Academic architectures:
Academic perceptions of teaching conditions in an Australian university

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Abstract:

This article reports a case study of academics’ perceptions of how the conditions under which they worked, at one campus of a multi-site regional Australian university, influenced their teaching practices. The data comprise transcripts of periodic meetings of a group of seven Education academics, as they reflected upon the nature of their teaching practices during the first half of 2008. To understand how the conditions under which they worked were perceived to influence their teaching practices, the study applies the concept of ‘practice architectures’ to participants’ perceptions. The concept of practice architectures frames the social world as comprising interacting socio-political, material-economic and cultural-discursive dimensions which collectively influence and are influenced by those who constitute any social setting. The study indicates that political, material and cultural pressure for increased use of new teaching technologies were seen as partially responsible for stimulating productive teaching practices. However, political, cultural and material pressures supportive of increased accountability and economic productivity, and of increased student demands and diversity without adequate resourcing, were believed to inhibit more productive teaching practices.

Keywords: tertiary teaching; academic conditions; practice architectures.
Introduction

This article draws upon perceptions of the teaching practices of a group of lecturers, working across pre-service professional Education courses in a rural and regional university in Australia, to provide insights into how the conditions under which these academics worked influenced their teaching practices. Understanding how such working conditions enable and constrain academics’ teaching practices is important for enhancing the quality of students’ learning experiences. Evidence is presented to show how these conditions are seen as both constituting and constitutive of academics’ teaching practices, and how conditions in a particular university setting were reflective of conditions in university settings more generally. To make sense of how academics’ teaching practices were understood to be influenced by the contexts within which they are undertaken, the article draws upon recent developments in practice theory, particularly Kemmis and Grootenboer’s (2008) concept of ‘practice architectures’.

Relevant literature reveals the socio-political context in which tertiary teaching occurs is changing rapidly, and is construed as affecting all aspects of academic work, including teaching practices. This context includes increased pressures of accountability within an increasingly neoliberal academic environment (Currie, 2005; Geisler, 2006). This is the case in universities in Europe, Asia and North America (Welch, 2005). Also, and as with the public service in general (MacDermott, 2008), publicly funded universities in many countries, including Australia, are influenced by pressure for increased productivity (McInnis & Anderson, 2005). The resulting ‘audit culture’ (Strathern, 2000) is seen as
demanding improved output in terms of teaching and research, and a greater emphasis upon measuring performance – what Lyotard (1984) referred to in his seminal work as ‘performativity’. While some academics are able to exploit the more managerialist culture in which they work (Kolsaker, 2008), others struggle as they respond to increasing pressure for quantifiable improvements in teaching performance and research quality and output.

The university sector has also become increasingly diverse and massified (Marginson, 2002; Welch, 2005), and there has been an increasing shift in funding from government to non-government sources, through the establishment of quasi-markets within the sector (Temple, 2006). These changes have led to academics reporting increased pressure on resources and greater demands from student ‘consumers’ for improvements in teaching quality (McInnis & Anderson, 2005). This has particular implications for non-elite institutions, such as the one referred to in this study, which operate from a position of subordination within a complex global field of higher education, in which differential relations between nation-states and institutions influence institutional resourcing and outcomes (Marginson, 2008). The combination of the shift in funding from the state to individuals, and the diverse needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds means that the non-traditional students who attend these ‘new’ universities struggle to engage in their studies (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). This situation is further exacerbated by the alienating pedagogical practices they may encounter in universities (Haggis, 2006).
Furthermore, the application of new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) has also influenced academics’ work. Benefits have been observed when educational and organizational objectives are aligned around the introduction of ICTs (Snyder, Marginson & Lewis, 2007). However, leadership, training and development and adequate resources are all seen as crucial to successful implementation (Keengwe, Kidd & Kyei-Blankson, 2009); while considered useful, ICTs have been seen as needing to be managed for maximum effect (Torrisi & Davis, 2000; Cullen, 2007). At times, ICTs have not been utilised to the extent envisaged by advocates (Laurillard, 2006).

Conservative adoption strategies may be construed as part of a broader process of institutionalisation of historically embedded structures and practices which exist beyond individual institutions, characterising the sector as a whole (Meyer, Ramirez, Frank & Schofer, 2007). There is also some evidence of superficial use of ICTs – for example, simply shifting resources and courses into an on-line format (Roberts, 2001), as well as some evidence of reluctance to use new technologies for their own sake, rather than for genuinely educational purposes (Eynon, 2008). Finally, amongst some academics, eLearning is considered less effective than face-to-face teaching approaches (James, 2008).

This study builds upon this literature by revealing the specific array of social circumstances which were embodied in academics’ perceptions of their tertiary teaching practices in a rural and regional Australian university setting. To reveal how these conditions were seen as influencing academics’ teaching practices, the article employs recent developments in the theorising of professional practice which frame social
conditions as the result of interacting socio-political, material-economic and cultural-discursive factors which simultaneously constitute, and are constitutive of, agents’ practices.

**Understanding the conditions of practice: the case for ‘practice architectures’**

Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) argue that social practices are the product of a complex, dialectical interplay between individuals and their social circumstances. In trying to make sense of this interplay, they seek to work with and across the tensions between Lave and Wenger’s (1991) more individualistic concept of practice as influenced by various ‘learning architectures’ created by the circumstances in which individuals and groups find themselves, and Schatzki’s (2002) more collective understanding of practice as the product of particular doings and sayings, in particular social arrangements. For Lave and Wenger (1991), practice is the product of individual learning arising from membership within a recognised community of practitioners. In contrast, for Schatzki (2002), practice is intrinsically social, and the product of constant and ongoing interactions with others. The tensions between these more individualistic and social conceptions of practice are analogous with broader sociological distinctions between social structure and agency.

Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) work across the tensions between the individual and the social by arguing that there is a strong inter-relationship between the two; the individual resides within the social, just as the social is understood to be firmly located within the
individual, and these stances are mutually reinforcing. Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) argue that the interplay between a more individualistic conception of practice, and one which acknowledges the inherent sociality of practice, gives rise to various cultural-discursive (‘sayings’), material-economic (‘doings’) and socio-political (‘relatings’) dimensions which come together to make up the social world. These sayings, doings and relatings collectively constitute a conception of practice as praxis – that is, practice as morally informed and committed action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). Praxis entails a moral commitment amongst actors to do the most good under any given circumstances.

Collectively, these cultural-discursive, socio-political and material-economic dimensions serve as the ‘architects’ of particular practices, or what are described as ‘practice architectures’. Practice architectures ‘…prefigure practices, enabling and constraining particular kinds of sayings, doings and relatings among people within them, and in relation to others outside them’ (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008, p. 59). At the same time, they are also always simultaneously subject to change and alteration by those involved in and affected by them. Through their praxis, the individuals and groups who contribute to the collective whole are not simply passive victims of their circumstances, but are active in creating (and changing) the talk about their work (cultural-discursive dimension), interactions between colleagues and others (socio-political dimension), and physical resources and actions (material-economic dimension) which collectively constitute these conditions.
Method and methodology

The research presented is a qualitative case study of a group of academics’ perceptions of how the conditions under which they worked, in a regional university in Australia, influenced their teaching practices. After Stake (2005), the case gives access to the broader phenomenon under investigation – in this case, the influence of academic conditions upon university teaching practices – but does so through a study of the complexity of a particular instance of the phenomenon. To understand the influence of university conditions upon these academics’ teaching practices, the study draws upon the perspectives of a group of educators collaborating about their teaching practices on teacher education courses serving primary, secondary, university and vocational education and training domains, at a single campus of a multi-site, regional Australian university.

The research arose out of an initial desire amongst a self-selected group of academics to meet to discuss how changing conditions in their workplace influenced their work – particularly their teaching practices – and to use this understanding as a vehicle to improve their practices. Early in the life of the group, it was decided to record the meetings for research purposes. Meetings were held approximately once per month over a six-month period during the first half of 2008, were digitally recorded, and professionally transcribed. All members of the group had access to the transcripts, which also served as reflective tools for subsequent meetings. Meetings were unstructured, and foci for discussion unfolded during each meeting. As meetings progressed, participants
referred to earlier meeting transcripts, and, occasionally, to individual logs of their teaching practices which they kept during the six month period; (however, these logs were not explicitly drawn upon during the research process). The author organised the meetings in collaboration with members of the group, and acted as a participant researcher.

The collective knowledge building which occurred during the course of the collaborative meetings was iterative and dialogical. During meetings, participants endeavoured to be open and honest about their thoughts and strove to enact Habermas’ (1996) call for a form of communicative action characterised by intersubjective meaning-making. During meetings, participants built upon one another’s points, interrogated, extended, and sometimes passionately critiqued earlier conceptions and understandings of individual and shared teaching practice. Participants asked and answered difficult questions about one another’s practice, and did not simply ignore or gloss over substantive differences. It is acknowledged that the findings of this study reflect the insights of a highly motivated group of participants, all of whom actively sought to further improve their teaching practices.

Three key themes/broad sets of conditions were identified using an emergent thematic analysis approach (Shank, 2006), which involved searching for patterns within the data. These themes were elicited initially by the researcher from the transcripts, but were also corroborated by other members of the group. The subsequent analysis was presented to
members of the group for critique, and revised accordingly. This process occurred several time during the life of the study. All names are pseudonyms.

As a philosophically informed, empirically-based study, the themes were analysed using Kemmis and Grootenboer’s (2008) concept of practice architectures. This involved identifying and foregrounding those socio-political, cultural-discursive and material-economic factors which conditioned the nature of these academics’ work. The concept of practice architectures was also employed to stimulate discussions during the meetings, and proved useful for orienting and reorienting dialogue around collective understandings of educators’ teaching practices.

**Findings and analysis: The influence of academic architectures**

The study reveals three themes/broad sets of conditions which were seen as influencing academics’ teaching practices within a specific university setting. These conditions relate to the increased emphasis upon auditing academic teaching and the way in which education is increasingly construed as an economic transaction; the rapid expansion of the student population without sufficient regard for resource implications; and the introduction of new technologies alongside workshop and lecture formats.
Auditing and economising academic work

At times, participants felt that increasing accountability pressures resulted in lecturers focusing upon how their teaching was perceived, as much as the substance of the teaching itself. A culture of performance management was seen as exerting influence:

Michelle: the other thing … that we all have now … [is] evaluating our teaching, because, you know, as a teacher you know that your students will be evaluating [you]… and … consideration in terms of performance management etc, etc. So, you know, I think that's a … kind of, that’s – there's a silence there, but, … pressure on us all knowing that those students are going to evaluate us …

(Meeting 2, 12/3/08, p. 19)

Tony: …do these students get it within this context? Am I coming across to them? Do they seem to be learning something? All of that sort of stuff. But it's also about being concerned about, you know, how I’m performing within this tertiary/university context. And part of the deal is that, you know, you must have these marvellous evaluations …

(Meeting 2, 12/3/08, p. 14)

Cultural-discursive pressures in the form of calls for increased accountability for the expenditure of public funds, socio-political pressure within universities for academics to prove the nature of teaching practices, together with material records of teaching performance in the form of teaching evaluations, combined together and resulted in
academics construing their teaching in relation to perceptions of students as evaluators, rather than simply as learners.

Other accountability mechanisms understood as influencing teaching practices included newly established external, state-based regulatory bodies which accredited university-based teacher education programmes:

Kim: … but our curriculum is a representation of that world, it is distorted for us and torn from us, the thing that the university once had – autonomy - torn from us by the [external state accrediting authority]. Shame on it for believing it knows better than us, and must tell us what to do, because we’re doing it wrong. … The temerity of those people who tell us it's not our responsibility to know that world – because it's their responsibility to know it for us - is to take from us our work…And this is the most profound attack on … academic freedom, and the collegial functions of universities.

(Meeting 2, 12/3/08, p. 16)

The establishment of this body was a material effect of an accountability-oriented state apparatus which construed increased regulation as the best means of ensuring ‘quality control’ over tertiary educational ‘outputs’ – in this case, teaching graduates. Simultaneously, the prescriptive policies of the state educational authority responsible for accrediting university education programmes were seen as a discursive apparatus which altered the socio-political relations existing between universities and external bodies. The result was a sense that academic relations were reoriented away from more autonomous decision-making amongst academic peers towards taking into account the
requests, requirements and demands of an external regulatory authority. This was again abetted by a broader cultural context which construed such auditing procedures as desirable.

There was also evidence of lecturers struggling against pressure to conform to market logics. A culture of consumerism was seen as influencing how students approached learning, and subsequent relationships between lecturers and students:

Alyce: I've had students say, ‘We've paid for this subject. Why do you keep asking us what we think? We want to know what it is we have to know’.

(Meeting 1, 19/2/08, p. 23)

The struggle with a consumerist culture was also apparent in the précis of one academic’s experiences by another:

Kim: And Tony’s hesitations and confusions and emotions are connected to the social structures and the material structures and the historical structures and discursive structures that give us these hesitations and anxieties, and you know, the expectations ... that we’re something to be consumed.

(Meeting 2, 12/3/08, p. 22)

Within the material context of an expanding education system and governments’ concerns about how to fund tertiary education (Marginson, 2002), the discourse of ‘user-
pays’ was seen as shaping students’ expectations, educators’ teaching practices, and the relations between students and lecturers more generally.

New students for new times

These pressures were also related to demands upon lecturers as a result of operating in a massified tertiary education sector, in a rural and regional setting. This meant many students came from non-conventional academic backgrounds, with varied approaches to study:

Michelle: I had a student ring today and said, ‘When do you think I should re-enrol?’ I said, ‘Can I suggest last November?’ ‘Oh,’ said the student. ‘Is it too late?’ And I said, ‘Well we’re actually into day two of the first semester, and you’ll get your packages within the next fortnight if you re-enrol now, and I suggest that when you get them that you give me a ring and we talk about the dates for the assignment submissions.’ And I said, ‘Didn’t you read your E-box1?’ ‘E-box? E-box? Where's that?’

… I mean, what do you do? Do you just say, ‘I'm sorry this is your problem?’

(Meeting 1, 19/2/08, p. 26)

Pressure on more students to engage in paid work, under these circumstances, was also seen as placing significant demands upon lecturer’s time:

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1 A reference to an email function within the particular technology platform adopted by the university. The E-Box is a rapid means by which lecturers can simultaneously disseminate information to all students in their subjects.
Alyce: [Students tell me, as I’m arranging tutorial groups.] ‘I need to go to my work!’ … About eight times! And I said, ‘Look, I've got 370 students who could tell me that. Almost all of them were [working], and there's no way our time-table can accommodate everyone’s work schedules’. I said, ‘You have to tell work: Here’s my time-table and here’s when I can work. Do you want me?’ And, so I said exactly that to these students. And I said, ‘Well, can you see my point? And this is how it has to be. I can't swap you all into Group “A” simply because it finishes before lunchtime everyday, or whatever, so you can get to your work in the afternoon… ’

(Meeting 1, 19/2/08, p. 28)

The relatively disadvantaged backgrounds from which many students came were overtly recognised as something which needed to be taken into consideration by lecturers:

Nicole: I mean, there's been a huge push about access and equity, and getting far more students, so you're getting a much wider spectrum of students going to university. So they're very different students, many of them, from the ones that we'd have gone with 30 years ago...

… I always find it very interesting that when you ask them, and I do, at the beginning of a sociology lecture, I always ask them, ‘Can you tell me whether you are the first person, or first generation in your family to go to university?’ About half of them will put their hands up, … the point is that many of our students are in that situation. They are coming from backgrounds of yeah, well, of some disadvantage basically, so I mean, I think there's that to consider.

(Meeting 3, 16/4/08, p.24)

In short, there was a recognition that times had changed, and these changes had long since walked through the door of the modern/postmodern university:
Michelle: Do you know what I think’s also changed, for us? Well perhaps I’m just speaking for myself, maybe. For most of us, in this room, doing our degree was the primary focus of our life at the time-

Kim: Yeah, yeah.

Nicole: These students, it is not.

Kim: No.

Rachel: No...

Nicole: [Student X] is working about 35 hours a week to keep himself, so his study is very secondary to everything else that happens in his life, and that's common for a lot of our students.

(Meeting 3, 16/4/08, p. 31)

Academics’ physical/material interactions with students from often-struggling circumstances influenced what lecturers believed to be possible in their classes. The varied backgrounds of students – being the first in their family to go to university – was seen as impacting upon students’ understanding of the nature of tertiary education.

The way in which lecturers struggled over how best to assist students under these circumstances also revealed the effects of massification of education. One academic’s concerns revolved around how to assist students to understand more difficult ideas without debasing this knowledge:
Kim: …how do we offer them something worth having? The difficulty for me is ... do I debase it by giving it to them in the language they already understand, or do I try to let them see what they don’t understand, to give them pictures, structures of ideas through which they might see what they don’t know?

(Meeting 3, 16/4/08, p. 30)

Such concerns reflected the considerable challenges presented by cultural-discursive and socio-political support for increased diversity and equity within tertiary education. This led to the material effect of significantly increasing the number of students requiring more support.

**New and old teaching technologies**

Academics also argued they were influenced by, and sought to influence, new teaching technologies. For some academics, the lecture and workshop spaces were actively framed as desirable, because they were seen as an efficient means of disseminating information:

Alyce: I've chosen what I think they should know, I'm passionate about it, I've already decided on what it is that I'm going to filter to this group of students … what I will speak to these students about...

(Meeting 1, 19/2/08, p. 24)
The way in which modern universities are often materially configured, with large lecturing and more intimate tutorial spaces, was construed as enabling dissemination-based teaching practices. Such support reflects historically embedded discourses and cultural expectations of universities, which are often in the ascendant (Meyer, Ramirez, Frank & Schofer, 2007). The political decision to support such approaches by this academic ensured the continuation of these embedded teaching technologies.

However, and at the same time, there were important tensions associated with some of these long-standing technologies. For one of the participants, the act of delivering a lecture provided an introduction to ideas, but was not the essence of the education on offer:

Kim: …and if you ask me where the course was most represented, I'd say it's in the readings, and the ones that we say are the required readings and the ones that we say are the recommended readings, but it's over there, that's what we want you to encounter. My talking, in the lecture, is trying to give you a way to understand what you're meant to be encountering this week, it's not a stand alone … But, if you think that what I'm saying in the lecture is the heart of it, then in my view, you’re profoundly mistaken. People didn’t come to university to study the thoughts of Kim Jones; they came here to study Education or whatever it is.

(Meeting 3, 16/4/08, p. 11)

It was not the lecture, delivered by the ‘expert’ at the front of the room which provided the principal conditions for student learning. Even though proving a resilient practice in university settings, lecture-style deliveries served as a material practice which could only
provide a glimpse into what was important within any given course. Instead, the material reading resources, together with discursive advocacy for such resources, and active support of the personal study of key sources, reinforced one another.

At the same time, the implementation of new ICTs also led to active interrogation of the validity of such technologies. Some lecturers resisted one-size-fits-all applications of ICTs within the university which would see all internal students automatically gaining access to electronic forums:

Kim: But I mean, for an on-campus course, arguably, you could say ‘I don’t want to have a forum, I want to have study groups. I want to have my class built around study groups, tutorials, workshop groups’—

Michelle: Which are sub forums, so you need to have-

Kim: No, no, I don’t want them, I don’t want them communicating with one another electronically ... It's like that Aboriginal bloke said to me, ‘Look,’ I said, ‘Can I write in a note book? I want to take notes. It helps me to remember.’ He says, ‘I don’t care what's in your notebook; I care what's in your head.’ If we care what's in our students’ heads, we might want them talking to each other, more than writing to each other.

(Meeting, 4, 7/5/08, p. 7/8)

Electronic fora were resisted by an academic adopting a normative view of student learning which construed such technology as potentially limiting the nature of interpersonal interactions.
Resistance to the use of the technology was also apparent on other grounds, as well. The technology platform adopted was construed as being undertaken for reasons of competitive advantage within the broader educational market-place, in which the university was positioned as a significant distance-education provider in Australia:

Tina: I think we should go back and look at the public reasons, advocated by the university for why we’re engaged with this particular kind of platform, and the … teaching and learning activities that come about as a consequence of it. And my memory is that the university needs to engage in these kinds of activities to remain competitive.

Tony: So it becomes almost like the technology becomes a KPI – a key performance indicator – that we can make some sort of measure off, in relation to the market: students staying on it, students choosing somehow to study here because we’ve got this different technology...

(Meeting, 4, 7/5/08, p. 10)

Such a critical response is both reflective of, and a challenge to, the pervasiveness of cultural-discursive and socio-political pressure for universities to be market-responsive, an increasing phenomena in the university sector as a whole (Bach, Haynes & Smith, 2007).

At the same time, the implementation of ICTs was also construed as providing educational benefits. A push for more ‘flexible learning’ approaches within the
university, which involved employing ICTs to integrate internal and external student cohorts was seen as inherently beneficial:

Alyce: That’s something we’ll be facing in the very near future with the review of the Master of Teaching course. It will then be coming up in line with our primary course, and there’ll be common subjects. There won’t be new subjects written for the Master of Teaching. Our existing ones in the … primary programme will be written as a distance package… And there’ll then be two maths subjects, two English subjects. And it’ll be the second and third subjects in our primary course that are offered by distance, which will, as a course coordinator, open up a wonderful set of opportunities for students. And I’ll no longer have to say, ‘This course cannot be done by distance.’ And therefore, the culture of everything, I think, will change considerably. So, they're all fascinating issues that are coming along, and in that case then, you would be starting to think about the choices there, and then see what impact that has on our numbers or the way we run things. It could be we only need a workshop-sized room for our lecture. All sorts of things-

(Meeting 1, 19/2/08, p. 14)

The material-economic investment in new approaches to teaching and learning, including the application of ICTs, exerted considerable influence upon this academic’s teaching practices. The introduction of ICTs, and subsequent efforts to make similar resources available to both distance education and internal students were seen as having the potential to enable student learning in ways which had not previously been possible.

The very provision of ICT resources was construed as possibly enhancing student learning, even if this was not always guaranteed:
Rachel: But, I mean, we can see it as our limit, [but] we can also see it as a different opportunity. So for example, the students that we’re dealing with, you know, we have them in classrooms, we have them with their books, and their chapters that they’re going to read for their classes. But then, we also offer them the other opportunities, which are the technological ones, which, are supposed to enable them, in this technologised world, to be able to interact with each other. Whether or not that works, that's a different thing, but it is another opportunity for them to engage in different ways...

(Meeting, 4, 7/5/08, p. 9)

In this way, political endorsement of the potential value of new technologies, together with material support for such technologies, were seen as providing at least the possibility for enhanced student learning.

**Discussion: Creating and critiquing university teaching conditions**

These academics’ reflections provide complex and incisive insights into the influence of current working conditions upon teaching practices within a specific university setting; the responses also resonate with how the conditions in other specific university settings, and the university sector more generally, have influenced tertiary teaching practices. Increased calls for accountability, the commodification and massification of education, alongside the push for increased applications of ICTs can all be seen to influence specific, situated practices. A case study of the interplay between the socio-political, cultural-discursive and material-economic factors which combine to create these conditions, and academics who influence and are influenced by them, provide useful
insights into the nature of teaching practices seen as possible and desirable under current circumstances.

The reflections of academics in the study reveal they are influenced by concrete university-wide accountability mechanisms, such as student evaluations, which may potentially serve as a useful source of information to enhance the quality of academics’ teaching practices. Support for such provision amongst senior administrators may assist in this process, as do institutional discourses which promote the educational benefits of formal evaluations. However, and at the same time, support for ever-increasing accountability mechanisms also caused lecturers angst about how students would respond to evaluations of their performance. Such concerns are local manifestations of broader cultural-discursive performativity pressures within the audit society (Strathern, 2000) at large. The material existence of these evaluations, talk about having to secure favourable evaluations, and pressure to do so, may serve as distracters from a more substantial focus upon students’ learning.

However, while these institutional and material pressures ‘to perform’ (Lyotard, 1984) within an increasingly massified tertiary education environment (Marginson, 2002) caused angst, a praxis-oriented discourse of concern for student learning still remains evident amongst the lecturers in this study. This was evident in the way one academic was explicit about whether his students ‘get it’, he was ‘coming across to them’, and whether they ‘seem to be learning something’. Just as some academics are able to work effectively in a managerialist culture (even to the point of exploiting these circumstances
(Kolsaker, 2008)), this academic maintained a focus upon students’ educational needs in spite of simultaneous concerns about ‘performativity’. However, it is also important to acknowledge the proactive nature of this particular group of academics, and that the specific nature of this group needs to be recognised as contributing to these capacities.

Alongside such influences, academics’ perceptions reveal an increasingly mercantilist approach by students, resulting in tertiary education being treated increasingly as a commodity. Such responses on the part of students challenge academics’ efforts to promote the intrinsic value of teaching and learning. The data suggest concerns amongst academics about students’ desires for ‘the facts’, for what they have ‘paid for’, and consequently, to which they feel entitled. Such economism is also apparent at the level of activity in the considerable tensions between educators’ efforts to foster independent learning, and students’ perceptions of education as a commodity which should be delivered to them in easily digestible portions, and without too much input or introspection on their part. Under such circumstances, academics struggle against the rearticulation of relations between academics and students into consumption practices. The result is considerable angst amongst educators about how best to respond to this manifestation of increased marketisation, which influences the sector as a whole in Australia (McInnis & Anderson, 2005), and in other countries (Welch, 2005).

When material mechanisms for both accountability and economism operate in conjunction with strong political support within institutions for ‘value for money’, and within a cultural context which construes service provision so strongly in these terms, the
potential for a more impoverished tertiary experience is very real. If academics’ teaching practices succumb to such pressures, students run the risk of being provided with a service which is ultimately valueless, because its inherent value has been displaced by external concerns (such as high-rating teaching evaluations).

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of the tertiary education sector, together with cultural and political support for such expansion, without adequate concern about how to materially fund rapid growth, is revealed as having unintended consequences on tertiary teaching practices. Gaps in cultural and economic capital between academics and students in this study were seen as deficits by educators with more conventional backgrounds to tertiary study. These material interactions existed alongside students’ calls for greater cognisance of their circumstances, such as in relation to having to work or difficulties engaging with ICTs – which were also a manifestation of political struggle in an alien environment (Haggis, 2006). Under such circumstances, the possibility of educators engaging in alienating pedagogical practices is very real, and was, arguably, at least partially evident amongst the perceptions of some educators in this study. At the same time, more localised discourses of concern on the part of students occurred in conjunction with broader cultural and political support for increased access to higher education of students from diverse backgrounds, but without significant additional resourcing to address the challenges of massification (Marginson, 2002), and the particular needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds. While some academics did try to reach out to students from non-conventional backgrounds in an effort to avoid the alienating pedagogical practices which reinforce disadvantage, inadequate material
circumstances together with a lack of political will to more fully fund public education mean that beneficial teaching practices may occur in spite of the conditions under which academics work.

Finally, the material provision of new technologies, together with a politics of strong support for their use within the university, and discourses advocating ever-increasing access to and provision of ICTs, are construed as enabling more flexible learning to enhance academics’ teaching practices. Such acceptance resonates with Torrisi and Davis (2000) and Cullen’s (2007) arguments that if managed effectively, support for more flexible learning approaches within universities could be beneficial, enabling students to access a different and wider variety of resources to augment more dominant approaches.

However, this is the case when such technologies are employed and supported for intrinsic reasons of promoting learning, rather than to address external concerns, such as those associated with market advantage. The data reveal academics are genuinely interested in engaging in new technologies when they can see how these could benefit students’ learning, and when these are provided and actively supported by a discourse and politics supportive of an educative stance; however, they struggle to justify their use where this is less apparent. Discursive criticism of the superficial adoption of ICTs, together with the judicious material use of these ICTs, serve as a counter to a wider performative tertiary culture which at times appears to endorse ICTs for their own sake, rather than for the educational benefits they could or should deliver. Such responses
substantiate concerns about ICTs not being utilised in ways intended by reformers (Laurillard, 2006), of the importance of ensuring educational and organizational objectives are in alignment with one another (Snyder, Marginson & Lewis, 2007), and the need for adequate resourcing of ICTs (Keenege, Kidd & Kyei-Blankson, 2009).

Such criticisms also provide evidence of academics’ praxis. This was evident in the way in which one academic discursively supported students to verbally express their thinking through regular face-to-face study groups rather than less effective electronic forums. While such a response could be dismissed as simply a reaction against e-technologies in general (cf. James, 2008), the way in which it was framed within a discourse of concern about students’ educational outcomes indicates its more praxis-oriented qualities. Consequently, those socio-political influences which encourage the use of technology for the sake of technology are challenged, and the significant material-economic investment in ICTs is construed as valuable insofar as it is seen as leading to improved student learning. In this way, material ICT resources, discursive support for educational applications, and a broader tertiary (and wider) culture supportive of such applications, are seen as challenging the more superficial applications of ICTs evident in some tertiary settings (Eynon, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Theoretically, the application of the concept of practice architectures to perceptions of the teaching practices of a group of academics reveals how the interplay between material-
economic, cultural-discursive and socio-political factors, which collectively constitute these academics’ working conditions, may be construed as influencing their teaching practices. This application also reveals that the notion of practice architectures is inherently complex, with material-economic, socio-political and cultural-discursive factors operating more or less obviously in relation to one another, depending upon the specific circumstances. As an attempt to capture the complexity of actual practices – in this case, academics’ perceptions of their teaching practices – the concept of practice architectures is a useful vehicle to better understand how specific practices are conditioned by their circumstances, as well as contributing to these circumstances. In the context of the study presented, these circumstances may be described as the ‘academic architectures’ which constitute current tertiary settings.

Practically, an understanding of these academic architectures is important because while it may be necessary to improve the practice of individual educators, there is a compelling case for ensuring that the *conditions of practice* are such that they enable educators to act for the good of the individual as well as society as a whole. While new teaching technologies were construed as at least partially beneficial, material, social and political support for the commodification of education, the increased need to account for practice, and the massification of the tertiary sector without adequate resourcing, continue to be problematic. On several occasions, the complex interplay between various cultural, material and political factors was construed as inhibiting, or potentially inhibiting, genuinely student-centred teaching practices.
Instances of more agentic responses on the part of academics reveal that even while there is material, political and discursive support for narrow accountability purposes, inadequate resourcing of the tertiary sector, and superficial applications of new technologies, educators have endeavoured to respond with the learning needs of students in mind. In this way, the research flags the possibility of practitioners’ praxis under sometimes tyring circumstances. Such praxis involves challenging those academic architectures not conducive to genuine student learning, and promoting those which contribute to both the good of the individual and society. However, it is important to recognise that the educators in this study were motivated individuals, and they often strove to sustain a focus upon providing a substantive educational experience for students in spite of the conditions which influenced their work. This required considerable emotional labour on their part, labour which could be better expended to further improve individual and collective teaching practice/s, and conditions for practice.

References


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