

MATTHEW WHELPTON

## **Teaching Portfolio**

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## 1. Overview

I offer this teaching portfolio in support of my application to be a founding member of the Teaching Academy. In this section, I give a brief overview of my career and teaching. In section 2, I present my teaching perspective and motivate the organisation of this portfolio as a kind of travelogue through the journey of my academic development.

I came to the University of Iceland in the autumn of 1995 as Lecturer in English Linguistics with the Department of English, fresh from my doctoral studies at Oxford in General Linguistics. I was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2003 and to Professor in 2017. I have taught at all levels, BA, MA and PhD. Much of the discussion in this portfolio will focus on the evolution of my first-year BA courses in linguistics, which form part of a compulsory 60 ECTS minor in English, covering literature, linguistics and academic writing. I focus on these because they have posed some of the sharpest challenges in activating student learning and in addressing the needs of a large and diverse student body, and have driven my evolving perspective to a considerable extent. However, the insights into student-oriented active learning have spilled naturally into higher-level BA elective courses and underscored the need for student autonomy and engagement, which have naturally formed part of my postgraduate seminar teaching. Doctoral supervision for me has been an intense personal dialogue with individuals emerging as scholars in their own right.

This portfolio also traces my engagement with the teaching community concerning academic development, from early conversations with my colleagues in the Department of English and the then Faculty of Foreign Languages, Literature and Linguistics concerning distance learning, through wider engagement with European colleagues in Germany, Italy and the Basque Country on the use of virtual environments to support language studies, to my current role as a leader at the institutional and national levels in academic educational development. This follows my appointment in 2019 as the Director of Academic/Educational Development in the Humanities for the University of Iceland and it has been a privilege and a challenge to support my colleagues through the demands of the Covid period.

## 2. My Teaching Journey

Academic development is a journey, both for individual teachers and for their institutions. Kugel (1993) maps out the landscape through which many teachers travel, from an initial focus on personal insecurities and an acute awareness of the demands of the subject through to a confidence that encourages active student engagement and independent contributions to the learning experience. Reflection on one's teaching practice and attention to student feedback and performance leads to the recognition that students cannot simply receive understanding: they must engage with the subject themselves and assimilate that knowledge in their own way. This has both cognitive and social aspects (Phillips 1995; Piaget 1957; Vygotsky 1978): cognitive in that the student's study experience must be assimilated into their current understanding and perspective on a domain; social in that this assimilation is often best attained through the dynamic give-and-take of discussion, explanation and accommodation with others. Academic development ultimately leads beyond one's own concerns and interests to wider conversations and engagements with colleagues about teaching and learning at an institutional and even national level.

This portfolio presents my own journey of development from a young transmission-oriented lecturer with the teacher firmly in the centre to a more modest though still hopeful professor, who sees their role as an enabler, guide and mentor in a learning journey that only the students themselves can undertake on their own terms. Traces of the young lecturer remain, however, in how the role of enabler and guide manifest themselves at different degree levels. In my first-year teaching on linguistics, there is a great deal of scaffolding and structured learning pathways (see 11.3 and 11.4) that a true social constructivist would find limiting, though this scaffolding has been amongst the most well-received developments in my teaching approach by the students themselves. This scaffolding is motivated by an emphasis on component skills (Ambrose et al. 2010, 94–95), deliberate practice (Deslauriers, Schelew, and Wieman 2011; cf. iterative quizzing in Dunlosky et al. 2013), and assessment for learning (Gibbs and Simpson 2004), with regular practice and assessment activities, designed to focus and structure student study efforts as per the time-on-task principle (Berliner 1984; Chickering and Gamson 1987; cited by Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 12). At the graduate level (see 11.6), this scaffolding has completely given way to

discussion of materials from the different perspectives and backgrounds that a diverse group of graduate students bring to the class. There the emphasis is on dialogue and the independent research contributions of the students, in which graduate students take a more active role in teaching each other.

Alongside these developments in my own teaching practice and perspective has been a widening engagement in the broader discussion concerning educational development. From an early stage I took an active role in these broader discussions, playing a pivotal role in the expansion of distance learning within my faculty and the adoption of a more flexible constructivist-oriented learning management system for the University as a whole. Since my appointment to the role of Director of Academic/Educational Development for the Humanities, I have taken an active part in discussions at the institutional and national level on academic development for higher education (see for example Whelpton 2021a; 2021b; 2021c) and am deeply concerned with the development of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) to bolster educational development in the Humanities.

I have not conducted formal research on student learning (my own research is in semantics) but my reflections on student learning and experience have been fed from a number of sources: discussions with students in and around classes, data from student course surveys (see 11.1), both statistical satisfaction ratings but also (and for me more insightfully) open answers, learning analytics data in Moodle and Canvas, shared survey results within my department (where the Academic English staff have been particularly diligent), and more recently small-scale interviews with students in the first-year (see 11.2), which emerged from my coursework for the diploma in higher education teaching (see 10.7). Where possible I have sought to share what I have learnt publicly (Whelpton 2007; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Matthew Whelpton 2009; Whelpton 2010; 2017; 2018).

Before moving on to some of the milestones in my own developing perspective on student learning and my role as teacher in that process, I would like to acknowledge one factor which

plays a prominent role in student responses to my teaching: my passion for the subject<sup>1</sup> (see open answers in 11.1). Although most students find linguistics difficult and many find grammatical analysis dull and dry, they sense my own passion for the subject and seem to thrive on it. This is clearly one driver for my consistently above-average survey scores. For some students, this passion opens their eyes to the potential and promise of the subject but for many it simply makes a difficult subject more manageable. For many academic staff it was precisely the encounter with such a passionate scholar that led them into the field. This is a factor that has to be acknowledged and honoured. However, it does not in itself lead to better learning, because only a student's own engagement with the material can drive that learning. For all its influence on student perceptions, the passion of the sage-on-the-stage does not guarantee learning. This is also a cautionary tale on the significance of statistical evaluation scores in student surveys!

One issue in particular has emerged from my engagement with students as a running theme in both my own practice and as an institutional leader in educational development: flexibility of access. New technologies constantly open up new opportunities, but also challenges, as the last year of Covid has so dramatically shown; and each generation of students represents a body of evolving expectations which have dramatic impacts on the reaction to the learning environment. In fact, the increasing diversity of the student body is an issue which has come to dominate my thinking about how learning spaces should be organised for students (Whelpton 2021b). How do we provide flexible and dynamic spaces in which students can learn, accommodating different learning aims and backgrounds, and different work and family situations? How do we exploit the best aspects of on-site and on-line learning in a way that opens up learning opportunities for the widest range of students? An ongoing theme in my development is therefore the tension between synchronous and asynchronous learning and the belief that well-structured asynchronous learning opportunities are just as important as the synergies offered by the traditional synchronous face-to-

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<sup>1</sup> This passion for the subject is also what drives my greatest weakness as a lecturer: I talk too fast! This has been a recurring comment in surveys and I have worked to address it. More recent responses give me hope that I have this under control – though it may be that recordings can be played at reduced speed!

face context. These questions will be amongst the most challenging to address in the post-covid years.

In the sections that follow, I have highlighted some major milestones in my academic development and use them to explore some of the assumptions which contributed to my current perspective. I begin with my initial shock in realising that even well-received teaching does not lead to successful learning, which led to a focus on what I would now call component skills. The development of richer teacher materials as well as technological advances led to the launch of the distance programme in English under my tenure as Head of the English Department, which in turn led me to apply for a major European grant in support of developing online virtual learning spaces. These developments encouraged an approach in my linguistics teaching which is very similar to the deliberate practice framework (Deslauriers, Schelew, and Wieman 2011). The particular way in which I implemented these did not however do enough to encourage student interaction and cohort-building: challenges I continue to address. The sea-change in attitudes to distance learning brought on by Covid has also opened up opportunities for addressing the need for flexible access to dynamic learning environments.

### **3. From Transmission to Component Skills**

One of my earliest memories of struggling with the challenge of teaching came in my first semester of teaching at the University of Iceland, as the newly appointed Lecturer in English Linguistics. I was teaching an introduction to general linguistics. The course was in a traditional lecture format with a final written exam. The lectures themselves seemed to be well-received, if challenging, and I was therefore unprepared for the essays I received in the final exam. It was clear that many students had managed only the most superficial engagement with the material and therefore were not in a position to engage in any kind of critical assessment. They therefore resorted to unfocused speculations in an attempt to fill up space. This was a deeply disheartening experience.

The significant impression that I took away from this experience was that the students not only did not know what I expected them at the very least to know but in fact did not know what they



did not know and had no idea of how to tackle coming to know it. It was as if I had walked around a dark storeroom full of treasure shining my lamp on various glittering treasures and they had enjoyed the tour, the tone of my voice, and the sparkling reflections glimpsed there but afterwards they were still stumbling around in the dark with no sense of what was actually in the storeroom, if only they could find it.

The perspective on student learning that I took from this experience, and which remains one aspect of my broader perspective to this day, is beautifully set out in Ambrose et al. (2010, 94–95), in their discussion of component skills and the stages at which student progress in their application of these component skills and their assimilation of these components into larger and more complex knowledge structures. Novices exhibit unconscious incompetence: they do not know the relevant component skills and do not know that they do not know them. The first step is to draw their attention to the skills that they are lacking, so that they can attain conscious incompetence, and lead them through effective teaching methods and learning strategies into conscious competence, in which they have mastered the component skills and can deploy them with conscious effort. Ultimately one hopes that they will attain the expert's unconscious competence, in which the skills are deployed reflexively and are embedded in effective and complex knowledge structures and procedural routines.

At this stage, I attempted to clarify the target components of competence and to develop my B.A. courses, especially in the first year, to have plenty of regular practice, focusing on particular analytical skills, with opportunities for group discussion of problems. This approach was still heavily focused on transmission but the aim was to clarify for the students the learning path before them and how they supported the final learning outcomes of the course: my first serious attempt at curricular alignment (Biggs 1999) and curricular coherence (Entwistle 2005). Already at this stage, I had begun to consider the importance of flexible access to learning materials and activities for the students. This effort was hampered by the lack of a flexible and sophisticated learning management system, in which resources and learning activities could be delivered. The problem was particularly acute given the increasing pressure from students for distance access to resources. This led to the next major milestone in my development: the launch of the distance programme in the Department of English in a hybrid/blended model.

#### **4. The Department of English Goes Distance/Blended**

The Department of English launched its distance learning programme in September 2003 during my tenure as Head of Department (Whelpton 2007). Distance learning was already established within the School of Humanities in 1999 following pioneering work within the Department of Icelandic and, on a smaller scale, within the Department of History. The Icelandic programme was a fully distance programme with synchronous classes broadcast from a special video conferencing studio. It attempted to reduplicate the dynamics of face-to-face class time in an online space. Despite the significant advantages of a specialised distance programme, it faced the burden of extra costs, as teachers had to commit to independent contact hours, on top of on-site teaching.

The Department of English had been handling informal requests for “distance provision” for some time and individual teachers had discretion to accommodate distance students by providing copies of handout materials and accepting distance submissions of assignments. The clear proviso, however, was that the service that the distance student was receiving was not equivalent to that received by on-site students and it was the responsibility of the distance student to put in extra time and effort to compensate for the relative lack of information and context being provided.

Here the issue of accommodating a broad and diverse student body first came into sharp focus for me. We received regular requests from students outside of Reykjavík who wanted to be able to pursue a B.A. in English off-site, as well as from Icelanders living abroad who saw the opportunities of new technologies for opening up educational opportunities. However, it was clear that there would be no extra on-going funding for distance provision. There followed an intense period of discussion and collaboration within the Department and the Faculty, coordinated by myself as Head of Department, in which we decided whether and how we would want to offer distance access formally.

In the end, we decided to pursue a fully blended approach in which all students on-site and off-site would have access to the same materials and learning activities. At this stage, the programme was largely in the form of traditional lectures with discussion of homework assignments. It was

therefore decided to record all lectures and make all learning materials (still at this point in the form of documents and slides) available electronically, with (limited) discussion options available through the intranet forums. Students were free to access resources either on-site or remotely, depending on their needs and preferences. As part of the preparations for the launch of this programme, I secured grant funding for teachers to convert their courses into a format more appropriate for blended delivery.

Despite obvious limitations, this was hugely well received, not only by the target remote students but also by local students with work and family commitments<sup>2</sup>. The central problems for the new distance programme all related to the notion of “learning community”: social constructivist approaches to learning (Maddux, Johnson, and Willis 1997; Steffe and Gale 1995; Vygotsky 1978) were in principle not possible, i.e. learning by group discussion and collaboration on tasks (seminar-style) rather than passive reception (lecture-style) were not accommodated in the available learning management system; social support networks were unavailable for distance students and the on-site community remained remote from distance students as atomised individuals; the sorts of impromptu relationships that flourish around a class meeting could not develop for distance learners, either with each other or between them and on-site students; consequently social study activity such as study groups could not develop for distance students or include distance students; the flexibility of access that distance-learning-compatible provision of materials makes available to on-site students made attendance more irregular and disrupted social group formation on-site.

In response to these issues, and in collaboration with Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Professor of Second Language Acquisition and the head of the programme in Academic English, I applied to a major European fund to develop an online learning space more conducive to social constructivist approaches.

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<sup>2</sup> Iceland has one of the highest levels in Europe of student employment alongside studies as well as student perceived financial insecurity (Hauschildt, Vögtle, and Gwosć 2016, 16–18).

## **5. Cohort-Oriented Virtual Campus for Effective Language Learning (COVCELL)**

The Covcell Project was a European project, which was funded by the Minerva Action<sup>3</sup> of the European Commission; the Minerva Action (2000-2006) sought to promote European cooperation in the field of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education. The Covcell Project was funded 2005-2007 (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Matthew Whelpton 2009) and included partners from Germany, Italy and the Basque Country (Spain).

This was a period of intense collaborative activity and discussion, co-ordinating partners with different emphases in their academic development goals. Humboldt University had just become the largest Moodle installation in Europe and was keen to use it better to support German as a Second Language; the University of the Basque Country had a strong tradition of technological solutions to support dissemination of the Basque language; Ca' Foscari University had a strong tradition in linguistics and was interested in metacognitive support for language learning; even at the University of Iceland, there were competing imperatives: support for Icelandic as a second language, academic English, the other foreign languages, and linguistics. The main technology partner was also Icelandic. As the principal investigator for this project, I was privileged to be at the centre of this vibrant discussion of goals and strategies.

The overall conception of the project was driven by the notion of "cohort-learning" – that learning is most effective and sustained where there is a community of learners who interact, collaborate on projects and share the learning experience. This emphasis was the result of direct teaching experience and was supported by pedagogical studies (e.g. Chapelle 2003). It was precisely this aspect of active collaboration which was lacking from the early implementation of the distance programme in English and from the University's teaching intranet at that time.

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<sup>3</sup> This project was funded with support from the European Commission. This portfolio reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

The project did not seek to reinvent the wheel in this area but to leverage the considerable developments that were already underway and make a contribution towards the ultimate goal of the “virtual campus”. Its strategy was therefore to adopt an already-existing Learning Management System which was compatible with the central aims and to which we could add extra tools in support of constructivist cohort-oriented language learning. The Learning Management System which was adopted was Moodle. The functionalities we added supported synchronous interpersonal communication: a text chat server with dynamic user lists which allowed users to see which other users are in the same area of the site as themselves (e.g. also looking at this week’s reading material, or this week’s homework, or this week’s lecture); support for audio-video chat, in the first instance simply by providing a plug-in to launch a Skype call using information in each individual’s profile, and later in the form of full audio-video conferencing, based on the open-source Flash server, Red5; a collaborative whiteboard allowing synchronous collaboration on diagrams and upload and annotation of images.

These plug-ins were delivered by the project but maintenance was beyond the scope of a three-year project, even of this size, and the speed of developments in the field as a whole overwhelmed these efforts. It is striking however to look back from the current moment and see how well the project anticipated the tools which are now receiving large-scale implementation in systems such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. From our more immediate point of view, the project had the advantage of establishing a sophisticated LMS alongside the University’s intranet teaching web and provided a huge boost for teachers seeking to use more sophisticated social constructivist methodologies in an online environment.

From a personal point of view, this was a period of significant development in my teaching and participation in an intense dialogue concerning teaching and learning with a diverse community of partners. Ironically, however, the most immediate impact on my own teaching practice was that Moodle gave me tools for developing further the component-focused practice framework to which I had been heading in a way that allowed me to engage asynchronously with a diffuse body of students.

## 6. Deliberate Practice and Asynchronous Learning

With the tools available in Moodle and with a continuing focus on component skills, I began to develop my BA teaching in a direction reminiscent of the deliberate practice framework, as described in Deslauriers et al. (2011), which is grounded in the approach of constructivism and formative assessment. It structures class time in terms of cycles of lecturer presentation and group problem solving. It provides both for short clicker question tasks with alternating discussion and instructor feedback, as well as longer assignments requiring individual written feedback after group discussion and instructor demonstration. This allows for practicing individual component skills and then framing them within a slightly more complex task.

My own teaching was constrained by the blended nature of department's distance programme in which we accommodated both on-site students and remote students who crucially were not required to attend a synchronous remote session. My attempts to accommodate this were purely asynchronous in this period. I developed large analytical problem sets which could be run automatically in the Moodle quizzing system. Each problem set was focused on specific analytical skills: identifying particular kinds of linguistic category or process; creating test sentences for testing linguistic hypotheses; interpreting data sets with a view to selecting the appropriate structural analysis. The lecture period was used to introduce the week's topic and to review the quizzes for the week together. The lecture and quiz review were recorded. There was a practice quiz for each analytical problem as well as a general quiz for important analytical terms. Students could take these practice quizzes as often as they liked, reviewing their score as well as the correct answers afterwards. They were encouraged to compare their mistakes with the correct answers and try to work out for themselves where they had gone wrong. If they could not, they posted in the Moodle forum: I answered questions there myself but I also encouraged students to answer each other, and this increased over the semester as students gained in confidence. Based on patterns in the learning analytics, I added regular mini-assessment quizzes (weekly quizzes for credit)<sup>4</sup>: before the next topic was introduced, the students had to complete an assessment quiz

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<sup>4</sup> Early versions of these courses lacked the weekly quiz for credit. Students were expected to practice at their convenience until the midterm review quiz. Learning analytics in Moodle for one example showed that only about 40% of students practiced during the relevant week but about 90% practiced before the midterm. Once the weekly

based directly on the practice quizzes. There were then larger review quizzes later in the semester. This iterative quizzing approach was identified by Dunlosky et al. (2013, 39) as highly effective for supporting student learning. Furthermore, the weekly assessment quizzes were one of the surprise hits of the student review surveys for the course (see page 28 in 11.1.1): students found that they helped them to structure their studies and gave them a clear sense of what was expected of them.

The problem was that the social constructivist and reflective elements of the deliberate practice framework were suppressed in this set-up. Because there was no attendance requirement and because the materials were so well structured for asynchronous learning, attendance on-site was relatively low (about 20-25%). Most students did not benefit from group discussion and interaction in class and there was no reflective written element to this set-up. This encouraged some students to attempt a shallow approach of learning rules of thumb for individual analytical skills which meant that they struggled with more complex skills, integrating components. Learning analytics in Moodle, as well as discussion in the forums, showed generally lower performance in the more complex skill quizzes.

The blended/hybrid nature of the English Department programme created considerable inertia in addressing these problems. I was unconvinced that the cultural and technological tools were sufficiently established to allow this to be addressed in a flexible way, accommodating such a large diverse student body, and I was reluctant to lock students into traditional on-site attendance. Covid has changed all that and I am currently restructuring our large first-year linguistic courses for flipped teaching with separate delivery modes, in collaboration with the sessional teacher who now teaches them.

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quizzes for credit were introduced, about 80% of the students practiced during the relevant week (and 90% before the midterm).

## **7. Covid, Canvas and Collaboration**

In 2020, the University of Iceland replaced its two teaching environments – the intranet course pages and the LMS Moodle – with a single LMS, Canvas. I was the representative for the Humanities on the tendering board which led to the Canvas selection and the Dean of Humanities asked me to focus on teaching technologies when he appointed me to the role of Director of Academic/Educational Development for the Humanities in 2019. The advent of Covid and the need to support colleagues in the rapid transition to remote teaching both reinforced this technical angle but also superceded it. Technology does not make good teaching: it must be harnessed by good pedagogical practice. Although I am currently not teaching, I remain responsible for the large introductory courses that have run as a thread through this portfolio. The current development of these courses takes place in light of the introduction of Canvas and the experience of remote teaching during Covid.

The aim now is to fully flip these courses and to introduce the reflective and social constructivist elements from the deliberate practice framework which are missing in the current implementation (see 11.3.2 and 11.4.2). A series of mini-recordings will be provided on the Canvas course page, covering the main informational content of the week in coherent chunks. A reading covering the same material in more detail will also be provided. Students must view and read this material before class. The viewing and reading materials will continue to be supported by practice quizzes linked to asynchronous forums for online discussion. These will be assessed by weekly assessment quizzes feeding into larger elements of the evaluation.

The classes themselves will be discussion-based. The emphasis will be on peer activities to give students the chance to activate their knowledge and digest the material together (either in open group discussions or activities such as pairs explaining concepts to each other), followed by general discussion which will allow the teacher to contribute more directly. Classes will end with a short reflective writing assignment, both to allow the student to take stock and to allow the teacher to identify potential problems or opportunities for development. These reflective written elements of the course will be reinforced with peer review assignments over the course of the semester. For the first time, there will be fully flexible access without sacrificing discussion-based activities (see 11.3.2.2), with access provided for: on-site students (on campus); distance



students who are free at the scheduled time (Teams meetings); distances students requiring asynchronous access (organised group work).

These courses will be taught by a sessional teacher, as my time is now focused on supporting my colleagues in developing their teaching and taking part in the institutional and national discussion concerning educational development in my role as Director of Academic/Educational Development.

## **8. Contributing at the Institutional and National Level**

The last five years have instituted a revolution in support and recognition for academic development at the University of Iceland. I have been lucky enough to benefit from this work personally and to be invited to join in the effort. With my appointment as Director of Academic/Educational Development for the Humanities in the summer of 2019, the University completed this policy target to institute stronger links between the Division of Academic Affairs and the individual Schools of the University.

It has been a challenging, stimulating and enriching experience to take part in institutional discussions concerning academic development, particularly during the Covid crisis. The five Schools of the University have very different characters and traditions; the appointment of Directors of Academic Development is an important step in developing a co-ordinated approach institutionally and to ensuring the dissemination of good practice. The Directors also act as a bridge between the professional pedagogists of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the academic staff of the Schools, and their role was intentionally conceived in terms of situated academic development. Indeed, our main focus has been to develop communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) within our own grassroot communities.

Among other events, I have co-ordinated informal discussion meetings for teachers, to come together and share concerns, ideas and best practices (see 11.7). We had a particularly busy period during the Fall semester, as we looked into various ways of using technology and good pedagogical practice to address the challenges of covid. We are currently in another intense period of discussion as we review the challenges of the last year and look to the future.

The same conversation is ongoing at the national level and I recently presented the view of our group at a webinar organised by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education (Whelpton 2021a) and was the keynote speaker at the University of Akureyri's annual teachers conference (Whelpton 2021c). The focus in the next academic year, with the expected return to on-site teaching, is to encourage teachers to take the skills and experiences of this period and use them to develop and enhance their teaching in a constructive way. In the Humanities, we will be placing a particular emphasis on flipped teaching, active student engagement in face-to-face time and better use of asynchronous methods, not only for transmission of information but also for task-driven learning and group collaboration.

The journey is ongoing and I look forward to the road ahead!

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