

TITLE: Building capacity or a leaky pipeline? Investigating the experiences of SoTL-focused postdocs in Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres

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PROPOSAL SUMMARY

This project investigates the experiences of current and recently- completed postdocs in Canadian Learning and Teaching Centres. Using a phenomenographic approach, it analyzes individuals' motivations, experiences, and progression pathways through their postdoc role and identifies implications for capacity building in the EDC community.

(i) CONTEXT OF STUDY

Scholarship on educational development has explored the multiple pathways for practitioners into the field (McDonald & Stockley, 2008), where educational developers represent a vast array of disciplinary identities, staff and faculty roles, and career motivations (Land, 2004). The same holds true for the increasing number of postdoctoral fellows based in Canadian teaching and learning (T&L) centres. These postdoctoral researchers are frequently engaged in their own Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research and play an important role in building capacity for conducting SoTL within their institutions. Postdocs in T&L centres can occupy a liminal professional space (Burke et al., 2017; Nowell, Grant, & Mikita, 2019) in that they are not students, faculty, nor educational developers, even though they might conduct faculty engagement/development work. As a result, their experiences and contributions as a growing group of professionals in the EDC and SoTL community are not fully understood, nor is the variety of ways in which they enhance the field.

This study seeks to redress this gap by investigating the experience of current and recently- completed postdocs in Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres. Using a phenomenographic approach, (Cousin, 2009; Creswell, 2007), this study will gather qualitative data that surface the variation of experiences and understandings of those who occupy, or have recently occupied, postdoctoral positions in such centres. Paying particular attention to individuals' stories, this study will investigate motivations for entering SoTL-focused postdocs, experiences within these positions, and career trajectories upon completion. As a result, the outcomes of this study will provide as yet under-reported data to EDC (and beyond) on the variety of ways in which this group of professionals contributes to educational development and the scholarship of teaching and learning across Canada.

(ii) STUDY OUTLINE

Research objectives

Specifically, this study aims to:

- Establish a baseline of current postdoctoral appointments in Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres across Canada. This will include mapping the number and locations of existing postdocs. This will be compared against available data from the US, UK, and Australia (which will be gathered via an environmental scan of relevant listservs and institutional T&L centre sites).
- Collect data from current and recently completed postdocs in T&L centres, addressing motivations for entering, the focus of tasks and development opportunities during their term, and their career aspirations/next steps upon completing their postdocs. This data will be collected via survey and follow-up interviews.
- Identify ways in which postdocs in T&L centres would like to form connections within their professional grouping and with EDC more broadly.
- Identify pathways for entry, retention, and progression for postdocs in T&L centres, paying particular attention to opportunities for retaining and capitalizing on their expertise in the EDC community.

Methodology

- Phase 1: desk research will be conducted to ascertain i) which T&L centres in Canada currently employ postdocs and ii) the extent to which T&L centres in USA, UK, and Australia also employ postdocs. Data will be gathered through emails to Listservs (STLHE, SEDA, HERDSA, POD and possibly ISSOTL) and through scans of institutional T&L centre websites (in Canada only).
- Phase 2: purposeful sampling will be used to identify possible participants (informed by phase 1). Initial data on role, length of contract, summary of main tasks, and career progression plans will be collected through an anonymous survey. Participants will be given the option, via a separate form to ensure data is not linked, to participate in a follow up semi-structured interview. The latter data will form the basis of the phenomenographic analysis.
- Phase 3 (*optional*): survey of Centre Directors which will gather data on reasons for employing postdocs in their centres and opportunities and challenges such roles present for the EDC community. This data would complement that gathered in phases 1 and 2. Capacity to conduct phase 3 will be contingent on the response rate from phase 2.

Researcher reflexivity

One of my motivations for conducting this study is borne out of my own experiences and positionality of being a postdoctoral research fellow at [X] University. Rather than seeing this as a limitation to the study, I see this as an asset. The insights and experiences I bring inherently shape and inform the questions asked and the framework through which I will analyze results. This will be explored thoroughly and continuously throughout this study and will be an integral part of the phenomenographic approach used. The identification of categories of description required for this form of analyses will inevitably involve levels of interpretation. Taking a reflexive stance will be important as will be the conversations I have with my co-researcher/student partner who will be employed to work with me on this project.

(iii) BENEFIT TO EDC & HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY

The benefits of this study are manifold. The contributions of postdocs in T&L centres in Canada (and beyond) has yet to be fully investigated. This study, to my knowledge, with the exception of Nowell et al. (2019), would be the first of its kind internationally. There is potential for this to make significant contribution of new knowledge to the EDC and wider international educational development community. The focus, scope, and methodology taken will be informed by discussions (yet to be held) at a research connections session (Cracker Barrel Session) conducted by myself and T&L postdocs from [X] Universities (authors, 2019) at the SoTL symposium organized by Mount Royal University, taking place in November 2019. This will give members of EDC and others engaged in SoTL a chance to inform and refine the research questions presented here.

Specifically, I believe the study will contribute and connect to the EDC Living Plan in the following ways:

- **Growth area 4: *Management of Teaching Centres, and institutional teaching and learning portfolios***
 - The findings will provide further detail and understanding about the contributions, opportunities and challenges faced by this growing group of professionals in Teaching & Learning centres. It will in turn help support the aim for 'future directors and leaders to be better able to prepare for future leadership and management roles by identifying the necessary (and unique) skills sets' that SoTL-focused postdocs bring to T&L centres.
- **Growth area 5.6: *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning***
 - The data will inform the specific tasks undertaken and skills set developed by postdocs who have expertise in conducting and supporting others to undertake SoTL. It will provide new insights for centre directors and leaders who will be interested in knowing how best to retain and capitalise on such expertise.
- **Growth II: *Community- learning from educational developer peers***
 - By developing a shared understanding of postdoc experiences there is opportunity to enhance connections with, between, and across this group with other educational developers. It will provide insights into the ever nuanced and complex definitions of roles and identities we occupy in T&L centres.
- **Foundation: *A strong educational developers caucus community***
 - Understanding the career trajectories of these developing experts in SoTL and faculty engagement is an essential component of building a strong EDC community. At present, experiences and trajectories of postdocs are unknown and so we are unable to ascertain whether we are building capacity or creating a leaky pipeline whereby we lose valuable capacity and expertise.

(iv) FEASIBILITY AND ACHIEVABILITY

I have an extensive track record of running studies that involve recruiting participants from a distance and collecting and analyzing survey and interview data. This will be the first time I will have applied a phenomenographic framework to data, though I am familiar with this approach from my research methods doctoral training.

The timeframe for this project will be as follows:

- Jan-Feb 2020: Research design and ethics approval
- Feb-March: Phase 1 desk research. Identification of research sample
- March-June: Survey and interview data collection
- June-September: Data analysis
- October: Presentation of interim analysis (*ISSOTL 2020*)
- November/December: EDC report and publication (target *IJAD*)

The funds requested for this project will be used to employ a current graduate student, who will work with me as a student partner and co-researcher. The student and I have worked extensively over the last 2 years on a project that has used Social Network Analysis to investigate distributed leadership networks in a teaching and learning leadership program (authors, 2018; authors, 2019). We, therefore, have a successful track record of working together and will be able to initiate our partnership work on this project straight away.

BUDGET

BUDGET ITEM	COST
Student partner/co-researcher (graduate student): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk research & survey of institutional sites (10 hrs) • Ethics application (5 hrs) • Survey construction and testing (5 hrs) • Interviews (5hrs) • Analysis (15 hrs) • Write up/publication (10 hrs) • Team meetings (20 hrs) 	\$1610 (70 hrs x *\$23 p.h) *Note this rate is comparable to what [x university] pays graduate students who participate as student partners in our [student partner program].
TOTAL 70 hours	
Transcription costs (assuming 20 interviews @ 1 hr each= 1200 minutes. Transcription fee is \$1 per minute).	\$1200
PI and research supervision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research design and overview (30 hrs) • Desk research via listservs (10 hrs) • Ethics application: writing and submission (10 hrs) • Data collection and administration (survey and interviews) (25hrs) • Analysis (30 hrs) 	185 hours: In kind contribution

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write up (20 hrs) • Team meetings (20 hrs) 	
TOTAL 185 hours	
Total	\$2810

AGREEMENTS

[X] I/~~We~~ agree to provide the EDC community, who funds this grant, with access to resulting information and resources for which the copyright remains with the author(s).

[X] I/~~We~~ acknowledge that I/we will submit an interim report and a final deliverable (as described below).

REFERENCES

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