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Learning through/about coping with the stress of teaching outside a specialist area in Exercise and Sport Psychology

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Abstract

The rationalization and casualization of academic teaching positions in universities has meant that, more and more, teaching staff are being asked to teach outside of their specific field of expertise. This situation may be particularly exaggerated if universities or courses choose to use a small number of units as first block units that include both transition to tertiary education practices and important foundational disciplinary content. Ideally, it is suggested that with good unit design and expert unit conveners overseeing this teaching and supporting these teachers, the use of non-experts should be seamless. But what are the consequences for the non-expert? In this paper, we look specifically at the forms of anxiety that are faced by non-expert teaching staff, the ways that this anxiety is dealt with by both the teachers and the unit convener, and the ways that these experiences of anxiety can be used to engage with students in the class.

Keywords: Anxiety, Choking, Mindfulness, Academic Teaching, Flow

Introduction

The foundational first-block unit for students across Sport Science, Exercise Science, Physical Education and Fitness courses at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, is an introductory Sport and Exercise Psychology unit. It has been excellently constructed by one of the authors of this paper to satisfy the first block principle of student engagement with others in their courses, through the use of activity-based learning and assessment modules. At the same time, the unit also delivers research-based content in this important foundational area that will inform both later level units, and professional practice in the client-focused areas that many graduates go on to fill. The British Association of Sport and Exercise Science [BASES] counts sport and exercise psychology as one of the three named scientific domains of study, and accredited courses will require first, second and third year modules in this area. Whilst the Australian equivalent of BASES, Exercise and Sport Science Australia [ESSA] is not as prescriptive, ESSA certainly recognize the important role that sport and exercise psychology plays when accrediting courses in the exercise and sport science area.

The three authors come to this cognate area with different backgrounds. Janet is the key academic, unit designer and unit convener for this unit. She has a long academic and professional background and holds a PhD in this area, and has an impressive international research publication record. Michael is a late career academic across social science and humanities areas, with a thirty-year career as a community sport coach. His attachment to this

area occurs through some topics that cross psychology, and his specialist areas of sociology and ethics, as well as the shared applications of all three areas in coaching. Teghan is an early career academic from an allied health area, who has recently begun a career in community coaching and is extending into higher levels of coaching. Again, there is some crossover in expert domains, but like Michael, no postgraduate background in the specific area of Sport and Exercise Psychology.

A principle of the block design of units at Victoria University that impacted on this unit design was that the selection of topics covered in the eleven face-to-face seminars that students engaged in during the four-week teaching block should both be useful in professional practice for the various cohorts of students, and should also assist in completion of assessment items by students during the block. The assessments in the unit include both group work and individual work, and involve written papers and presentations on sport and exercise psychology topics. Additionally, the progressive design of the three main assessments meant that students were required to first define a topical problem from the media in psychological terms, then investigate psychological research literature to demonstrate the causes of the problem, and finally present psychologically-based interventions that might help solve the problem. Topics covered in face-to-face classes included motivation theory, goal-setting, coach-player communication, team dynamics, concentration strategies, mindfulness, flow experiences, relaxation strategies, anxiety and stress in athletes, and burnout. The interesting phenomena was that the theories and practical tools outlined in class, and useful to completion of student assessments, were equally useful for teaching staff who were teaching outside of their area of cognate expertise.

The suggestion in the college that all three of us work in is that if needed, given good unit design, expert unit conveners and generalized skill in teaching, any teacher should be able to facilitate participatory and engaged student learning (Hodkinson, 2005) in any area. This is a common expectation experienced by teaching-focused academics in universities across the world. The experienced reality is different. Expertise in a subject area brings a degree of relaxation that many non-specialists do not feel. Teaching outside of your cognate area of expertise can be stressful and threatening to one's identity as a teacher. As class teachers, Michael and Teghan were also caught between the institutional hope to develop generic critical thinking and academic skills and orientations in students (Jones, 2009) with a sense of obligation to cover disciplinary content that is both valued by the accrediting body and important for successful participation in later year units. This obligation was even more pressing in the block model, where novice teachers may only have one day between sessions to prepare for the next topic, and may be completing assessment grading whilst trying to prepare. Each author will provide a short story to describe some challenge that occurred during the block mode. The orientation of these stories will be to provide useful tools in dealing with the issues that arise in teaching outside of one's area of expertise.

Michael's Story- 'Choking' in Class

The first two classes in my first year of teaching the unit had gone reasonably well. However, the stakes rose in the third class, as we were moving on to the first psychological concept that we would cover in class, motivation strategies in sport and exercise. The early section of class asked students to report on the many quasi-motivational techniques that had been employed by the community coaches and physical education teachers that they had met. Having produced a large amount of research on coach harassment and abuse, I felt reasonably confident in dealing with these stories, and making clear the distinctions between popular and psychologically-based versions of motivation. I moved on to cover a set of informative slides

and readings on the ingredients of Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory of motivation in sport (1985, 2000 cited in Gould, 2019), when I stumbled on a key point and misread a slide. Immediately, one of the best students that I have experienced in six years of teaching the class, who had read the relevant book chapter before class, gently raised his hand and asked for clarification. This was the moment when my choke began. And all the ingredients that psychological research has revealed about choking situations, distraction from task-relevant cues, the rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing and sweating that leads to an inappropriate concentration focus on my body's internal response, and the negative feedback 'spiral' that produces greater anxiety, were present for me (Vealey et al., 2014; Hussey et al., 2020). What could or should I do?

A couple of classes later, the class was covering choking in performance, and Michael recognized both his symptoms and the management responses that helped. There is a substantial literature on mechanisms that are useful in helping choking-susceptible athletes manage choking situations both immediately and in the longer-term period (Vealey et al., 2014; Hussey et al., 2020; Gropel & Mesagno, 2019). In the immediate period, the research suggests that skillful employment of trained anxiety-management centering practices such as muscle relaxation, deep breathing, mindfulness techniques, and practices of attentional control, helps (Baltzell et al., 2014; Hussey et al., 2020). For Michael, not being too critical about his mistake helped in the moment. Michael had prepared the class from day one by honestly and openly owning up to not being an expert in the area and suggesting that all members of the class should consider themselves as parts of a learning community. So teachers should enter these stressful moments in class with acceptance that they will happen, and welcome non-judgmental feedback from students as part of the learning process. Unhealthy perfectionist concerns (Stoeber, 2011) about teaching are not conducive to reduced anxiety when teaching outside of your area of expertise.

In the longer term, sport psychology suggests the importance of the use of imagery to recreate anxiety-inducing moments, of pre-performance preparation so that teaching becomes more automated, of routinization and the use of cue-words during teaching performance to avoid shocks that trigger choking moments, and of debriefing when choking occurs so that future teaching shocks do not elicit similar teaching performance decrements (Cotterill, 2011; Pineshi & di Pietro, 2013). Preparation for class was more important, and different to, preparation for classes when teaching within a teacher's area of expertise. Routinization of classroom patterns, adopting key cue-words, over-familiarization with important concepts and visual representation of ideas all helped to avoid ongoing instances of choking in the classroom. In terms of debriefing, the role of the unit convener/expert is important. Janet coaxed Michael back from his initial choke into being a facilitator, even a flawed one, in student learning. Janet continued to provide support and encouragement to the teachers who lack her level of expertise in the cognate area. For example, for Michael, still suffering some anxiety at the commencement of classes even after four years and also having to cope with the additional stressor of teaching online because of Covid, Janet provided an insightful article about a professor at the University of Southern California who described how he thrives in the unusual 'zoom' teaching conditions imposed during lockdowns by having a positive mindset in challenging situations and keeping things in perspective (Thanh Nguyen, 2021).

Teghan's Story- The Impact of Stress

As an Early Career Teaching-Focused Academic, I have been proactive in expanding my range of teaching specializations, throwing myself into the deep end of teaching new units and being versatile and adaptable whenever necessary. This both embodies the ethos of Victoria University, and makes me more secure in the contemporary precarious environment of academia. But it also opens me to stressful teaching situations. Quick thinking in response to on-the-spot questioning has been a skill that I have developed in my Clinical Career as a health professional. Did my previous experience with managing patients and cases with psychosocial barriers to healing and recovery help with managing my own stress of teaching topics in sport and exercise psychology that were outside of my specialist cognate area? What teaching practices was I able to use to manage my own stress and anxiety about this new content, which at times seemed overwhelming?

Many students felt confronted by the demands of working in groups, responding to questions in class and presenting to the cohort. But many of these anxious students had also experienced, and overcome, great stress in their own sporting careers. Teghan's professional experiences outside of the university teaching environment, as both a health professional and a netball coach, have provided clinical and sporting experiences that she was able to share with students in exemplifying the application of many psychology topics. She focused on using her experiences as a tool to help students understand the importance of research-based psychological skills training in dealing with their own personal circumstances of experiencing stress and anxiety in class. To exemplify some of the psychological tools that help individuals overcome stress and anxiety, Teghan explained the strategies and concepts she used when acting as an Assistant Coach in an Under 17s Netball Development Team in the Bendigo League. One pertinent example occurred when Teghan was helping a starting Goal Shooter who was struggling with pre-game anxiety and stress, producing the effect of being unable to reach an optimal level of arousal and consequently missing a lot of goals. This then affected other areas of the player's game including her movement patterns and willingness to cut to the ball. The player had withdrawn from exposing herself to stressful situations in the game, much like many students who withdraw from participation in classroom discussions and activities. Teghan enacted some strategies to help the player deal with this 'stage-fright' including pre-game visualization, the use of music to elicit the optimal level of arousal and enacting a simple routine when taking a shot (Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Smirmaul, 2017). In addition, Teghan encouraged the player to adopt mindfulness training which allowed the shooter to learn about parking any negative thoughts (Lin et al., 2019; Dehghani et al., 2018). Through demonstrating the application of the strategies and approaches that students are learning about in the unit, the teacher is able to give the students a perspective about the utility of psychological skills training to clients and players who are dealing with the same stress and anxiety that the students themselves face in the classroom.

Additionally, reflection on these skills consequently helped manage Teghan's own teaching stress. To manage any anxiety and stress produced in class by students who have asked a question on a topic that she was not an expert in, Teghan relied heavily on her lived experiences as a player herself, a coach and a clinician, helping students to tie professional practice back to the content. The reflection by Teghan that she could not continue to be a stressed teacher, associated with the prospect of academic burnout, made her contemplate the style of teaching and the approach that she could take. The adoption of reflective story-telling about previous experiences and situations she had been a part of in her involvement in elite sports as an allied health professional, trainer or coach, allowed students to see how certain activities and topics of content were used and adopted in real life situations with athlete clients. But it also allowed

Teghan to be comfortable about how the information was being presented, by using deep and experiential storytelling of emotive first-hand experienced situations (Wiles & Enslein, 2021).

This amalgamation of theoretical concepts and storytelling about lived experiences also transformed the students' engagement in the learning process. Students started to share their own experiences, helping them to understand the relevance of the session topics covered in sport and exercise psychology to their own situations. Students validated Teghan's teaching approach through their growing willingness to engage in class, explaining in feedback that this approach helped them in learning the concepts and content expected of them in class and that links to experiences would also help with remembering content into the future. Teghan mitigated some of the stress and anxiety she felt when teaching units that were not in her expert area by engaging the class in participating actively in their own learning.

As the years of teaching outside of her focus area have continued, Teghan has found herself using examples and experiences provided by other teaching team members, on top of her own examples that resonated well with previous groups of students, in addition to re-using previous de-identified student stories that exemplified the experiences of day-to-day people, their peers and the experts in the field. This has formed a growth area for Teghan to expand on and become more confident in the area of Sport and Exercise Psychology over the blocks and years she has been involved in teaching this unit. Teghan would still not consider herself an expert in the area, but she has developed a teaching strategy linked to the reflections on the psychological aspects of her own experiences, that allows her to now engage with the class and content confidently, and largely without anxiety.

Janet's Story- Dealing with a Stressed and Anxious Teaching Staff

Teaching academics have reported experiencing anxiety to me as the Unit Convenor and Key Academic for this unit. In the main, the anxiety experienced by academics has, to date, related to teaching a unit outside of their formal qualifications, and more specifically, in relation to marking assessment tasks. The nature of the three assessment tasks in the unit is such that students select topics of interest to them. This flexibility offered to students has the potential to require a teaching academic to mark assessment submissions that cover over 40 different topics in a teaching block. Interestingly, a number of these topics relate to performance anxiety issues for athletes. Understandingly, the scope of assessment submissions to be marked by academics can be the source of considerable anxiety when many have no formal exercise and sport psychology or general psychology training or qualifications. Another reported source of anxiety for academics in relation to marking is the quick turnaround that is required in the block mode. Marking needs to be 'juggled around' classes and the preparation required for these. This preparation time is often much longer for teachers who do not have a cognate background in the area.

'Anxiety' is a key topic in Exercise and Sport Psychology units and courses delivered world-wide (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). Anxiety is "a negative emotional state in which feelings of nervousness, worry and apprehension are associated with activation or arousal of the body" (Weinberg & Gould, 2019, p. 78). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) posits an explanation of anxiety that is covered in the Victoria University unit, in his expose on 'flow'. In this context anxiety is conceptualised to occur when there is an imbalance between an individual's perception of the challenges faced and the skills possessed by the individual to meet those challenges, where one's skills are perceived to be inadequate to meeting the challenge. According to

Csikszentmihalyi, all individuals are considered at risk of feeling anxious including those in sport, exercise and academic settings.

In response to reports from academics about their feelings of anxiety when marking students' assessments, Janet developed and adopted a number of strategies derived from Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) conceptualisation of anxiety, to assist in reducing the anxiety felt by the teaching staff. The goal of these strategies is to align the academics' perceptions of the challenge (marking a range of topics largely outside of one's area of expertise in a relatively short time) with the skills that teachers possessed (to mark competently, fairly, promptly and transparently). Strategies included:

1) *Conducting a pre-unit meeting for the team of teaching academics*

This team-building activity reviews all the assessment tasks in detail and encourages academics to raise queries and offer suggestions to ensure they fully understand the requirements with respect to marking. At this meeting team members decided on pairings (typically an experienced teaching academic in this unit with a less experienced academic) for moderating assessment marking and providing general mentoring and time-management support.

2) *On-going rubric refinement and detail*

Based on feedback from academics during any teaching year, Janet continued to fine-tune assessment rubrics. The definition of criteria on rubrics is made clear and comprehensive for teachers who are outside of their expert area. For example, this year Janet further clarified the criteria of '*recent references*' to '*psychologically-based references published in the last 8 years*'. In another example, Janet changed the criteria of '*provided a conclusion*' so that it was further clarified to '*logical and psychologically-informed conclusion (with supporting reference/s) provided*'.

3) *Provide marking and referencing examples for academics to trial*

In addition to rubrics, providing academics with descriptions of the features that define high-standard (Distinctions and above) assessment submissions is helpful. For example, in assessment #1 (Reporting on a Typical Issue in Exercise and Sport Psychology), academics are alerted to:

“Students who do well in Assessment 1 (12-15 marks):

- *Provide a definition of Exercise and Sport Psychology*
- *Relate the discussion of their topic to the definition cited*
- *Accurately reference in accord with APA style (7th ed.) in-text and in the Reference list “*

Also, giving teachers access to examples of high-standard exemplar submissions of each of the three assessments tasks submitted by former students and encouraging academics to mark these exemplars, allows these academics to become more adept at recognizing rubric requirements when grading submissions. Academics achieve this by comparing their marking with the marking and feedback provided by the moderators who originally assessed the exemplar submission.

4) *Availability of extensive online modules, readings and resources*

Janet also developed a set of 40 online modules to cover a range of topics in Exercise and Sport Psychology that teachers cannot cover in detail in class given the time constraints of teaching in the block. Students use these self-paced online modules to engage with theoretical content on specific topics that interest them. Many of the topics in the online modules were selected in light of their potential interest to students when selecting topics for their assessment tasks (e.g.,

Perfectionism, Mental Toughness, and Mindfulness in Sport). These online modules are also available for academics to access prior to marking submissions on any of the 40 topics. Teachers can also access a full selection of provided readings, TED talks, and links to reputable academic websites in preparing for classes and in marking assessments. These complement the set of readings from the text, *'Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology'* (Weinberg & Gould, 2019) and other current publications that are provided for students in the learning management system.

5) Provide 'second opinion' for academics if needed when marking

Academics sometimes ask Janet to provide a 'second opinion' when warranted (e.g., requested by a student). In the last block of teaching for example, an academic reported feeling under extreme pressure from a student to amend a student's grade to a High Distinction. Janet offered to mark the submission and did so without reference to the academic's marking and comments. This provided reassurance and comfort to both the academic and student that any concerns were fully addressed.

6) Engage in frequent communications with academics

Open and on-going communications within the team of academics is essential. In her roles as Unit Convenor and key teaching academic, Janet uses opportunities to pro-actively drive these communications. She chooses to teach the first class slot in the unit of each week (8am on a Monday). This gives Janet an opportunity to identify current issues with students, particularly in relation to the assessment tasks and the class content. In addition, Janet has set up a discussion board for students to post their queries and comments about the assessment tasks and other matters. All of this feedback was valuable information for the teaching team of academics. Teachers shared and discussed this information on a daily basis. In doing so, the teachers who were acting outside of their cognate area were well equipped for the marking tasks.

All of these strategies involved an initial additional workload for Janet as the unit convenor. However, in comparison to dealing with stressed teachers who were anxious, choking in class, or in tears in her office, this initial effort yielded far more than it cost. It certainly was more helpful in mitigating unit convenor stress and anxiety than constantly having to find and train new teachers because old ones leave to find less stressful work.

Conclusion

One of the foundational principles of teaching and learning at Victoria University is that students learn more by doing. The experiences of two of the chapter authors, Michael and Teghan, as teachers in an introductory Sport and Exercise Psychology unit, permitted both to learn about important sport and exercise psychology concepts through stressful situations that occurred during teaching. Both teachers entered the teaching process with academic expertise in areas outside of psychology. Both experienced some psychological barriers to productive and enjoyable teaching experiences that mimic the psychological barriers that athletes feel when trying to produce optimal performance of sport.

Faced with the problem of stress-inducing teaching situations, it became useful to reflect on the coping strategies suggested in the sport and exercise psychology literature to help athletes deal with psychological stressors that negatively affect their sporting performance. So, in the

classroom or zoom space, it became important for teachers to use mindfulness orientations and attentional control strategies to prevent disruptions for choking-susceptible teachers, and to use cue-words, routines, progressive muscle relaxation and controlled breathing techniques to deal with stress and anxiety before and during classes. This chapter explained some of the psychologically-informed techniques that were used in dealing with the anxiety-inducing situation of teaching outside the teacher's expert areas. Both Michael and Teghan have continued to teach into this unit with increasing comfort and joy, in an experience that may be the teaching equivalent of Hains-Wesson's 'failing successfully' (2022, p.729). Both use their past anxieties and responses as examples to discuss in class.

In addition, the chapter looked at the ways that specialist experts can use research-based anxiety-reduction techniques to mentor less experienced staff members when faced with anxiety inducing elements of teaching. Janet used the application of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) conceptualisation of, and responses to, anxiety to address academic anxiety. A balance between challenges (of teaching or marking) and skills (to teach or mark) can be achieved by changing academics' misperceptions of the imbalance between the excessively high challenges they face and their inadequate skills to face these challenges. By adopting a number of the strategies described above in Janet's section on unit convening, teachers with less expertise will experience less anxiety. These strategies have been successful based from feedback received by the unit convener from the team of academic teachers. As one of the teaching team recently emailed, *"I absolutely loved working with you and the team. I have had such an enjoyable block! The classes were fantastic, I got lots of positive feedback from them and I forgot how rewarding it was to teach first years!"* Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) conceptualisation should alert all teachers and unit convenors to the changing dynamics of perceptions of challenges and skills. It is important for those with expertise to continue to monitor individual academic responses to teaching and marking to avoid or minimise anxiety. Adopting psychological principles to do so is a strong endorsement of what is taught to the students in this unit of study; namely, anxiety is a natural response in certain circumstances but strategies can help to mitigate its effects.

Teachers who have experienced a flow state in teaching will talk about many of the characteristics that are associated with flow; the balance of the teaching challenge with their teaching skills, the transformation of classroom time when in flow, the loss of their own self-consciousness when teaching, and their sense of control over, and concentration on, the teaching tasks. Not all teachers will experience this state. However, it is useful to reflect on the idea that the environmental and individual characteristics that increases the probability for teachers to achieve a flow state, are also useful for non-expert teachers to moderate the anxiety they might feel when teaching outside of their area of expertise.

Disclosures

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