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Keys to Teaching Excellence: The professional practice of Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awardees

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Abstract. The notion of teaching excellence' is complex and multi-faceted, and this raises questions around what 'excellent' teaching looks like and how it can be developed. To better understand different aspects of teaching excellence, this research project used narrative inquiry to investigate the stories of twelve national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees in New Zealand, exploring awardees' trajectories and professional practice, including views on their identity, and on what they consider to be excellence in tertiary teaching. This article focuses on how these educators embody, convey, and foster excellence in their practice. Through careful review and analysis of the collection of narratives, I identify five major thematic areas—each made up of characteristics inherent in a teacher's personality and skills that can be developed through practice and reflection—which participants see as being key to the practice of teaching excellence. I propose a visual model, **The Keys to Teaching Excellence**, which captures the essence of these themes.

Keywords: teaching excellence, narrative inquiry, professional practice, teacher development, scholarship of teaching and learning

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This paper draws on a research project, undertaken in New Zealand, to investigate the trajectory and professional practice of national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees - practitioners defined as 'excellent' by a national body - to explore their background and evolution as educators, their current practice, and their thoughts around future development, with a view to better understanding different facets of teaching excellence.

The paper begins by briefly considering the current discourse around teaching excellence. I then outline the narrative inquiry methodology, before setting out my findings. While the project was guided by three research questions, this paper focuses on key findings in response to my second question, "How do these practitioners embody, convey, and foster excellence in their practice?"[1]

Literature Review

Considerations around the notion of "teaching excellence" are varied and highly complex (Bartram et al., 2019; Broughan et al., 2018; Johnson, 2021). As Stevenson et al. explain, "excellence is, of course, a multi-faceted concept, and it is not surprising that the term operates ambiguously, contradictorily, and contentiously" (2017, p.63). For Wilcox (2021, p.55), 'teaching excellence' is "a buzzword too readily accepted by institutions but poorly defined by policymakers", and "should be treated with caution". We could indeed argue, then, as Dixon and Pilkington (2017) highlight, that unless we clearly understand 'teaching excellence', how can we say for sure whether or not it is being demonstrated?

Part of the challenge is that teaching and learning has multiple moving parts, and, whatever 'excellence' looks like, it "is not achieved in a vacuum" (Sanders et al., 2020, p.73). An extensive review of the literature shows different combinations of elements contributing to teaching excellence, including, for example, colleagues, leadership, workload, and commitment (Day et al., 2007), the ability to create optimal learning conditions (Smith & Lygo-Baker, 2017), and the reflexive development of a personal teaching philosophy (Skelton, 2009). Bain (2004, p.1) reports on numerous aspects of the knowledge and practice of almost 100 of "the best" college teachers across the United States, studied over a fifteen-year period, while Kane et al.'s (2004) model of excellence incorporates subject knowledge,

[1] For insights into the findings in response to my first research question – "How does the concept of excellence unfurl in the narratives of Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees?" – please see Goode (2023).

skill, interpersonal relationships, personality, and research/teaching links, and integrates reflective practice throughout. For them, "skills are far from being the most important determinant of teaching excellence" (p.295). Indeed, many authors (including Brophy & Good, 1974; Burant et al., 2007; Jones, 1989; Seymour, 1963) suggest that teaching excellence is related to personal qualities.

McLean (2001) asks what criteria are used to measure excellence, and, perhaps more importantly, whose opinions we should value, summarising differences between student and staff perceptions of 'teaching excellence'. Although Johnson-Farmer and Frenn (2009, p.7) suggest that teachers and learners are both involved in "dynamic engagement" within the teaching excellence process, different parties are unlikely to view excellence in the same way (Goode, 2025; Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Miller-Young et al., 2020). For the learner, for instance, it might be about confidence, motivation, creating opportunities, and empowering individuals and groups through learning. Is it, then, these things which demonstrate teaching excellence?

Methodology

How can we best capture the complexity of the experiences, knowledge, and practice of multiple individuals, and draw meaning from it? I would say that we achieve this by using participants' own words, and by giving them the opportunity to tell the stories of their lives and careers. The foundations of teaching and teacher development lie in personal experience (Lyle, 2009), with Cole and Knowles emphasising "the autobiographical nature of teaching" (2000, p.9). As this research involves the experiences and perceptions of others, the most appropriate way to collect data was through interviewing. Interviews are "narrative occasions" (Riessman, 2008, p.23) and allow me to re-tell stories of colleagues' lives and careers, and to capture their respective "critical moments" (Pennycook, 2004, p.330), including in their own interactions with their colleagues, mentors, and students. Cohen et al. (2011, p.455) cite Bauman (1986) when they assert that "stories, being rich in the subjective involvement of the storyteller, offer an opportunity for the researcher to gather authentic, rich, and 'respectable' data". Coles (1989) asks how we might "encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments in life?... You don't do that with theories. You don't do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story" (p. 28). We use narratives to share our experiences, identities, points of view, explanations, and justifications (Brinkmann

& Kvale, 2015; O'Toole, 2018). In addition, people in different contexts and locations can relate to narrative (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011; Gamson, 2002). Narratives, then, allow us to gain insight into people's lived experiences (Clandinin, 2007, 2009; Garvis, 2015), and to communicate these to a larger audience (Bochner, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1997; Riessman, 2008).

A previous publication has detailed the methodology (Goode, 2023), so I provide an outline here. Human research ethics approval was granted for this project.

Participant Interviews

One semi-structured interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis with each participant (six female and six male, aged between 44 and 64 years old[2]). A total of 13 hours and 58 minutes of discussion took place, with conversations lasting between 44 minutes and 1 hour 22 minutes. Some pre-planned questions, focusing on key areas including the educator, their life experience and career, the community, and reflections on teaching excellence, were set out in an interview guide / prompt sheet (Figure 1) to provide a skeleton structure and consistency to the interview process. It was important for participants' stories to emerge, so guiding questions were reframed as the conversation developed. Questions were not shared with participants ahead of time, so as not to affect the naturally developing conversations and stories. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and member-checked.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. In the social sciences, this "is arguably the most influential approach, …probably because it offers such a clear and usable framework for doing thematic analysis" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p.3353). A general inductive approach was used, with patterns and themes being induced from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An iterative cycle enabled themes to be identified, compared, and consolidated.

[2] The gender balance here was entirely coincidental. While I do not feel that age, gender, or ethnicity impact on or inform teaching excellence (and was not investigating these elements), I do appreciate that some readers may be interested in this data.

Figure 1 *Interview guide / prompt sheet*

I would like to get a sense of who you are and what contributed towards you receiving a national teaching excellence award - Tell me about you, the tertiary teacher.

The educator	What brought you to this place?
	How has your career developed? (turning points, critical moments…)
	What were your hopes, dreams for your practice?
	Tell me about the transition from professional (nurse, tradesperson, engineer, artist…) to educator? (How do good educators emerge from professionals?)
	How have your opinions about your skills changed over time? How do you see your own practice now?
Excellence	What *is* an "excellent" teacher?
	Tell me about applying for a Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award: ▪ What resources did you use to talk to the concept of excellence? ▪ What mentoring did you have (during the application process) and how did that help you? ▪ Were you able to look at the applications of previous awardees? Did that help?
	What impact (if any) has winning the award had on you / on your teaching?
	To what extent do you think your excellence has come about from your life experience?
	What does excellence in action look like?
	Can excellence be taught? / Is it possible to teach this thing we're calling 'excellence'?
The community	What keeps you here – what is special about this place?
	What does the community expect from you? What does the community know about you?
	Tell me about key changes that you've experienced in the learning and teaching community
	Tell me about challenges/barriers you experience, and their impact on you
Reflections	What overall experience do you bring to your practice?
	What are your passions/motivations in sharing your practice with others?
	Do you think there is a difference between excellent teaching in a polytechnic compared to that in a university?
	What tools are important in tertiary education?
	How do you see your future evolving? / What are your hopes for the future?
	What would you like to see in place, in terms of teacher development in a tertiary context?
Meaningful photo(s)/ object(s)	Tell me about the photo/item you've brought with you. Why is this important to you? / What meaning does it hold for you?

Findings and Discussion

In this paper, the focus is on my second research question "How do these practitioners embody, convey, and foster excellence in their practice?". This section sets out selected findings from the analysis of narratives, presenting themes which occur the most often across the series of narratives, and linking them with existing literature.

I identify five major thematic areas which participants see as being key to teaching excellence. Here, I address each of these in turn (in no particular order of importance), before proposing a visual model which captures the essence of these themes.

When participants' own words are used, the line number given refers to the transcript of our conversation. Participants have been assigned letters (A-L) at random.

Theme One: Building Relationships

Importance of Relationships

Eleven out of twelve participants talked about the significance of relationship building between teachers and learners:

> Underpinning all of my philosophy was always that whakawhanaungatanga[3]; understanding the relationship, enabling people to be successful, and trying to find different ways that worked for different people. There's no 'one size fits all'. (Participant I, lines 43-47).

Multiple examples in the literature recognize the importance of teachers' ability to build relationships with others. Palmer (2017), for instance, writes that "good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (p.11). Liu (2015) describes teaching as inherently "interactional" (p.150), while Britzman (1986) portrays teaching as being "fundamentally a social relationship" (p. 453). For Rogers (1979), it is the student-teacher relationship which sits at the core of student-centred learning, and Higgs and Titchen (2001a) propose a conceptual

[3] A Māori term, often used in New Zealand, encapsulating the importance of making meaningful connections and building relationships. The Māori Dictionary (Moorfield, 2003-2024) defines 'whakawhanaungatanga' as the "process of establishing relationships, relating well to others."

framework of professional practice which places an emphasis on "working with and for people" (p.6).

> I feel that most of what I do is about relationships; I just maintain and foster relationships. So, I often feel like a fake as a teacher… I'm not a teacher, I'm a relationship developer, and those relationships are as creative and enabling as they can be. (Participant L, lines 96-100)

Van Tartwijk et al. cite Evertson and Weinstein's (2006) concept of the "warm demander," when discussing the importance of positive teacher-learner relationships: "Teachers who are warm, responsive, caring and supportive, as well as holding high expectations of their students" (2009, p.454).
Grieve (2010) cites Cooper (1989) when she writes that the "quality of relationship between teachers and pupils is one of the most important factors in determining the effectiveness of a school" (p.267). She also reports that "characteristics concerned with relationships and classroom interactions are considered important by practitioners who themselves have been identified as excellent teachers" (Grieve, 2010, p.274), highlighting that, in her research, the qualities rated most highly by practitioners were "affective qualities" (p.274). Consequently, Grieve suggests that some weight must be given to interpersonal skills, particularly "centred on developing relationships that emphasize leadership, friendliness, and understanding" (p.275), when designing Professional Development content for educators.

If, as these findings suggest, positive teacher-learner relationships, characterized by warmth, mutual trust, and empathy, are key to teaching excellence, teachers still need to be aware of these as professional relationships. I draw on Grant's (1999) metaphor of "walking on a rackety bridge" and the importance of maintaining balance: The teacher "must take greater care in how s/he walks on that bridge. A small thoughtless move can throw the student off the bridge. No movement at all can provoke unwise movements from the student… [with] some… 'jumping' up and down" to ensure they are noticed (p.9). With this in mind, conversations around the ethics of power and identity in teacher-student relationships are recommended in teacher education (Claessens et al., 2017; Thornberg et al., 2020).

Working with Others

Alongside relationship building is the value of working with others and building strong networks, within one's own team, across institutions, and in wider communities (be they geographical and/or domain-specific networks). All twelve participants discussed how important this is to them.

> All of these people that come into one's life… they all play a part in how one shifts your way of teaching and supervising, because they all do things differently, and… you see people doing things in a different way, and you learn from that. (Participant D, lines 188-191)

Several researchers (including Berry et al., 2010a; Bryk et al., 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) have found that collaborating with others increases teacher satisfaction (with both their position and with the profession overall), while Berry et al. (2010b, p.5), citing a 2009 survey of teachers in the United States (MetLife Foundation, 2010), report that more than 90 per cent of teachers believe "their colleagues contribute to their teaching effectiveness". Tomlinson (2010) calls for teachers to "associate [themselves] with quality [and] develop friendships with colleagues who set high standards" (p.25), and Viadero highlights that "teachers raise their games when the quality of their colleagues improves" (2009, para. 1).

> Networking with people who are excellent in teaching has been fantastic, what we can learn from each other… it's really good to get different ways or different perspectives on what people do, and the research behind it too. (Participant E, lines 504-505; 508-509)

This means that, as well as building relationships with learners, we cannot underestimate the impact that positive, motivated, and authentic colleagues and peers in the wider academic and/or education community can have on our practice.

Awareness of Learners as Individuals

All twelve participants emphasized the need for teachers to recognize their learners as individual people, bringing different experiences, expectations, and personalities into the learning environment.

> I think for us, the difference in excellence is that we know our students. We've got an intimate knowledge of their thinking, of their backgrounds, of their health, of their issues that they maybe have, of outside influences that they have to deal with. (Participant E, lines 609-612)

Hirsh and Segolsson (2021), reporting on their inquiry into students' perceptions of teaching excellence, describe "the best teachers… as highly attentive and responsive to student differences… teachers [who] have made the effort to get to know them so well that they usually know when and how they need to help them in different ways" (p.45).

Molla and Nolan (2020, p.75) describe a "socially just pedagogic practice" as one which is "sensitive to individual differences and promotes an understanding of students' varied cultural traditions and learning abilities". In his work comparing expert and experienced teachers, Hattie (2003) found that "experts are more focused on solving problems with respect to individual students' performance in the class, whereas the experienced teachers generally focus their decision on the entire class" (p.6).

In summary,

> *It's about knowing your learners; you* have *to know them.* (Participant I, lines 261-262)

Taken together, these findings confirm the importance of building relationships with learners, colleagues, and peers, based on genuine care and respect.

Theme Two: Focusing on Learners

Each participant in this study highlighted how their focus on learners drives their practice:

> My hopes are that education is the best thing it can possibly be for the students. (Participant B, lines 471-472)

This echoes Tomlinson's view that "great teachers… look at both the content they teach and the people whom they ask to learn that content with considerable reverence" (2010, p.24). Prosser and Trigwell (1999) draw a contrast in this way:

> Teachers who focus on their students and their students' learning tend to have students who focus on meaning and understanding in their studies, whilst… teachers who focus on themselves and what they are doing tend to have students who focus on reproduction. (p.142)

Hattie (2003) states that "expert teachers have high respect for students… as learners and people and demonstrate care and commitment for them" (p.8). He suggests that expert teachers focus more on the complexities of what is happening in their classroom at any given point, while experienced teachers focus more on what the teacher is saying and doing.

> The ultimate… the outcome, that's what I'm striving for, seeing them on the day, graduating… and how I get to that, I think it's worth being able to say, "You are my customers, and this is how I approach my teaching… towards what you need, not what I need". (Participant E, lines 175-178)

Putting it simply, as Shulman (2004, p.36) asserts, "to take **learning** seriously, we need to take **learners** seriously".

Engaging With Learners

As part of this focus on learners (and, again, building on the call to recognize learners as individuals), eight out of the twelve participants talked about the importance of genuinely engaging with them:

> I really strongly believe that every learner has the ability to succeed… you have to meet their expectations and keep them engaged, so as a practitioner, I worked really hard to get to know my learners, to really understand who they were and why they were there, in order to be able to meet their needs and their expectations. (Participant I, lines 32-37)

> It's about the fact that everyone in that room feels like that person's talking to them. (Participant K, lines 473-474)

In searching for a reliable definition of engagement, Silver and Perini (2010, p.321) perhaps summarize it best: "Terms like *participation*, *attention*, *interest*, and *on-task behavior* all seem to be used interchangeably throughout the literature". They go on to propose that the notion of 'engagement' signifies *commitment*, as "this is what we are looking for from our students" (p.323) and highlight that an engaging classroom results in better outcomes for learners. For Fredricks et al. (2004), who put forward three types of engagement—behavioural, emotional, and cognitive—there is a sense of **investment** when students are engaged in their learning; a "thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (p.60). Others highlight how student engagement has a positive impact on multiple factors, including motivation (Lund, 2016; Raza et al., 2019), behaviour (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Raphael et al., 2008), retention (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Farr-Wharton et al., 2018; Kahu, 2013), completion rates (Christenson et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2008), and overall academic achievement (Carini et al., 2006; Gunuc, 2014; Reyes et al., 2012).

Understanding that there is no one single way to engage learners, I appreciate how Silver and Perini (2010), drawing on previous work (Silver et al., 2001; Strong et al., 2003), examine student engagement "through the lens of learning styles" (p.325), and propose **eight Cs of student engagement**: competition, challenge, curiosity, controversy, choice, creativity, co-operation, and connections. I would suggest that these could equally sit within several other elements of teaching excellence.

Wanting Learners to Succeed

For all twelve participants, another element of their focus on learners is genuinely wanting their learners to succeed. Back in 1999, Grant described the aim of teaching as "developing the student to her/his fullest potential" (p.2). Hirsh and Segolsson's research participants described "how the best teachers are equally passionate about the students' learning and understanding" (2021, pp.43-44). The same authors cite Sugrue's concept of 'scaffolding-shepherding' (1997) when they explain that "teachers must balance between simultaneously scaffolding learners in a cognitively challenging manner, while paying attention to their social and personal needs in ways that adequately safeguard and shepherd their social development, self-confidence and self-esteem" (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2021, p.38). In essence, this captures the idea that participants in this study want their learners to succeed not only academically but also in life generally, "empowering and giving the students the confidence to stand tall in whatever challenge they will face" (White et al., 2009, p.26):

> I know that I can create good relationships with people and understand people and support them to do things well… it's allowing people to realize their potential, to be the best that they can be. (Participant I, lines 52-55)

> Excellent teachers are people who want excellence in the people that they're sharing their knowledge with. (Participant K, lines 304-305)

Hay McBer agrees: Excellent teachers "crucially, repeatedly express positive expectations and build pupils' self-esteem and belief that they can succeed, as learners and in life" (2000, p.21). They "make students believe that learning and knowledge and development are possible for everyone and that hard work pays off" (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2021, p.47). This kind of empowerment can lead to transformation of the learner.

Transforming the Learner

The majority of participants (ten of the twelve) reflected on seeing transformation within learners as an important part of their role:

> A great practitioner… can facilitate some form of transformation in a learner… and that happens at different levels for different people. (Participant F, lines 224-226)

> I think it's the realisation, slowly, in the students… seeing that transition… that's the thing…, you get to the end of the journey, and you realize where they've come from. (Participant G, lines 493; 497-498; 505-506)

"Transformative or transformational (terms used interchangeably in the literature) learning is about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way

we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, p.166). Such transformation may be a result of increased confidence and/or self-awareness (Harvey & Knight, 1996), ability to understand one's world (Taylor, 2017), and/or a change in previously fixed assumptions or mindsets (Mezirow, 2003). As Cheng states, "in the context of quality enhancement in higher education, there is a growing focus on quality as transformation, which emphasizes the empowerment of students" (2011, p.3). My participants would agree:

> *Education is a business of transforming lives… and so, therefore, we have to do the absolute best we can… How do we help people help their lives? And what does success look like for them?* (Participant I, lines 393-394; 398-399)

> I always enjoy working with people, and that special moment when they realize that they've captured something, they've understood something, they've moved on, and that a world has opened up for them… I really love that. (Participant J, lines 83-85)

In a case study which included interviews with fifteen university Teaching Excellence awardees in the UK, Cheng found that their perception of quality centred on "transformation to develop and enhance students' learning" (2011, p.14). For Eisner (2002, p.14), the best education "is a process of learning how to become the architect of our own education", which inherently both involves and results in empowerment.

In summary, then, these findings contribute to the literature around learner-focused or learner-centred education and illustrate the importance of engaging with and empowering learners, wanting the best for learners, and, ultimately, transforming the learner.

Theme Three: Facilitating Learning

Ten participants described their classroom practice as facilitation:

> [It's] about facilitating, and using the time to uncover the learning that's present in the room, rather than transferring it from my head to theirs… (Participant K, lines 262-263)

> How can I facilitate their learning? How can I change my thinking of being the 'know-it-all' teacher in front of the classroom to the one that has got some knowledge that can facilitate the learning of the students in many other ways as well? I think that's probably the biggest thing. (Participant E, lines 528-532)

> [An excellent teacher is] able to facilitate a community… able to work with a group of students and get them on board… get them having fun. (Participant J, lines 221-223)

Kember and Kwan (2000) propose that viewing teaching as 'learning facilitation' "emphasize[s] meeting the needs of the students and helping them to develop into… independent learner[s]" (p.484). This ties back to my previous theme of focusing on and empowering the learner. Teaching Excellence awardees participating in Cheng's study (2011) see facilitation as "an effective way to encourage… experiential learning, …give more scope for creativity and experimentation, and enable [students] to become independent" (p.10).

> To be able to inspire someone isn't telling them what to do… it's actually facilitating their learning. (Participant H, lines 146-147)

Co-construction of Knowledge

As part of this concept of facilitation of learning, ten of the twelve participants emphasized the teacher-learner partnership within the classroom, and their belief that knowledge is co-constructed:

> All the knowledge is in the room, and you've just got to get to it… everyone's got different experiences, and also different levels of understanding… They want to share their stories. (Participant A, lines 147-158)

This echoes Smith's description of expert teachers as "miners": "They [expert teachers] seemed to believe that students had all they needed with them. The teacher's job was to "mine" it, to discover it, to draw it out for students to see it themselves" (Smith & Strahan, 2004, p.364). It also captures the Māori concept of **ako**, "a teaching and learning relationship where the educator is also learning from the student in a two-way process" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 16, citing Pere, 1982).

> *I'm always passionate to learn something new… and I really enjoy sharing that experience… and the conversations [that happen] around what we've just done.* (Participant H, lines 323-324; 326-327)

Biesta (2004) similarly asserts that success in learning occurs in the interactional space between teacher and learners. "If we understand meaning making as located in between the individuals who interact in a social practice, communication must be understood as being about participation and co-construction rather than about the transmission of messages from a sender to a receiver" (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2021, p.37). Learners participating in Hirsh and Segolsson's investigation into student perceptions of teaching excellence

highlighted the importance of "teachers' willingness to listen to the students and the teachers seeing them as competent partners whose insights and opinions should be considered" (2021, p.43). For these learners, this was "crucial to their desire to learn" (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2021, p.43). In addition, they valued teachers who "explicitly state that learning is a shared responsibility between teacher and students" (p.44). Cheng (2011, p.8) reports that Teaching Excellence awardees "stressed the importance of co-operation and partnership between lecturers and students in the teaching process" and that "teaching by itself could not produce good learning outcomes".

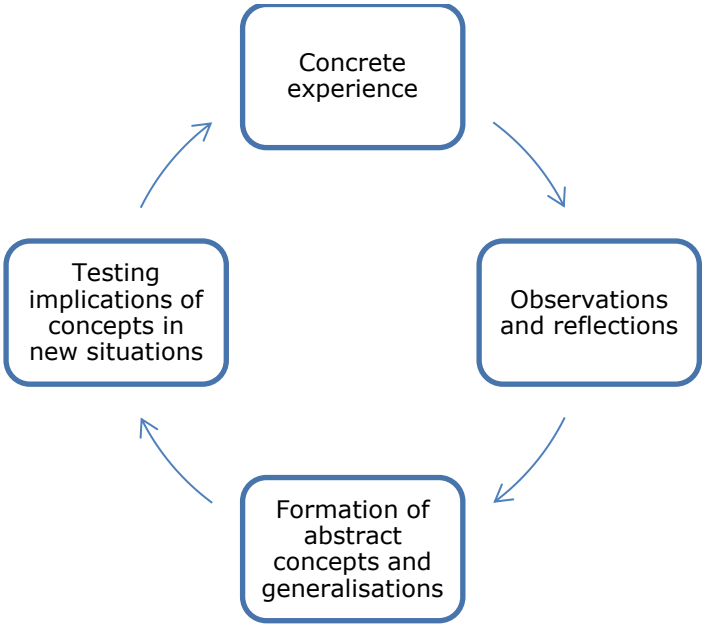
These ideas all tie in with my earlier themes of relationship building and focusing on the learner and show how the individual themes are inter-connected.

Experiential Learning / Project-Based Learning

Teachers' willingness to use different approaches and strategies in the classroom has been linked to improved student learning (Coker & Porter, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2000), with experiential learning in particular "firmly rooted in adult learning practice" (Knowles et al., 2015, p.181). Kolb defines 'learning' as "the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience" (2015, p.49), with his model of experiential learning (Figure 2) drawing heavily on Dewey's work (1938) around interaction, experience, and reflection (Bates, 2019), Lewin's work (1951) on action research and organisational behaviour (Knowles et al., 2015), and on Piaget's theory (1954, 1970) that knowledge construction is based on an individual's experiences (Bates, 2019).

While Kolb's model has been heavily criticized (Gould, 2009; Jarvis, 1987; Miettinen, 2000), its contribution to the literature around experiential learning cannot be denied (Knowles et al., 2015), and "as a rule of thumb, the model provides an excellent framework for planning teaching and learning activities" (Tennant, 2006, p.91). Indeed, as Bates (2019, p.20) highlights, experiential learning "to this day remains the cornerstone of many educational approaches and learning programmes".

Figure 2 *Kolb's experiential learning model*



The vast majority (eleven of twelve) of these award-winning teachers highlighted the importance of experiential learning, project-based learning and/or 'learning-by-doing':

> I was able to think outside the box… how can I make this project-based, applied, real-life scenario learning?... It all stems I think from the basics; it's applied, and that's when they do their learning… it's their own project. That's when you get the buy-in. (Participant E, lines 232-233; 309-310)

> Our shift has gone away from 'Here's the dish, this is how you do it, you repeat it, tick a box' to 'Here's a brief, interact with these people, see what they want, build it. (Participant H, lines 296-297)

The literature suggests that "giving students more agency in the learning process is important not only for the immediate learning experience, but [also] in terms of preparing them for the long term" (Spiller, 2011, p.3). It can help maintain or even increase student motivation (Franco Valdez & Valdez Cervantes, 2018; Gadola & Chindamo, 2017), boost learners' self-confidence (Barron et al., 2017), and impact on programme completion rates (Hill, 2017). Bradberry and Maio (2019), who surveyed former university students to investigate the impact of experiential learning, found that it contributes to student success in their respective programmes, while also "instill[ing] numerous practical skills and provid[ing] insights that help prepare students for success in their future careers" (p.94). The fact that most of these award-winning teachers use experiential and/or project-based learning could perhaps be attributed to Otago Polytechnic's overall culture of experiential learning, but also suggests a focus on

the learner, building their capabilities, and wanting the best possible outcomes for the learner in the long-term.

Crafting Facilitation Skills

It is interesting that four participants explicitly described how they see excellence in how someone teaches, rather than it being subject-matter expertise.

> I don't think excellent teaching comes from what you teach, I think it comes from how you teach it… for excellence teachers, it's not that they've taught something amazing, it's how they've done it, and how they've engaged with the class. (Participant I, lines 371-372; 375-377)

Schön (1987, p.13) would seem to agree: "Outstanding practitioners are not said to have more professional knowledge than others, but more 'wisdom', 'talent', 'intuition', or 'artistry'". This also fits with Higgs and Titchen's concept of "professional craft knowledge" (2001b, p.x), and Grieve's reference to "the craft of teaching" (2010, p.273). For Tomlinson, "great teaching is both a science and an art" (2010, p.26), while Grimmett and MacKinnon (1992, p.396) explain that:

> Craft knowledge of teaching is not substantive subject matter knowledge, nor is it syntactical knowledge (…from the disciplines); rather it is a particular form of morally appropriate, intelligent, and sensible know-how that is constructed by teachers… in the context of their lived experiences… and learner-focused pedagogy.

Leinhardt and Greeno (1986) characterize teaching as "a complex cognitive skill" (p.75). They draw on Sacerdoti's (1977) proposal that knowledge for skilled performance comprises 'nets' of different schemata, and explain how, for skilled teachers, "many component actions are performed with little effort, because they have become automatic through practice" (p.76). Hattie concurs and suggests that 'expert' teachers make the most of the automaticity they develop through practice "so as to free working memory to deal with other more complex characteristics of the situation" (2003, p.8). He emphasizes that his intention is not to undervalue "the importance of content knowledge – it must be present – but it is more pedagogical content knowledge that is important: that is, the way knowledge is used in teaching situations" (Hattie, 2003, p.10). This mirrors the concept of 'flexible purposing' (Dewey, 1938; Eisner, 2002), when teachers are able to capitalize on unexpected moments with learners to create further learning opportunities.

Two additional participants suggested there is something "indefinable" in excellent facilitation of learning:

> I honestly believe that there's an element of magic… there's an indescribable element, just stuff that makes teaching… it's an art as much as it is a science… there's this bit that is undefinable. (Participant B, lines 144-148)

Looking at the 'how not what' idea from a different angle, Berry et al. (2010b, p.8) claim that "increasingly, research points to the fact that it is not just what teachers can access, but how they use those accessed resources to advance institutional excellence, that will determine their effectiveness and their longevity in the profession".

Theme Four: Creating a Positive Environment

Creating a Place/Space for Learning

Two-thirds of participants (eight of twelve) discussed the importance of creating an environment in which learning can occur:

> There is no planning, I don't think, for magic moments in education, I think sometimes they happen by creating the environment that allows people to feel safe… to share their experiences. (Participant I, lines 232-234)

Molla and Nolan (2020, p.78) cite their earlier work (Nolan & Molla, 2017) when describing "an empowering learning environment [as] characterized by respect, collegiality, openness and support". As Hattie asserts, "expert teachers are proficient at creating an optimal classroom climate for learning… where error is welcomed, where student questioning is high, where engagement is the norm, and where students can gain reputations as effective learners" (2003, p.7).

> [It's] kind of creating an atmosphere where it's actually OK to make mistakes - and we all make mistakes and that's how we learn… you can feel comfortable in a classroom with this person, that you're not being judged, that you can make mistakes and be yourself… that, for me, building an atmosphere is the most important thing, building a good atmosphere. (Participant J, lines 228-231; 233-234)

A report commissioned by the United Kingdom's Department for Education and Employment (Hay McBer, 2000) expands on this idea: "Effective teachers use their knowledge, skills and behaviours to create effective learning environments in their classrooms… environments which maximize opportunities to learn, in which pupils are well managed and motivated to learn" (p.27). The researchers found that "teachers really do make a difference. Within their classrooms, effective teachers create learning environments which foster… progress by deploying their teaching skills as well as a wide range of professional characteristics" (p.9), emphasising that "outstanding teachers create an excellent classroom climate and achieve superior [learner] progress largely by displaying

more professional characteristics at higher levels of sophistication within a very structured learning environment" (Hay McBer, 2000, p.9).

> I believe excellent teachers create the feeling where the people that are listening, or sharing the learning experience, feel that they are valued. (Participant K, lines 664-667)

In Hirsh and Segolsson's research (2021), students highlighted "the importance of a caring and trustworthy relationship between teachers and students" (p.42), recognising that this helps build a safe and affirmative space; "a classroom environment where the students feel safe and comfortable to show when they do not understand and where they dare to ask questions" (p.42). Schoonmaker describes a student teacher "discover[ing] the importance of creating an environment that nurtures active learning" (1998, p.560), and Schaefer et al. (2014) tell the story of a teacher who connected her desire for "her classroom to be a space of affirmation and belonging for students, an uncomplicated space of acceptance" (p.20) back to her complicated childhood.

Making Learning Enjoyable

Tied to the creation of a place and space conducive to learning is the importance of making learning enjoyable.

> I worked really hard to make teaching enjoyable, interesting… they really enjoyed games, role-plays, and as many creative things as you could think of, 'cause it helped them to learn… and I really, really, really worked my butt off! (Participant C, lines 215-216; 228-230)

> I think that's quite important; I mean everything should be fun when you're teaching! (Participant J, lines 165-166)

This is also present in the literature. The subject of Schoonmaker's (1998) narrative, for instance, "believes learning should be fun, [and] shows an inclination to experiment" (p.560), which, for her, both contribute to the learning environment. Students using different technologies in Ismaile et al.'s study (2017) reported that it was fun and enjoyable, while also feeling that this improved focus and reduced levels of anxiety, with similar results reported by Anjaniputra and Salsabila (2018). James and Nerantzi (2019, p.xli) show that "academics across continents are integrating playful practices" into tertiary teaching, including through the use of Lego, Playdoh, Meccano, word-puzzles, and worms (though not necessarily all at the same time!).

In summary, participants here see value in creating an environment in which learning can not only occur, with learners feeling safe and valued, but also in which it is fun and enjoyable.

Theme Five: Reflecting on Practice

Importance of Reflective Practice

Every participant in this study talked about the importance of reflective practice as one aspect of teaching excellence:

> *If you can get teachers who're reflective and learning from that, I think that's… yeah it comes back to that reflective thing… being able to question. If you're not questioning what you're doing, you're never going to advance… or get closer to excellence.* (Participant G, lines 336-337; 344-346)

> How do we teach people how to be excellent teachers? I think we have to get them to reflect on their own practice… and you have to be open, so, therefore, you have to be vulnerable… open in their own practice and what they do… and how they reflect on that. (Participant I, lines 380-382; 386-389)

Some authors (for example, Akbari, 2007; Jaeger, 2013) question the impact of reflective practice and/or its integration into teacher training programmes, with Russell (2013) going so far as to ask whether reflective practice has "done more harm than good in teacher education", suggesting that it is talked about extensively in theory but not modelled in practice. This perhaps echoes Rodgers (2002, p.843) when she laments that "in becoming everything to everybody, [reflection] has lost its ability to be seen". For many, however, (including Garmon, 2005; Kreber & Castleden, 2009; Meierdirk, 2016), reflection is widely accepted as a "vital aspect of teaching practice" (Beauchamp, 2015, p.126) and a "prerequisite to quality teaching" (Mälkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012, p.33). Ewing and Smith (2001) remind us that "the knowledge used by professionals in their practice includes knowledge born of reflective experience" (p.21), York-Barr et al. (2006, p.xvii) highlight that "constructing meaning from experiences enhances the applicability of that knowledge beyond the situation in which it was learned", and Schoenberger-Orgad, (2011, p.13) succinctly suggests that "as teachers, we remain as learners, and it is our job to constantly reflect on and improve what we do".

> There are days when I think 'Yeah, that went well… yeah, I really nailed it today', and other days where I just think 'Ah, that could've been a lot better', so I think… it's important to be self-reflective all the time. (Participant J, lines 192-194)

> [Excellent teachers] *are always prepared to critique themselves and what they're doing… We have to be able to talk about what we're learning and how we're learning, and we have to create that environment where teachers want to give up a bit of power and actually just critique the hell out of what they're doing.* (Participant K, line 357; 448-450)

Russell (2013), acknowledging that it is his own personal interpretation of the work of Schön (1983), proposes that "Schön was urging us to consider much more fully and carefully how new and experienced professionals *learn from their own experiences of professional action*" (p.85 [emphasis in original text]). In one of his last publications, Schön himself called for a new epistemology within higher education, one which "must account for and legitimize… the practitioner's generation of actionable knowledge… that can be carried over… to new practice situations" (1995, p.34). Rodgers (2002), returning to the work of Dewey (1933, 1938) summarizes that "reflection is not an end in itself, but a tool or vehicle used in the transformation of raw experience into meaning-filled theory that is grounded in experience, [and] informed by existing theory" (p.863).

In essence, these findings are consistent with the literature, with participants recognising (and indeed emphasising) the need to reflect on one's own practice, and to be prepared to critique and question one's own work, in order to work towards continuous improvement.

Staying Relevant/Current

Two-thirds of participants (eight out of twelve) discussed the need to stay relevant and current with their subject matter expertise and practices, for the sake of both teacher and learners:

> I read a lot of different things… and I watch a lot of different documentaries, I listen to things on the radio, and I'm always thinking about the content and how I can include that in the class, or how a current issue can be related to what I'm doing… to try and make things relevant. (Participant C, lines 362-366)

> It's kind of looking at [something] and saying 'Yeah, OK, my knowledge is important, but is it actually still that current? And if it's not current, how can I bring it back to be… how can I update my knowledge, how can I improve my understanding?'… You have to keep yourself current. *(*Participant E, lines 395-398; 417)

> I think anybody who's passionate about their subject, it's a very good start… which is why it's important always to teach some new things and update your content all the time… you need to do that for your students, but also you need to do it for yourself. (Participant J, lines 311-314)

For Haggerty et al. (2019), if teachers want "the best experience for their students, …it's essential to maintain currency in their pedagogical knowledge, skills and attitude" (p.63). Cusick (2001) reminds us that "knowledge for practice is never complete" (p.133), calling for all practitioners to be "'research sensitive'… [with] an awareness of research, and [to] use systematic knowledge gained through research to guide their practice" (p.125), while Karlberg and Bezzina (2020, p.16) encourage "more participative models that can see teachers engaging in more 'situated' learning which incorporates a recognition that professional learning and development occur as part-and-parcel of everyday working life".

These ideas can be tied back to elements of the findings for my first research question (Goode, 2023), with participants recognising that there is always more to learn.

Authenticity

Several participants highlighted the importance of authenticity in their professional practice:

> I think that everyone has to bring their authentic self… [you've] got to bring that authenticity to the class, so that [you] get trust and respect… you have to be authentic and give a little bit of yourself. (Participant I, lines 270-274; 276)

Palmer (2017) suggests that identity and integrity are key to good teaching, and that "as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes… to manifest more fully the gift of self from which our best teaching comes" (p.25). This can be linked to 'congruence', one of Rogers' (1979) three core attributes needed by teachers (alongside empathy and 'unconditional positive regard'): "Congruence requires that the face one presents in the classroom is not substantially different from the face one presents in research or in one's family life" (Blackie et al., 2010, p.639). For Molla and Nolan (2020, p.77), professional practice "involves thinking and acting against the backdrop of one's goals, values, understandings, and beliefs", and I would argue that this is not possible if we are not authentic.

> Ethical frameworks could form the centre of an academic as well as a practice-based engagement… I don't think I think of my values as ethical - they're just my values – but when you start to look around and think, "What is driving my relationships?", it is probably deeply ethical. (Participant L, lines 307-310)

Authenticity also needs to extend to our learners. Excellent teachers "[allow] learners the chance to express themselves in an authentic way" (Pinner, 2019, p.3); they are "genuine, and generate the atmosphere where pupils can venture to be themselves, express themselves and not be afraid of making mistakes – an important starting point for learning" (Hay McBer, 2000, p.22). This is consistent with the importance of creating an environment conducive to learning, and, albeit less explicitly, the importance of building relationships based on mutual respect.

Other Considerations

In addition to these five keys to teaching excellence, all participants talked about the personality traits of excellent teachers. Unlike the analysis for my first research question (Goode, 2023), which revealed different characteristics of participants' own identities, here participants reflected on what they perceived to be the personality traits of excellent teachers. While "personality is a very dominant and important characteristic of the ideal teacher" (Arnon & Reichel, 2007, p.451), Tomlinson (2010, p.26) reminds us that there may be "no off-the-shelf blueprint for building a highly successful teacher".

> I've known some excellent teachers who are quite quiet people… who are not bouncy… and energetic and get everybody revved up; they're very quiet, and they're wonderful at observing the people who're not managing, and noticing things that, well, that sort of bouncy people might not notice… and I've loved teaching with people who're quite different from me… we bring things to each other, and I think that there's not one kind of good teacher. (Participant J, lines 239-245)

Several characteristics are consistent with the values, motivators, and practices which have come through earlier, including reflective practice and being aware there is always more to learn:

> They don't stop when they've achieved [something], they keep going… they just want to get that good. (Participant A, lines 313-314)

> There's the desire to learn… to be reflective, and to actually say I want to get better at this, and to craft it. (Participant B, lines 383-385)

The importance of relationship building, demonstrating care and empathy, and engaging with learners are also present here:

> You've got to be able to listen… you absolutely have to be able to figure out where someone else is at, … understand what they understand, and what they don't understand, and then help to move them along. (Participant B, lines 171-174)

> I think you need to be diligent; I think you need to care. (Participant C, line 360)
>
> I think it's, on the one hand, the knowledge, on the other hand, the relationship with the students, but also, I think, thirdly, the ability to bring that student into contact with other people… kind of connecting them up with other options and possibilities. (Participant D, lines 229-233)
>
> I think… you've got to have a passion for what you're doing, and be able to convey that passion in some way, shape, or form… and I think being able to relate to the audience that you're working with, and, particularly with our… a lot of our students, is to treat them as adults, not kids… (Participant G, lines 352-356)

These findings support the idea that "the personalities of teachers and their empathic and attentive attitude towards their students [are] important" (Arnon & Reichel, 2007, p.457). Johannessen et al. (1997) emphasize the importance of the affective domain in teachers, and Weinstein's (1990) study of prospective teachers found that their beliefs about good teaching centred on "affective and interpersonal" traits (p.279).

> It helps to be organized, to be self-aware, to be really, really respectful – and to share how to be respectful – to model professional behaviours, to be really empathetic, and to be kind, and to not put yourself ahead of, or your needs ahead of the class, to be learner-centric… to review and value and refine your own practices all the time, to celebrate with your learners, to facilitate learning through cultural practices… to always be open as a learner, to be a learner, and it's kind of just, like, noticing moments of learning, and to celebrate them all the time. (Participant L, lines 272-279)

This participant captures many of the 'keys to excellence' in their description of excellent teaching, as well as recognising the value of noticing "moments of learning" and celebrating with learners. Besides this being a positive practice in itself, Marzano (2007, 2010) also identifies celebrating success as one factor which contributes to establishing and maintaining positive relationships with learners, communicating learning goals and expectations, and boosting student engagement levels.

In summary, in terms of how these practitioners embody, convey, and foster excellence in their practice, the analysis of narratives has resulted in five over-arching themes, set out in the Keys to Teaching Excellence (Figure 3):

- Building relationships
- Focusing on learners
- Facilitating learning
- Creating a positive environment

- Reflecting on practice

Within each theme sit personal characteristics and values which came through strongly in these narratives (Goode, 2023), together with elements of teaching and professional practice which also contribute to excellence, as set out in this paper. It is worth noting that Hattie (2003), whose "study commenced from an extensive review of literature and a synthesis of over half a million studies" (p.15), suggests that multiple elements make up the profile of an expert teacher, describing them as "facets of the gem-stone", and clarifying that "there is no one necessary facet, nor the equal presence of all, but the overlapping of many facets into the whole" (p.10). These keys to teaching excellence also overlap. There are, for instance, characteristics and practices which could sit under more than one theme: For example, 'Considering learners as individuals' could be considered an aspect of 'Focusing on Learners', as well as being an essential element of 'Building Relationships'; 'Crafting facilitation skills' could be part of 'Reflecting on Practice', as well as part of 'Facilitating Learning'. Like Hattie, I am not suggesting that any one sector is more important than any other. I propose instead that it is about the combination and balance of these 'Keys to Teaching Excellence'.

Interestingly, these elements of excellence are all quite different to the political and managerial discourse around excellence, with its focus on performance indicators, league tables, and other metrics. I would suggest that, for teachers, while understanding the need to be accountable, excellence bears no relation to such 'quantification' of practice. Instead, it is embodied in doing the right thing for learners and colleagues, and empowering individuals through care, respect, and facilitation of learning.

Shulman (2005), when discussing 'signature pedagogies,' the "types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions," calls for a close look at professional preparation "if you wish to understand why professions develop as they do" (p. 52). He goes on to highlight "three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to think, to perform, and to act with integrity" (p.52). While Shulman suggests that these three elements are given different levels of attention in different professions, he is very clear in his statement that "signature pedagogies make a difference. They form habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the hand" (2005, p.59). For me, habits of the mind, heart, and hand are all visible in 'The Keys to Teaching Excellence' model, and I would argue that teacher educators and

educational developers have a responsibility to empower current and future teachers to embrace all these aspects of their profession.

Recommendations for practice

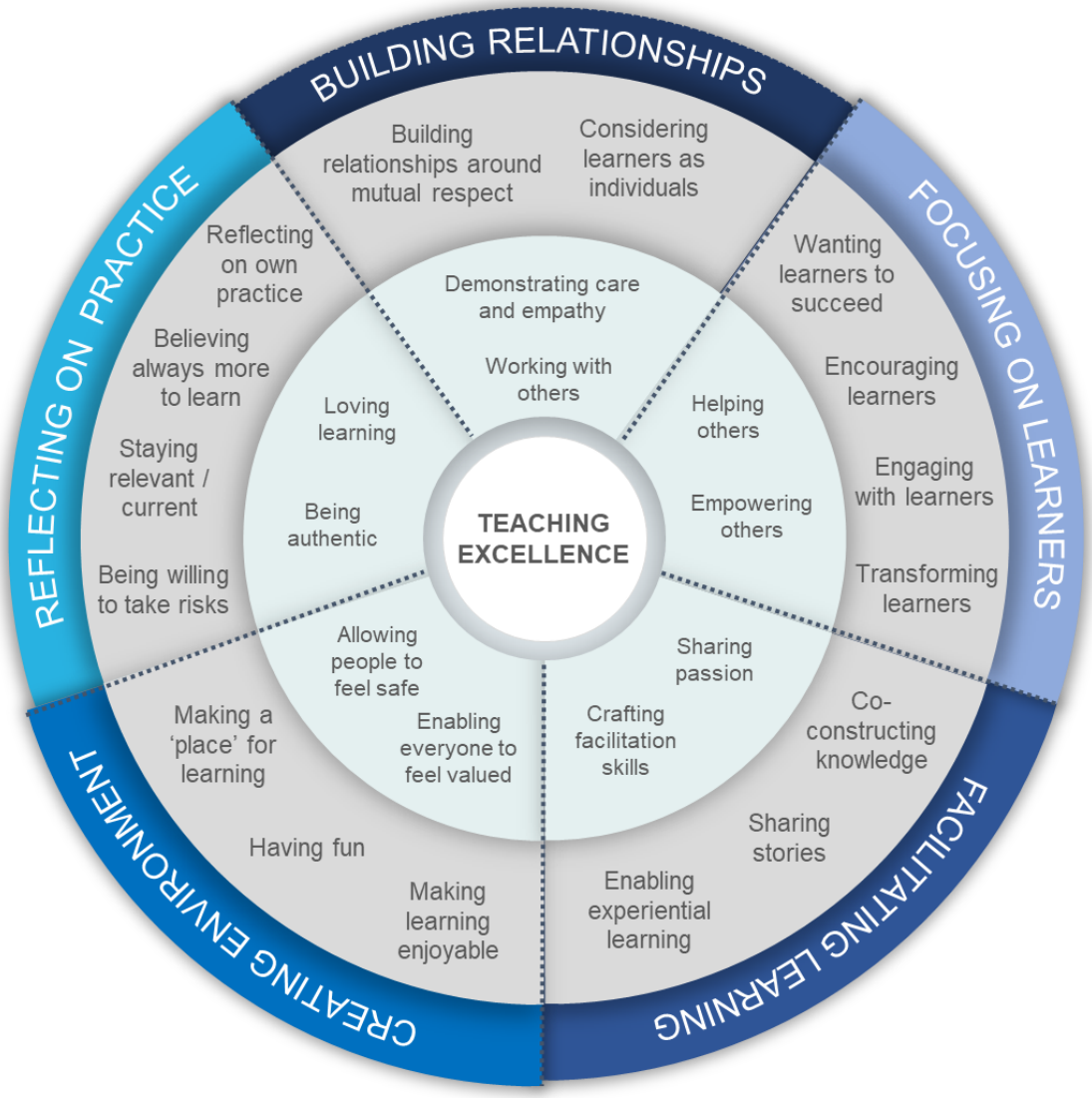
There are opportunities here for teachers, leaders, and educational developers to work together on policy, practice, formal training programs, and continuing professional development which encourages and energizes teachers on their journey towards excellence.

From a very practical perspective, sharing the 'Keys to Teaching Excellence' as a visual resource on printed postcards has been particularly impactful in New Zealand and at several international conferences (Goode, 2024). This enables staff to pin the card on their own noticeboard or attach it to their computer monitor where they can see it every day, rather than it being filed away somewhere electronically.

Just as the 'Keys to Teaching Excellence' can support and guide teachers in their practice, it should also be modelled by teacher educators and developers in their work with colleagues. Many elements, both practical and interpersonal, might be enhanced through a combination of activities, within and across disciplines, including workshops, peer-teaching, action-research projects, coaching and mentoring, collaborative learning opportunities and/or classroom observation, but all elements should be an integral part of ongoing development. The 'Keys' can be applied to the development of early-career and experienced teachers, encouraging the building of relationships, a focus on the developing teacher, facilitation of learning through the co-construction of knowledge and experiential learning, the creation of a positive environment in which people feel safe and valued, and a commitment to reflecting on practice with a view to developing excellence, individually, within teams, and as an organisation.

I encourage educators and leaders to see teaching excellence as a habit, rather than a checklist or 'endpoint', and to reflect on how these keys can be implemented to guide practice and inform professional development choices and professional growth.

Figure 3 *The Keys to Teaching Excellence*



Significance

These findings contribute both to existing research and knowledge around what teaching excellence looks like, and to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) which recognizes "the importance of taking a critical and research-based approach to teaching and learning" (Tight, 2018, p.61). They also highlight that investigating teaching and learning practices does not need to be discipline specific. For us to better "understand or improve student learning in higher education and the teaching approaches and practices that affect student learning" (Chick, 2018), SoTL inquiries can be conducted and shared widely.

I hope that educators will recognize elements of their own practice, to (re-)inspire and (re-)motivate them in their work. Citing multiple authors, Johnson (2019, p.253) reminds us that "Teachers are the most significant variable in determining the quality of education students receive and the amount of learning that occurs". In other words, developing teaching excellence, both in oneself and in others, raises the quality of learning for our students.

Limitations

I recognize that the narrative inquiry here has captured the stories of twelve practitioners within the tertiary context in New Zealand. However, participants do have different backgrounds, ethnicities, and come from different discipline areas. I firmly believe that fellow educators will be able to both relate to and recognize elements of their own professional practice, regardless of geographical or educational context.

While some may consider twelve to be a small sample size, "bigger isn't necessarily better. The bigger the sample, the greater the risk of failing to do justice to the complexity and nuance contained within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p.742). Indeed, I would argue that the value lies in the 'richness' of the data, rather than in the number of participants.

This paper does not offer a definitive definition of 'teaching excellence', but that was never the intention. It does, however, contribute to the literature and to ongoing conversations around this complex subject.

Conclusion

This paper reports on research investigating the stories of national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees, to explore their evolution as educators, their professional practice, and their thoughts on what they consider to be excellence in tertiary teaching.

Given the multi-faceted nature of teaching excellence, I sought to explore different elements of how these practitioners embody excellence in their practice. This research shows that teaching excellence is not about theoretical knowledge but is deeply rooted in educators' values, passions, experience, and ongoing commitment to learning. Five major themes have been identified, each made up of characteristics and skills which can be developed through practice and reflection. No one theme or key is more important than any other; instead, it is about the combination and balance of these 'Keys to Teaching Excellence'.

Understanding how we can foster excellent practice in educators, both through formal training programmes and through continuing professional development, is important nationally and internationally, and this project will feed into future research as I expand on my findings and their implications.

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