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Identifying conflicting demands for a balanced teaching approach

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This paper introduces the preliminary development of the Teaching Balance Model (TBM), a conceptual framework to help educators navigate competing discourses in contemporary higher education. Developed through grounded theory methods combined with individual and collaborative reflection, the TBM responds to tensions heightened by increasingly complex teaching environments—particularly in technology-enhanced, online, and hybrid contexts. Rather than viewing challenges such as theory versus practice, learning versus assessment, or students as partners versus customers as binary oppositions, the TBM encourages an integrative approach. Data were generated through reflective memos and coding of teaching decisions and rationales from three business academics with experience across online, hybrid, and face-to-face settings. Through iterative coding, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling, key categories—such as value priorities and decision-making rationales—emerged to inform the model. The TBM proposes a balanced middle ground that supports inclusive, values-driven teaching while acknowledging systemic pressures. We discuss the model's potential as a reflective tool for practitioners and its future development for research into academic identity, wellbeing, and institutional culture. The TBM aims to contribute to conversations about sustainable and equitable teaching practice in digitally mediated learning environments.

Keywords: online teaching, teaching balance, reflection, grounded theory, qualitative

Introduction

This paper presents preliminary findings of what we refer to as the Teaching Balance Model (TBM). This model emerged from a combination of reflection (both individual and group) and grounded theory (GT). Our preliminary findings argue that, although there are competing discourses across numerous issues in contemporary education, these discourses need not be a dichotomy of either-or problems, but rather that we can bring these discourses together with the aim of consolidation and balance for contemporary teaching practices.

Given the reflective nature of this study, before considering the method, findings and future aims of the study, we feel it necessary to introduce and identify our own backgrounds. Two authors currently teach in a purely online environment, with one teaching in a hybrid mode (both online and face-to-face). The online teaching environment is fast paced, is marketed towards students with different needs to the traditional cohort (e.g., often been in the workforce for several years, have children, etc). All authors have come from an on-campus 'up-bringing' but two have been engaged in purely online teaching since 2021. Whilst all three authors are business academics, one currently teaches marketing and two management. The authors got together to discuss their approaches to course delivery and competing influences they have to manage.

Method

Grounded Theory is a method that is oft misapplied, with papers that purport to be GT often being simply a qualitative descriptive analysis (Sbaraini et al., 2011). For the purposes of this paper, we draw upon the collective components of GT identified by Rieger (2012, p. 3). These include begins with inductive logic, simultaneous data collection, analysis and theory construction, constant comparison, memo writing, theoretical sampling and generation of a grounded theory.

Initial purposive sample:

In GT, a researcher collects data from a purposive sample and code it before more data is collected or generated (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 11). The initial purposive sample involved the first author engaging in content reflection. Drawing upon their previous experiences as academics, the authors began making notes about what they felt they did across their courses and what competing pressures or factors led to the final delivery.

Data analysis and coding

Initial open coding and constant comparison was undertaken. Initial, or open coding, involves the researcher "naming each word, line or segment of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Consistent with the early stages of the reflective process, this stage of coding was heavily descriptive. By doing this, the authors were able to describe what was happening in their courses without forcing any preconceived ideas onto or into the data.

Once initial open coding was complete, the authors began to think not just about what decisions were made but reflect on why they were made. At this point, the authors began to move from early content stages of reflection to a more complex process level of reflection – a stage where we begin questioning the knowledge we are thinking (McAlpine et al., 2004). Examples of initial open codes and reflections about why decisions were made are presented in Table 1:

Table 1

Type of code	Codes/memos
Initial coding (codes directly from data)	Make all course content available from the start; balance theoretical content with practical; be available for advice.
Reflective codes (codes generated by reflecting on why decisions were made)	Trying to foster student independence; reframing language used so it's easier to understand for students; trying to be proactive with providing resources for students with disabilities; foster an environment where the course just runs independently of staff intervention; trying to improve ease of access to everything course related (content, information, etc.).

Elevated categories

In GT, initial coding is the basis for further analytical work. Codes that reoccur or are deemed "particularly significant in illuminating the studied phenomenon" are elevated as "provisional theoretical categories which subsequently undergo selective or focused coding" (Charmaz, 2008; cited by Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1279). An early provisional category identified related to *decision-making*. By identifying and labelling the different decisions made across the initial open codes, the authors reflected on why the decisions were made. Were they driven by student complaints, desire to increase engagement, desire to assist understanding of course material?

A second early provisional category identified was *values*. Following identification of this category, the authors asked themselves further analytical questions about the emerging category. New questions included:

- What values are evident?
- What values are prioritised?
- Do any of these contradict or have antithesis I want to avoid?

With these questions in mind, all authors began to consider the data collected. What started to become evident were that there were some initial codes that reflected important values, often demonstrated contradictory priorities and there was debate between the authors about what should be prioritised. Examples of these codes included students as customers, the balance between theory and practice, and decisions made relating to course

design (although in course design there were probably more similarities in our thinking than across the other codes).

Theoretical sensitivity

At this point the authors decided to consider how they viewed themes evident across the elevated categories and with this potential bias in mind, conduct literature reviews of current themes. They agreed that across this review, they would each be aware of, but not deny their own academic backgrounds (marketing and management). What was evident across the dual literature reviews was that although there were notable differences (in the literature examined), there were also similarities. For example, whilst marketing literature would often embrace a perspective which viewed higher education as "a service (Mazzarol, 1998; Ostrom et al., 2011) … [where] … students are the core customers" (cited by Guilbault, 2016, 296), management literature (often dominated by managerialist issues), differs to this view, expressing concern that higher education has jettisoned education itself in the pursuit of training (Enteman, 2007). Similarities did emerge, however, including jointly held perspectives such as students being partners (Clayson & Haley, 2005) and students as citizens (Svensson & Wood, 2007).

We then began recognising that what we were considering were rather unhelpful dichotomies and instead began considering that multiple truths might exist that could be incorporated into a single holistic model. Part of theoretical sensitivity is being aware of one's own intellectual history and the type of theory read and absorbed (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 12). Recognising this, we began to consider other models that were not reliant upon a dichotomous assumption. One model considered was the four realms of the tourism experience, or what Pine and Gilmore (1999) termed the 4E's. Rather being concerned with the specific elements that create an experience, Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggested "four main dimensions of experiences along two axes: the customer's level of participation and the customer's connection with the environment or surroundings" (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011, p. 242). A reason why this model became a source of inspiration was that application of the model required recognition that an "experience is not necessarily solely related to one of the four dimensions. Even if one dimension is emphasised, the experience will (often) have elements of all four dimensions" Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011, p. 243). Furthermore, we were inspired by the idea that there may be a sweet spot: "Pine and Gilmore (1999) describe this as the "sweetspot," and this is what gives the richest experiences" (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011, p. 243).

Similar to Pine and Gilmore (1999), we felt that our current elevated categories had components that, whilst necessary, shouldn't dominate (or be an explicit focus). Rather, there should be a balance point. Our preliminary model is represented in Figure 1:

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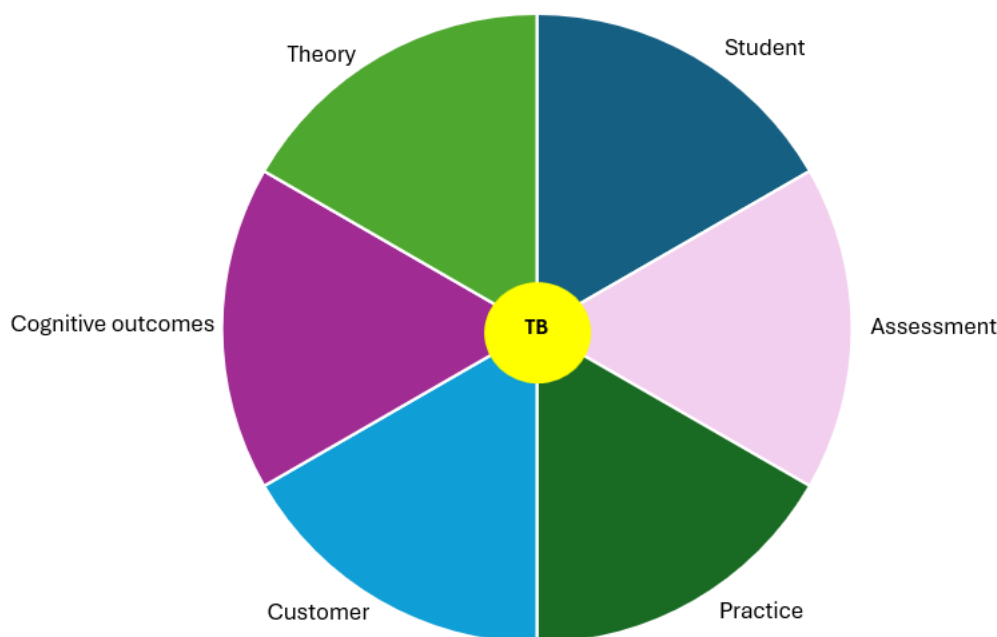*Educating in an Era of Continuous Change*

Figure 1: Teaching Balance Model (TBM)

Each segment of the TBM represents an important component of teaching, and each segment has an antithetical component that has a conflicting discourse. Examples of these can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2: Opposing segments

Segment	Thetical	Antithetical
Theory/practice	Theory is an important part of the higher order and critical thinking inherent in a university education	"…the focus is based on the identification and development of knowledge, competences, and attributes that foster students' development of effective performance in the labour market". (Römgens et al., 2019)
Students/customers	"Students are NOT customers … The sooner institutions of higher learning disregard a "customer service" model the better" (Guilbault, 2018, p. 295).	Higher education is a service (Mazzarol, 1998; Ostrom et al., 2011) … [where] … students are the core customers" (cited by Guilbault, 2016, p. 296)
Cognitive outcomes/assessment	Scaffolding is used in course design to gradually build students' understanding, guiding them from foundational concepts to complex ideas in a structured way that supports deep, effective learning.	Students self-optimize to prioritize assessment completion, forgoing large amounts of course content (e.g., Lipnickas et al., 2025)

What we argue is that rather than an either-or solution, for academics there is middle ground. This, we argue, should represent academic values (which includes goals/outcomes). When considering values, one needs to be aware of what they do, why they do it, and what they would like to do (or achieve). What we currently do may not be what we would like to do. However, understanding why we do what we do, and if these actions/decisions are consistent with what we want to do, or perhaps should be doing, is important. We propose that the TBM model can be used as a guide when asking questions and making decisions. The aim when using the model as a guide is to help ensure that some kind of balance between conflicting discourses is achieved. Drawing upon memos documented by the authors across this study, an example of this might be:

'I'm fine to give students extra time since they're adults; I'd prefer they do better quality work than rush it or quit'. Whilst in this instance it may appear that the approach is dominated by a customer-centred approach (e.g., student dictates deadlines, retention prioritised over deadlines), it is balanced - a desire to help ensure that the student gets something meaningful out of the assessment, rather than nothing at all.

Further research

We are continuing to explore and refine the current categories. A prominent area is consideration of elevated categories not discussed in this paper – in particular codes relating to academic wellbeing. We have identified codes relating to themes such as the need for balance in areas regarding professionalism, burnout, evaluation/promotion, assessment versus learning and how these exist as their own conditions whilst also influencing current TBM categories.

We are also considering the potential of questionnaire development to identify where academics current and desired behaviour/thinking places them within the model. This may require consideration of the different beliefs, vulnerabilities and forces that push and pull academics in multiple directions, possibly drawing upon self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989) to consider if there is an *actual* TBA model (what academics actually do), an *ought* TBA model (a model that represents duties, obligations and responsibilities that result from issues 'imposed' on academics) and a *want* TBA model (a model that includes academics own desires, hopes and aspirations). Likewise engaging with academics from across disparate courses and disciplines would help enhance practical application in diverse teaching contexts Following this path may mean that the TBM could be used as a tool for further understanding institutional organisational culture (both whole of organisation as well as at the department level) regarding how staff view their role via their actual TBM, their desired TBM versus their ought TBM and how they view university expectations in comparison to what is actually enabled, or encouraged, by the organisation.

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