quality. Employed across different departments within the faculty, this was a group of like-minded individuals who had realised the need for support, the advantages to be had by working collegiately, and the power of sharing ideas. Whilst their academic skills helped me, my background in management consultancy was valuable to them as I had planned, controlled and carried out many projects for clients in the past and had written proposals and final reports as part of my role.

The benefit of being invited to join such a group and of being mentored by its more experienced members, allowed me to fully recognise what can constitute valid research and it demystified the process. My initial reaction to being told what was needed was one of panic. I had presumed that any research conducted would need to be discipline specific and, even though I had had many contacts in industry and

a lot of personal experience to draw on, I had now been teaching for several years and so networks had weakened and I realised I would be approaching organisations as an hourly paid, casual member of staff and not as an academic with the backing of a university, funding and an established research history. Recognising that continuing to explore teaching and learning, albeit in a more systematic and more public way, would be valid, useful and acceptable, was a major turning point.

It was now possible to progress to the next level of the model defined by Kern *et al.*, (2015) and to start to share what was being done in a public way. To start with, this sharing was with the other members of the research group but, with their supportive encouragement and because membership of the group allowed the exploration of and access to small sources of funding (up to this point much of what had done had been completed in my own time), another sessional lecturer and I joined various national teaching and student engagement networks and became involved in on-line forums, both providing and asking for ideas and feedback. This led to meeting with special interest groups and the most natural next step was to submit abstracts and posters for consideration for inclusion at annual conferences. These were accepted and when our presentations of innovative practice were well received, we understood that we were both on our way to becoming scholars of teaching and learning.

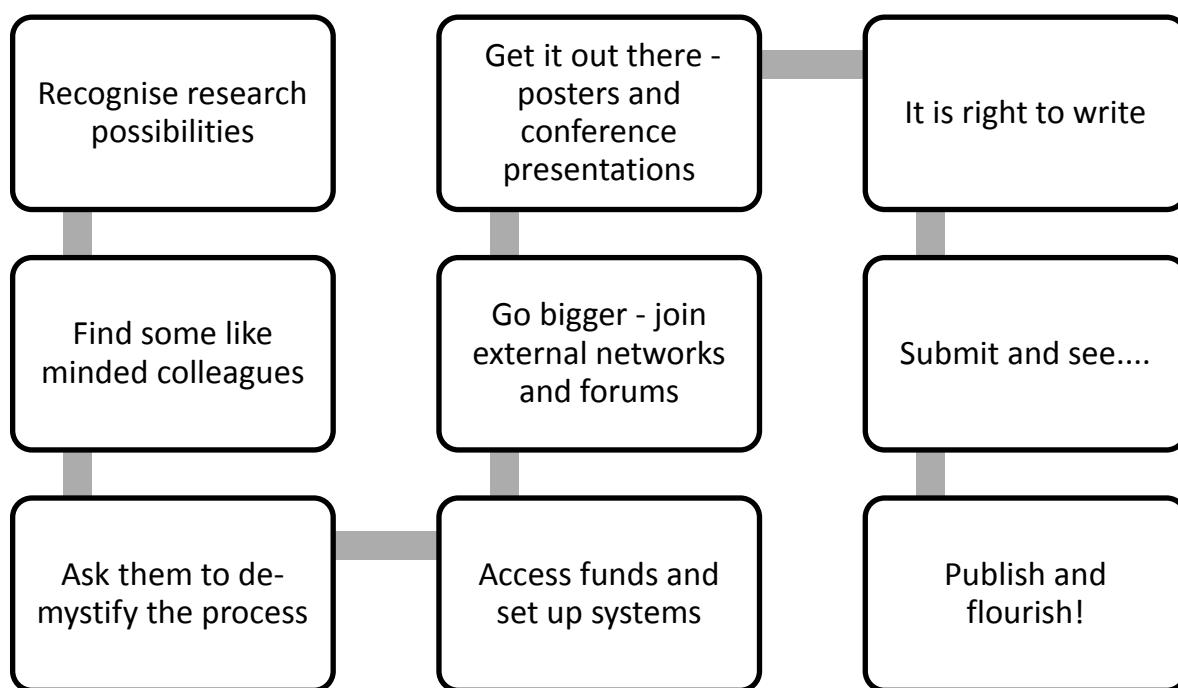
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is different to all the previous stages in the DART model, as it is carried out systematically and investigates questions related to student learning. It is also shared publicly at conferences and with the publication of papers, articles and case studies. It is methodical and credible results can be gained which means it shares many of the characteristics of discipline-based research. For me, the transition to this stage took place when I started conducting systematic and critical literature reviews into areas of interest, synthesised my findings, revealed gaps for further exploration and frameworks which could be used to develop and evaluate interventions. Understanding that such literature reviews can be of interest to others and so are publishable was another source of encouragement. From the point of having such a paper accepted for publication, I felt that I had succeeded in my objective and was pleased to describe myself as a valid participant in the field of HE research.

Supporting your sessional staff

This case study shows that with the correct support in place and with access to funding and guidance, it is possible for staff employed on a sessional basis to develop a robust and valid academic identity which is on a par with their full-time colleagues. According to Becher and Trowler (2001) many studies that consider the motivation of academic researchers cite the desire “to develop a reputation in a field and contribute significantly to it” (p. 75). Many sessional lecturers are no different, and if they can become involved in the research of teaching and learning, the HEIs employing them profit from the development of innovative and engaging teaching interventions and assessment regimes, sessional staff feel valued as full members of academic teams, and communication between permanent academic researchers and teaching focussed sessional lecturers is enhanced. Students benefit from all of this and from being taught by engaged, engaging and innovative pedagogues who employ evidence based approaches.

I have summarised my journey (see Figure 2) in order to show HEIs, those involved in managing and developing sessional staff and sessional staff themselves, what can be done to move towards being seen as a valued and valid member of an established academic team rather than a flexible, cost effective and temporary gap filler, and how to make this change in status a reality.

Figure 2: My journey



There are, however, many variables that need to be considered if this model is to work. The sessional staff involved need to be motivated. It would have been possible for me, when told of the need to become research active, to consider my options and join another institution where teaching focussed staff are not required to diversify. It appears that the support of like-minded others is also a necessary component. In this case, the research group were open minded and accepting of sessional staff joining their community. They were willing to act as mentors, explain concepts, provide guidance and much appreciated feedback. In some Business Schools the cultural gap between two such sets of staff, with different academic backgrounds, working methods and approaches may make this acceptance harder to achieve. It is also vital that funding is made available to allow sessional staff to be paid for the time they put into research activities. Most are paid only for the contact hours they provide and there is no system to pay them for additional work where the hours are hard to estimate and measure. This funding can be provided in a

variety of ways; allowing an agreed number of hours to be claimed for or providing a bursary subject to outputs for example, but either case requires a relationship of trust and support.

For this to happen and for sessional staff to realise their full potential as valued and valuable members of HE communities, there needs to be a change in culture. From seeing them purely as flexible and cost effective gap fillers, business schools need to realise that many sessional staff have worked as practitioners and can provide much needed input to developing students' employability skills. Many are committed and professionally recognised educators who have chosen to teach and many can, with the right help, support and encouragement, develop robust academic identities which in turn, allow them to fully participate in the life of a department and faculty. This allows them to become and remain motivated as well as to inspire and engage their students.

Should more business schools take up this opportunity, it would be possible to consider the impact of integrating sessional staff into academic teams much more fully in terms of motivation and engagement levels and to start to explore the effect of this on students' achievement levels. Go on, you know you can, support your sessional staff so that they too feel part of your team...They may well be introducing themselves as "only a sessional lecturer", I was, and we all deserve better!

Author biography

Jane Southall is Adjunct Faculty at Kingston University Business School and a sessional lecturer at Kingston College. Following a career in training and development with blue chip management consultancies, she now teaches Organisational Behaviour and HRM. Her research is based within the HE field with a focus on: academic identity development; embedding employability and academic skills (especially critical thinking skills); building engagement via assessment and transition to Higher Education. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

References

Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories*. 2nd edn. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Higher Education Academy (2011) *The UK professional standards framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education*. Available at:

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/ukpsf_2011_english.pdf (Accessed: 31 March 2016).

Kern, B., Mettatal, G., Dixon, M.D. and Morgan, R.K. (2015), 'The role of SoTL in the Academy: Upon the 25th Anniversary of Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered*.' *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 15(3), pp. 1 – 14.