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Editorial - TL Forum 2015: Teaching and learning uncapped

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Introduction

Teaching and Learning Forum is a series of annual conferences held in Perth by Western Australia's five universities, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, The University of Notre Dame Australia, and The University of Western Australia. After 24 Forums, 1992-2015 (TLF, n.d. 1), TLF is clearly an enduring presence in our local discourse on university teaching and learning practices. In this editorial for the *Journal's* special issue, titled *TL Forum 2015: Teaching and learning uncapped*, we present multiple understandings of how *an enduring presence* has been attained, and why we assert the importance of our *local discourse*.

An enduring presence

One measure of TL Forum's enduring presence is the number of submissions per year. Table 1 shows this for 2006-2015, with the added perspective of relating numbers of submissions to numbers of staff, given that numbers of staff increased nearly 30% during this period. The 10 year average of nearly one TL Forum submission per 100 FTE staff is potentially a useful benchmark, though there is very litte data from elsewhere that can be used for comparative purposes.

Table 1: TL Forums 2006-2015 - relating submissions to numbers of staff

Forum year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total no. submissions (a)	112	73	92	110	94	107	87	112	134	138
FTE Staff WA unis (b)	9,523	9,798	9,831	9,040	10,845	11,990	11,422	12,144	12,118	12,339
Subs per 100 FTE (c)	1.18	0.75	0.94	1.22	0.87	0.89	0.76	0.92	1.11	1.12

a. Total number of submissions: Data sources as for Table 2.
b. Full time equivalent staff in WA universities: Data from the Australian Government's *Higher Education Statistics* publications, accessed via http://education.gov.au/staff-data. As the Forums have been held at the beginning of each year, staff numbers cited in this row are for the previous year (when the work was done!), e.g. in the 2015 column the number of FTE staff is from the Government's 2014 data tables.
c. The average over 10 years is 0.98 TL Forum submissions per 100 FTE staff.

Whilst 24 Forums 1992-2015 establishes an enduring presence, the recent 11 year period 2006-2015 summarised in Table 2 reflects a change that had to *be endured*, namely the downgrading of conference proceedings as a recognised "outlet" for publishing of research work. Table 2 shows a steady decline in numbers of full papers, fortunately for TLF more than countered by the increase in "abstract only" submissions. The downgrading of conference papers resulting from the Australian Government's changing policies concerning research funding for universities is a large topic, beyond the scope of this editorial (though deserving further research). What is within our scope here is a brief analysis of the steps taken by a series of TL Forum Committees in response to the changing policies. With the hosting of TLF rotating to another university every two years, the period 2005-2015 involved six different Committees, though there was some membership continuity provided by long-serving individuals (TLF, n.d. 2).

The main innovation that a TL Forum Committee took to safeguard "research" recognition of full papers published in the TLF *Proceedings* (TLF, n.d. 1.) was the initiation in TLF 2005 of two categories for full papers, namely "Research" and "Professional practice" (TLF, 2005). The 2005 Committee was concerned that in previous years a number of the published full papers could possibly be deemed ineligible as research papers, should we face a strict application of the Australian Government's definition of research that was current at the time and has persisted to the present.

Table 2: TL Forums 2005-2015 submissions and outcomes summary (a)

Year	Full papers		Abstract only submitted	Total submissions (b)	Total offers
	Submitted	Accepted			
2015	10	9	117	138	138
2014	21	13	104	134	130
2013	23	19	75	112	108
2012	20	17	53	87	87
2011	25	17	72	107	106
2010	35	21	55	94	92
2009	39	14	67	110	107
2008	27	18	59	92	90
2007	30	22	37	73	68
2006	44	25	62	112	103
2005	35	27	54	89	85
a. Data sources: http://ctl.curtin.edu.au/events/conferences/tlf/ tlf2015/editorial.html, and similar files for 2005-2014. b. Includes all categories: Full papers (two categories: Research, Professional practice), Abstract only publication and Workshops.					

The Australian Government's definition of research was:

- creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.

- any activity classified as research and experimental development is characterised by originality; it should have investigation as a primary objective and should have the potential to produce results that are sufficiently general for humanity's stock of knowledge (theoretical and/or practical) to be recognisably increased. ... (Australian Government, 2003, pp. 5-6)

If some TLF full papers that were included in university submissions to the Australian Government's *Higher education research data collection* process (Australian Government, 2003) were not recognised as "research", could there be a risk of exposing all TLF full papers to a hostile scrutiny? Therefore, TLF 2005 Committee initiated the category "Professional practice" to minimise this risk (TLF, 2005). However, on the positive side, the 2005 Committee and its 2006-2015 successors also sought to use this new category to promote a particularly important purpose, in the TLF context, namely recognising and striving towards *best practice*.

The term "Professional practice" was defined by the 2005 Committee as comprising:

... academic papers with clear strengths in creativity, leadership and excellence in professional practice, demonstrated in teaching, staff development, program or institutional development, educational media or services developments, or learning skills services. Being grounded in best practice rather than new knowledge, accepted papers are not eligible for the DEST research category "Conference publication". (TLF, 2005)

By subjecting professional practice papers to peer review, we hoped to distinguish accounts of *best practice* from merely *good practice* in teaching and learning, and to recognise such achievements, notwithstanding the trend at the time towards publication being warranted only if it was "research" as defined by *Higher education research data collection* (Australian Government, 2003). We were well aware, from previous Forums, that many presentations were accounts of *best practice* or *good practice* grounded upon applications of existing knowledge; meritorious, but not conforming readily with the "new knowledge" dogma that was in ascendency at the time. The term

"professional practice" was accorded a broad definition, signalling a desire to be inclusive towards staff whose role was primarily in academic support services rather than in teaching a particular subject.

Just a few years after TLF 2005 "tightened up" on publication of research papers, the Australian Government hardlined its attitude towards recognition of research published in conference proceedings. The "Excellence in Research Australia" (ERA) process eliminated almost all conference proceedings papers from recognition as research publications (ARC, n.d.). However, the commencement of ERA in 2009-10 did not have a dramatic effect on submissions of full papers for TL Forum, just some acceleration of a trend that had emerged around 2007-08.

Besides the use of the professional practice category, the TLF 2005 Committee and its successors promoted other ways for Forums to encourage writing about best practices in teaching and learning. The TLF 2005 Committee, under the Forum theme *The Reflective Practitioner*, sought to create interest in *writing as an act of learning* (TLF, 2005):

> For TL Forum 2005 we sought to place some extra emphasis upon a particular aspect of reflecting, namely writing. The purpose has been eloquently summarised by Richard Winter (1996):
>
>> ... writing up a report is an act of learning and in this sense, we write for ourselves so that, when we read what we have written, we find out what, in the end, we have learned.

The TLF 2008 Committee (TLF, 2008) considered the Australian Government's *Research Quality Framework*, an initial iteration of the ERA (ARC, n.d.), and predicted explicitly:

> ... it is likely that [TLF's] presentational or publication role will be taken over increasingly by a relatively small number of multinational journals. This trend could reinforce the TL Forum becoming a popular avenue for presenting, discussing and "working up" research and professional practice topics in university teaching and learning, in contrast to being an avenue for the final publication of completed projects.

The TLF 2009 Committee (TLF, 2009) reiterated this theme:

> We express the hope that TL Forum presentations, in all categories of publication, will encourage and help authors to continue developing their research and professional practice topics for future publication in a journal, a book chapter or a conference proceedings. If going in this direction, we recommend that you include an Acknowledgement paragraph in your paper, stating that an earlier (or summary, or preliminary, etc) version of it was presented at Teaching and Learning Forum, and give the URL for your abstract or full paper. Generally, most editors will note with approval that your paper has been 'worked up' and 'tested' in a peer group environment (though they should delete such a paragraph before sending the paper out for double blind review!). In the increasingly competitive matter of getting your research into a Tier A* or Tier A journal (ARC, 2008), 'working up' through a conference presentation may be especially worthwhile.

More recently, TL Forum has drawn a strong influence from the *scholarship of teaching and learning* (SoTL) (Atkinson, et al., 2013). In a Forum 2015 keynote address, Brett Freudenberg discussed "research into practices of teaching, learning and curriculum" from a "SoLT" (scholarship of learning and teaching) perspective. Brett drew particular attention to one component of such research (Freudenberg, 2015):

- Sharing the results of your analysis publicly for the purpose of peer review and to share the body of knowledge with colleagues and the community ...

The notion that TLF participants "share the body of knowledge with colleagues and the community" is especially important for TL Forum. In the Forum climate, the *sharing* of a body of knowledge ranks equally with the "research as new knowledge" perspective, or even more importantly. *Sharing* is a key strategy for effective dissemination, the "breeding", or "fomenting", or "stimulating" of actual implementations of improved teaching and learning practices, which is a vital complement to perceiving SoTL research, or indeed many other fields of research, in terms of "new knowledge". Expressing this idea in another way, we could admit that TL Forum papers typically are *everyday* SoTL rather than *eminent* SoTL. However, if we place high importance upon local improvements in teaching and learning practices, can *everyday* SoTL have an *impact* that counters possible shortcomings on the "new knowledge" criterion? Reeves (2011) discussed the balance between educational research being "rigorous", and having an "impact" upon educational practices and outcomes. Similarly, for TL Forum we should reflect upon the balance between "new knowledge" and having an "impact".

Among other reasons for TLF's enduring presence, institutional support warrants particular mention. One notable example is The University of Western Australia's *Postgraduate Teaching Internship Scheme*, offered since 2000, which "encourages promising doctoral research students (including professional doctoral students) to develop teaching skills in their fields" (UWA, n.d.). One of the aims is to "provide them with an opportunity to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning and participate in a public forum on teaching and learning" (Partridge, Hunt & Goody, 2013). Thus UWA's "teaching interns" became a very strong group of contributors to TL Forum over many years.

Whilst in this editorial we have projected TL Forum as having attained *an enduring presence*, perhaps we could equally well have used the phrase *an enduring process*, particularly with respect to the formulation of research papers and the role of *our local discourse* in the process. Actually, the theme of an enduring presence, or process, links quite tightly with the theme of *local discourse*, as discussed in the next section, which takes a broad view of what it is, and why it is important.

Our local discourse

Table 2 indicates high acceptance rates for TL Forum submissions (columns 'Total submissions' and 'Total offers'). This has been a deliberate policy for many years. Firstly, in almost all cases, authors whose full papers were not accepted were offered "abstract only" publication. Secondly, a liberal and inclusive approach has been adopted over many years for the abstract only category. This reflects our desire to project TL Forum as a supportive learning environment for beginners and novices at "Sharing the results ... publicly ... to share the body of knowledge with colleagues and the community" (Freudenberg, 2015). However, the selection process for this special issue imposed a higher bar. Invitations to submit were extended to authors of "abstract only" presentations at TLF 2015, as well as authors of full papers. From 16 submissions, eight were selected by the special issue's editorial board, after considering academic and research merit, and worthiness as a TL Forum "representative".

By far the most common reason for rejections of TLF submissions has been editorial committee decisions that the topic was inappropriate for a university teaching and learning conference. As rejections were usually very small in number, our editorial process usually gave helpful advice about other outlets and some encouragement. We do not usually identify submissions that were declined, but Katharina Bense has kindly agreed to feature in an anecdote extracted from TLF

editorial email archives. An anecdote that helps to illustrate how TLF has sought to provide a supportive learning environment, whether "accepted" or "declined".

> I am a Phd student at UWA, in the Department of German Studies. In 2013, I submitted a manuscript for refereed full paper publication in the TLF conference proceedings. While declining the paper, the reviewer encouraged me to submit the manuscript to a journal, what I hadn't considered at that point. (Please see the reviewer comments below). Eventually, I submitted to the *Australian Educational Researcher* and my paper was published in September this year.
>
> Link to Springer article [http://www.springer.com/education+%26+language/journal/13384] [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0143-2]
>
> However, as I just found out, the article is also among the five finalist for the Springer Best Paper Award 2014. While I don't expect to be the winner, I feel I should share these good news with you, because without the reviewer's suggestion I would not have submitted the paper.
>
> I would appreciate, if you could forward this email to the reviewer, if it wasn't you. Thank you very much and have a very nice day.
>
> All the best
>
> Katharina
>
> *Reviewer 1 Comments*
> This a thoughtful, interesting and well-written paper, with relevance reaching beyond its primary evidence base in the teaching of German language in Australian schools. However, it is very much a 'language education in schools' paper. I cannot envisage it connecting sufficiently well with the tertiary teaching and learning interests catered for by TL Forum. Somewhat reluctantly, I conclude 'not a TLF topic', though I urge the author(s) to consider submitting to a journal or conference concerned with language teaching in Australia schools, or with broader issues relating to the positioning (or lack of positioning) of language and culture education in Australian curricula. .... The issue summarised eloquently in the title quote, "Languages aren't as important here", is a significant and perhaps inadequately addressed issue in Australia and similar English speaking countries which have large minorities of persons with a different first language.

Reviewer and editor advice to aspiring authors and presenters is one component of our *local discourse*, broadly defined. Undoubtedly important, though of course there are other important components. To single out just one more of the many components, TL Forum has much formally recorded discourse in the form of feedback sheets and more recently, post-Forum online questionnaires. Whilst a rigorous review of Forum evaluation feedback is outside the scope of this editorial, some excerpts from the open-ended questions may help to illustrate diversity of perspectives upon TLF's positioning, somewhere on a spectrum between being a conference for presenting research findings, and a conference that is a learning activity, or a community of scholars activity (TLF, 2014):

> Activities - unsure if you mean what I mean - the sharing of experiences by other academics, what is working, what is not, how students are responding. Not necessarily research but scholarship of TL.
>
> While there generally seemed to be good collegial support my impression was that all presentations (including some I was party to) were very "safe" reportage - no real innovation - replication and over-explained.
>
> I also felt that some of the presentations over the two days were more like 'show and tell' sessions rather than research, and to that end, I think the Forum needs to have/add a serious research stream as part of the offerings.

> The quality of innovative and transformative engaging teaching presentations were not of a standard that I would consider innovative, transformative or engaging. However, the research presentations were very engaging.

Some respondents suggest that the TLF's editorial processes should be more selective, e.g.:

> I think the quality of the sessions could be improved: not as many parallel sessions, but better quality.

> Better screening of presenters who offer career advancing sessions rather than further own interests.

> Diverse standards of presentations lead to some weaker presentations, but most were interesting.

> There was a mix of quality in the presentations. Some were so specific that difficult to translate to context.

> Ensure that the quality from all presenters are of a high standard

> A more vigorous vetting of the presentations.

Sometimes respondents suggest more emphasis upon the developmental role, for example:

> Somehow entice more heads of school to go?

> Make it more about T&L on the ground, what people are doing to innovate, not just what research is being done - we have other conferences for that.

> Keep it up! Maybe encourage people to submit papers/present who are a bit shy or not sure if they are good enough to present.

There is a common thread in this very brief selection of quite diverse and sometimes ambivalent quotations: a continuing tension, albeit mild, between research as a focus, with its connotations of rigour, new knowledge, and greater selectivity, and people development as a focus, with its connections to learning activities, the community of scholars perspective, and a passion for improving one's own teaching. The qualifier, "albeit mild" is very deliberate, for two reasons. Firstly, overall, TLF has enjoyed very favourable and supportive feedback (and an enduring presence), and secondly, a little tension can be one of the best stimulants.

The TL Forum theme for 2015, *Teaching and learning uncapped*, grew out of this tension (there was another tension that grew from the Australian Government's 2014 Budget, relating to uncapped fees, that we need not delve into). In the TLF context, *uncapped* can apply equally well to uncapping and growing research in the SoTL genre, and uncapping and growing our local community of scholars and one's own learning activities.

Perhaps we could accord the concluding words to an anonymous respondent to our TLF 2014 evaluation, who considered the question, "In what ways do you think the 2014 Teaching and Learning Forum could have been improved?" and, *Twitter*-like, responded with only two words (TLF, 2014):

> Be awesome.

Well, is that an order, a directive, a hope, an appeal, a mission, a way to go, a research goal, advice from a senior academic, or just younger generation newspeak? Maybe some will feel, what the heck, I'll tick 'All of the above', and thereupon set a course for awesomness in T&L. To you, we say *bon voyage!*

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