

# Teaching in contemporary learning spaces

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*Academic and consultant Julia Atkin discusses how a teacher's perception of their own role can influence their design approach when it comes to creating learning environments. This article is an abbreviated version of [a keynote address \(http://www.iletc.com.au/publications/proceedings/\)](#) to The University of Melbourne's ILETC symposia Challenging Transitions in Melbourne and Copenhagen 2018.*

The re-design of school facilities in the first two decades of this century is considerably more sophisticated than the open-space design of the 1970s.

Emerging school facility designs reflect far greater intentionality. The best contemporary designs are focused on creating learning spaces that empower students to be effective lifelong learners who engage in deep learning with persistence and resilience. Teaching is now understood to be about embracing the challenge of developing learners who are equipped to work collaboratively, creatively, and critically on complex, non-routine, unfamiliar problems.

This shift in the design of school facilities from teaching-centred classrooms to the design of integrated, purposeful learning spaces that support learning in multiple modes, creates challenges for many teachers, while others take it in their stride. Why is this paradigm shift easier for some than others?

## Factors that mediate a successful transition

Human behavioural change is tricky at the best of times. We are creatures of habit and much of what we do and how we do things is deeply ingrained in us having been learned from the models of teaching and the architecture of the school facilities we experienced ourselves.

Making a successful transition from a homogeneous space, designed for 'one to many' teaching, to settings and spaces designed to support a range of learning and teaching activities will depend on many factors such as professional support, encouragement to take risks and a collaborative culture. Central to teachers' success in navigating the transition, however, will be whether they have a wide repertoire of pedagogical strategies to operate in a multi-dimensional environment. This in turn has been shown to depend on how they perceive their role as teachers.

Between 2000 and 2013 the South Australian Department for Education drew together the research and voices of teachers and world experts to generate a pedagogical framework, the South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning (TfEL) Framework (Figure 1). In developing this pedagogical framework, the key focus was on unlocking what it is that teachers do to both enhance academic achievement and to empower students to become lifelong learners. The SA TfEL Framework is a learner and learning-centred framework.

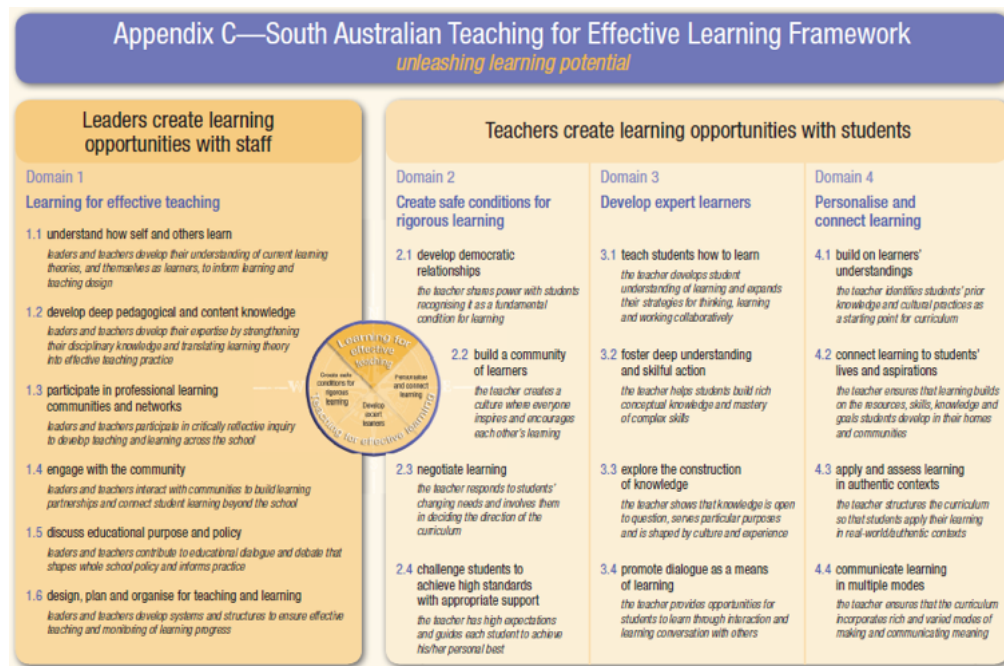


Figure 1. South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning pedagogy framework. (South Australian Government, 2010).

At the time, research was also undertaken to determine which factors influenced the extent of a teacher's pedagogical repertoire. It was shown that a teacher's pedagogical repertoire was not dependent on age, gender or years of experience. The research showed that teachers' beliefs and assumptions about their role shape their practice and strongly influence the range of pedagogical strategies they employ (as shown in Figure 2).

The research revealed three identifiable trends in the teachers' perceptions of their role:

- **Content coverage and control** – the teacher's role is to 'cover' the curriculum; to teach the curriculum. They generally do not explicitly perceive that it is their role to ensure that learners learn what is intended in the curriculum.
- **High relationship – low challenge** – the teacher's role is to primarily care for the learners. These teachers erred on the side of not challenging learners as they perceive learners have enough to deal with as it is.
- **Responsive** – the teacher's role is to ensure learners learn meaningfully and thus the pedagogical approach was learning and learner-centred. Teachers with a wide repertoire of strategies fell into this category.

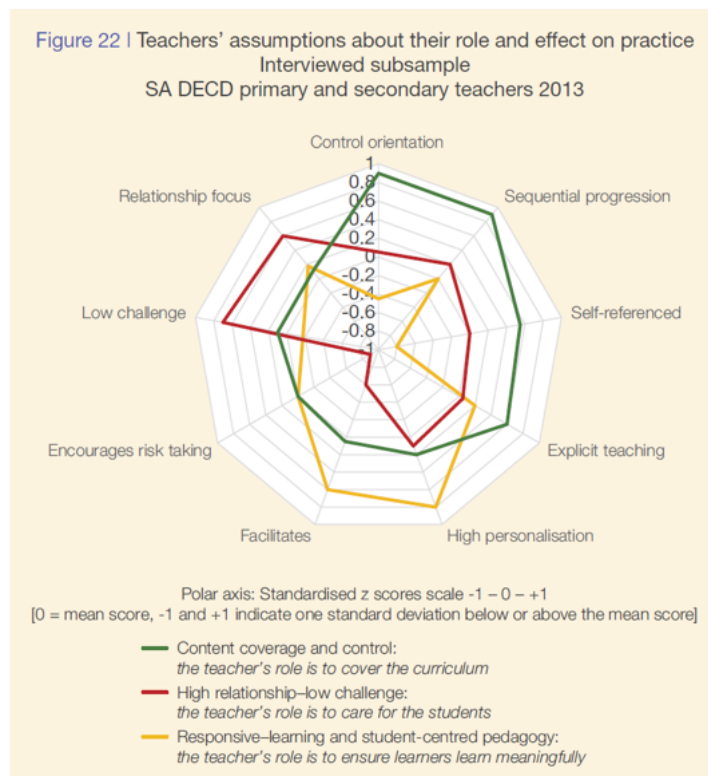


Figure 2. The impact of teachers' beliefs and assumptions about their role and the effect on practice. (South Australian Government, 2013)

A very small percentage of teachers (those classified above as 'Responsive') demonstrated that they employed a wide range of strategies that enact the 12 principles of the three domains of pedagogical practice (displayed in Figure 1): Create safe conditions for rigorous learning, develop expert learners, and personalise and connect learning.

## The impact of teacher perceptions of their role

It is widely acknowledged that 'learning about' skills and capabilities does not develop capabilities and skills. Capabilities and skills are not developed by transmission of information – they are learned through experience and coaching. Collaborative ways of working and independence, for example, are developed through participatory and experiential processes where students learn to be collaborative, self-directed and self-managing through setting goals and obtaining constructive feedback from peers and those with greater expertise. Developing global citizens involves more than projects to raise money for giving aid to developing communities. Global awareness and global education means being connected seamlessly to other young people around the globe and engaging together in youth dialogue and projects that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

It is stating the obvious to say that teachers who see their role as 'coverage and control' will find a shift to both physical and social environments designed to promote student self-management and self-direction in learning extremely challenging. Yet our responsibility to today's learners is to do just that. The development of 21<sup>st</sup> Century capabilities is enhanced in learning settings that inspire creativity, active investigation and self-expression in settings that invite self-direction and require self-management, in settings that connect students globally. Such learner and learning-centred settings are in stark contrast to the standard industrial era classroom and teaching driven by a felt obligation to 'cover' the curriculum and control the learning process.

How can an understanding that teachers' perceptions of their role have an impact on their pedagogical range, assist teachers make the transition to teaching in contemporary learning spaces?

Further investigation of teachers' epistemic awareness and the impact of this on their pedagogical approach showed that teachers who were classed above as 'Responsive', and had a design approach to teaching and learning, reflected on their practice and their own assumptions, questioned their beliefs and viewed learning as meaning-making.

On the other hand, teachers who were classed above as 'Content coverage and control' had a script approach to teaching and learning, reflected on their practice but not their assumptions, did not question their own beliefs and viewed learning as the acquisition of information with a lower emphasis on learning as meaning-making (as seen in Figure 3).

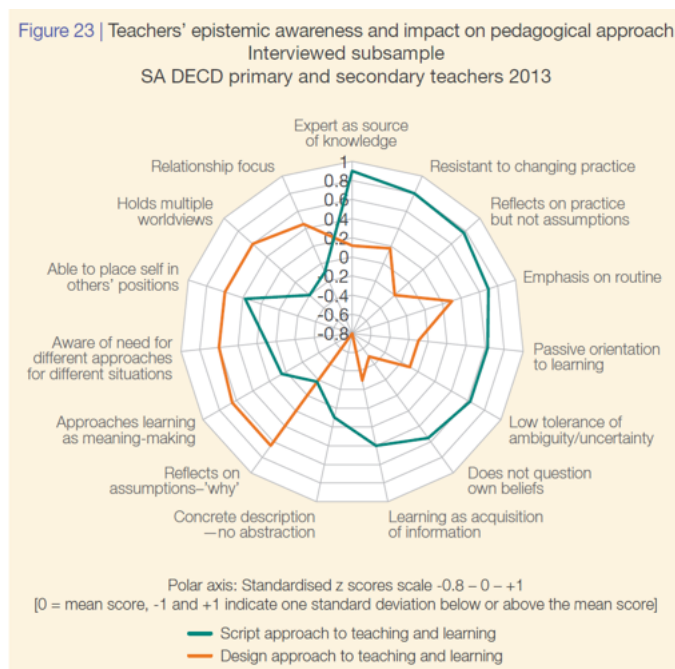


Figure 3. The impact of teachers' epistemic awareness on their pedagogical approach. (South Australian Government, 2013).

While providing obvious insight as to why some teachers will navigate the transition from a traditional learning environment to an innovative learning environment more readily than others, it also points to processes that will aid the transition.

Stimulating dialogue about the nature of learning, accessing teachers' personal story knowledge of their own powerful, deep learning experiences, eliciting teachers' values and beliefs about learning (increasing epistemic awareness) and involving teachers in intentional design of settings and spaces to support different types of learning activities are all strategies that support teachers make the transition from a traditional, teaching-centric learning environments to learning-centric environments.

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*South Australia Teaching for Effective Learning Pedagogy Research Project 2010 -2013 Final Report*, Communities Making a Difference National Partnerships, Internal Report, Department for Education and Child Development, Government of South Australia, 2013, p45.

Julia Atkin says there are three identifiable trends in a teacher's perception of their role: content coverage and control, high relationship – low challenge, and responsive.

As a teacher, have you considered which role you might identify with most? How could this impact your approach to teaching?