

# The Hidden Side of a Teaching Award Application

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## Abstract

Whilst applying for a national teaching award, I was confronted with the possibility that perhaps my teaching was merely “good practice” and not an example of excellence. With the support of some key people, I deconstructed my teaching approaches and reconceptualised how I teach. In doing so, I discovered how ‘just’ talking with peers helped empower me as a teacher. This paper uses an autoethnographic approach to describe my reflections on my teaching practice during the eight week period when I was applying for the award. It firstly describes the method of autoethnography. It then describes key events and stages during the application journey and my reflections on how I was transformed as a teacher through these stages. Finally, this paper concludes with insights about how to apply for a teaching award that encompasses teaching excellence.

Key words: Autoethnography, reflection, transformation, teaching awards, teaching excellence

## Introduction

Earlier this year, I was invited to apply for a national teaching award, namely an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning. ALTC citations are “awarded to those who have made a significant contribution to the quality of student learning in a specific area of responsibility over a sustained period” (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010a). This paper is an autoethnography that describes the transformative journey I went through from the invitation to apply through to the date of submission. It details the self-doubt I experienced when considering whether to apply for the award, and how the creation of ‘safe space’ allowed me to reconceptualise my approaches to helping students learn in the complex discipline of biochemistry. The paper encompasses a reflective analysis of the thoughts and feelings I experienced during this journey, and describes discoveries I have made both about myself and about the teaching award process. Finally, I reveal my response to the outcome of the application.

## What is autoethnography?

Autoethnography is a qualitative, narrative methodology in which the researcher is the subject of a study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Other terms which are encompassed by autoethnography include personal ethnography, personal narratives, lived experiences, narrative self-inquiry and socioautobiography. Ellis (2004, p.30) describes an interpretive, narrative, autoethnography project as a story, not unlike a novel or biography, which “often discloses hidden details of private life and highlights emotional experience”.

There has been recent growth in examples of autoethnographic writing that describe the experiences of educators and researchers in education. Duarte (2007) uses autoethnography to describe a journey through a scholarship in teaching project in a higher education institution. Hagan (2005) uses autoethnography to reflect on the impact of teaching mathematics at an exam-driven secondary school on personal teaching style, and Crerar (2009) uses autoethnography to reflect on her experience as a beginning teacher, and to argue how beginning teachers are innovative

beginning researchers. Dyson (2002) explores the role of autoethnography in education as both a distinctive research design and writing technique, and highlights how the reflective nature of education practice makes it suited to the autoethnographic style. In writing about the 'self', autoethnographies expose the hidden aspects of teaching which are not often written about in literature on quality teaching.

## **Using autoethnography to describe the experiences of a teaching award applicant**

Teaching awards are a form of professional recognition for quality teaching practices. Consequently, there is interest in the accounts of teaching award recipients (Dinham & Scott, 2002, 2003; Frame, Johnson, & Rosie, 2006; Skelton, 2004). Both Frame et al. (2006) and Dinham and Scott (2002, 2003) use survey approaches to evaluate how teaching award recipients perceive their experiences of applying for a teaching award. These reports are written from a third person perspective and the authors select which aspects of recipients' 'voice' to present. There is limited research describing the experiences of award recipients as they participate in the application process. Autoethnography is an approach that allows the author to reveal hidden, emotive reflections for a particular experience. In using this approach, I am able to reveal an alternative perspective to the application process.

This paper presents a first hand account of applying for a teaching award, and my reflexive analysis of the experience. It is of practical relevance as it provides a link between the objective metrics of teaching award applications and the personal experiences of someone applying for a teaching award. This paper also addresses insights I discovered about myself as a teacher and about the teaching award application process.

## **My story**

"She loves what she is teaching so tries to make us love it too" (Biochemistry Student Feedback on Teaching Survey, 2009)

I am a biochemistry educator. I began teaching biochemistry during my Honours and PhD degrees in Biochemistry, and I have been a lecturer in biochemistry since 2003. Biochemistry is central to many biomedical science courses, but unfortunately has a universal reputation as being 'difficult' and 'boring'. Biochemistry seeks to explain the roles of chemical processes in living things. Core concepts in biochemistry units include 'bioenergetics' (e.g. why the human body needs energy and how it obtains it from the food we eat) and 'signal transduction' (e.g. how hormones such as insulin released in one part of the body can result in changes elsewhere in the body) (Nelson & Cox, 2008). Generally these processes involve several steps that appear complex to the uninitiated, so my challenge as an educator is to engage and excite large classes (>150 students) of typically reluctant students in this area.

My attempts thus far have been viewed as 'successful' by both students and peers alike. In recognition of my commitment to student learning in biochemistry, I have been awarded a Vice-Chancellor's Award for Teaching Excellence for an Early Career Academic (2008), and a University Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning (2010).

In this article, I focus on the emotional journey I went through from being invited to apply for an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning through to the date of submission. I have broken up my journey into three stages:

1. The Beginning, when I meet with Teaching and Learning staff to discuss the expectations of a national citation. This was a confronting meeting that led to a period of self-doubt. I questioned my own ability to complete an application in the short time-frame available. I

was unsure if I would have anything of value to say in an application, despite my track record of university teaching awards and other evidence in support of my teaching abilities.

2. The Middle, when through guided reflection I completely re-evaluate and reconceptualise my teaching practice and discover what could be the unique and excellent components of my teaching practice.
3. The End, when I was able to complete an application I was proud of, with the valued support of a team who I trusted to share my thoughts and draft applications with.

### **The Beginning – Self-doubt**

February 24 - I have just received word I have been awarded a University Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning. In my letter of congratulations, I'm invited to apply for an ALTC Citation. I feel flattered and excited about the prospect of a national teaching award, but I am unsure if what I do would meet ALTC standards. I am not surprised to have received a university award as I received one in 2008, but I imagine the national standards must be high.

March 3 - I decide I would like to apply for a Citation. I book a meeting to talk with Coralie about the steps I will need to take to submit an application by April 28, eight weeks away! I have known Coralie for several years in her capacity as a senior academic in the university Teaching and Learning Centre. She was invaluable in arranging support for my university teaching award application. I trust what she has to say, and feel I can again share my thoughts with her.

March 10 - I meet with Coralie. She explains the process involved in applying for an ALTC Citation, and the aspects of the application itself, using documents from the ALTC website (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010b). Whilst limited to four pages, the application has a number of sections:

1. The proposed citation statement, describing the unique contribution of the nominee to student learning.
2. A synopsis written in third person to be used in communications about the recipient's success.
3. A summary of the particular contribution and its specific context.
4. A written statement addressing one or two selection criteria expanding on the contribution to student learning.
5. A written statement providing evidence for the ways in which the contribution has: influenced student learning, engagement and/or the overall student experience; been sustained over time; and been recognised by fellow staff, the institution, and/or the broader community.

Coralie shows me a document detailing feedback on the 2009 award applications (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010c) and tells me national teaching award standards are much higher than university teaching award standards. I started to feel nervous at this point. What does she mean *standards*? She tells me I must clearly focus on the 'excellent' features of my teaching practice, and how I make an outstanding contribution to student learning. Describing aspects of my teaching which are "good teaching practice" (Ramsden, 1992) would not be sufficient for a successful application. We review my university teaching award application. Only a few weeks earlier I was so proud to complete it. Now we read through it. In describing approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn, I highlighted three strategies:

1. Using my enthusiasm for both biochemistry and teaching to promote student engagement.
2. Using multiple approaches to simplifying complex biochemistry concepts, ensuring learning outcomes are explicit, relevance of material to everyday life or future professional activities

is clear and that a range of audiovisual tools are used to make learning both interesting and fun.

3. Teaching with consistency and support to provide a positive, student-focused environment.

Coralie suggests perhaps it is just good practice to be student-focused and make expected learning outcomes clear. She points out that many teachers who are considered to be 'excellent' are enthusiastic teachers, so being enthusiastic alone would not be sufficient grounds for an ALTC teaching award. For an ALTC application, I need to make sure I articulate both the unique and excellent aspects of how I contribute to student learning. I start to feel quite disappointed in my university application, and ask Coralie to highlight features of the application that were excellent and/or unique. Coralie points out limited key phrases as examples ('online games, images and videos', 'deconstruct complex material'). In doing so her actions suggest this application would not be as useful as I had hoped as the basis for a national application. We talk about how I would need to expand on these sections, and how important evidence is in backing up my claims.

Later in the office I attempt to prepare draft #1 of my application. When I delete from my university award application all the sections I now consider to be 'good practice', I am left with very little. Panic sets in. Perhaps I am merely a 'good' teacher. Maybe I am not the excellent teacher students and peers tell me I am. Maybe students and peers give me positive feedback about my teaching in comparison with other teaching staff who do not demonstrate 'good practice'. In this case, a favourable comparison does not necessarily mean I am an excellent teacher. In my distressed state, I begin to worry also about the time it will take to complete a worthy application. Coralie has hinted at frequent meetings, and weekly draft submissions. How am I going to manage when I only work three days a week with a heavy teaching load? I complete draft #1, and dread my next meeting with Coralie.

On reflection, my feelings of self-doubt are not uncommon to teachers, particularly those working in environments with limited frames of reference within which to judge their own worth (Dinham & Scott, 2002). Thinking that I was perhaps only a 'good' teacher implied that I would 'fail' if I submitted my teaching award application. This was a significant external threat to my self-esteem (Herrmann, Leonardelli & Arkin, 2002). The decision of whether to self-handicap and blame time constraints on an inability to submit an application this year, or whether to persevere and 'do whatever it takes' to submit an application worthy of an award, would occur in my meeting with Coralie.

### **The Middle – Self-discovery though 'just' talking**

March 24 – I visit Coralie and she asks how I am going. Truthfully, I tell her I am wondering if I should bother to prepare an application. I tell her I don't know if there is any excellence at all in my practice. I have revealed my worst fear out loud. What happens next, what happens in the next ninety minutes of the meeting, was life-changing. Coralie does not laugh, she does not agree with me, she does not say anything at all. She pauses, thinks for a moment, then suggests we 'just' talk while she takes some notes. It sounds like a reasonable thing to do. Coralie moves her chair so it is next to mine, takes out a blank piece of paper. *Can you tell me what you teach?* she asks. I start to talk. As I speak, Coralie starts to write down key words she hears. She prompts me with additional questions:

*explain what you mean... why is biochemistry hard... but why... how do you teach difficult material... what do you do in class with students... how does this help them learn???*

I have engaged in reflection of my own teaching practice since 2004 when I commenced a university program for new tertiary educators. I have an ongoing teaching portfolio and I have published research in learning and teaching. But it was in this meeting with Coralie, when I had the time and

space to do so, that I tried to explain the actual mechanics of my teaching practice for the very first time. Here are some words and points that Coralie wrote down as I spoke:

- Biochemistry – complex, biology and chemistry, second year unit, foundation knowledge needed for later subjects, new language, cellular processes that make our bodies work, not static, everything is fluid
- My teaching aims – help students learn a new language, be able to use these new words in sentences that make sense, students are learning processes and the language needed to describe these processes, “baby-steps”
- How I teach – focus on key concepts, and the words used to describe these, but words are not enough, I use animations, DVDs to help students visualise the fluid processes. I highlight the personal relevance of the core concepts with everyday examples, I draw pictures, and show students how I draw pictures to rebuild complex images of processes step-by-step, putting the fluid back into the static. Learning is likely to occur when the process of learning models the biochemistry that goes on inside of us. I weave all of these processes together in a fun atmosphere to help students engage and learn, step-by-step.

It was absolutely amazing to see these words appear on paper, and to see key words like ‘language’ and ‘processes’ and ‘networks’ appear. These words described what I do, but I have never, ever before thought about my teaching in this manner, nor expressed my teaching approaches using such words. This deconstruction of my teaching approach was a transforming experience. I began to see that linking an array of specific teaching tools to teach biochemistry was my unique contribution to student learning. But was this excellent? Regardless, I left this meeting feeling renewed, excited, and now committed to completing an application for submission.

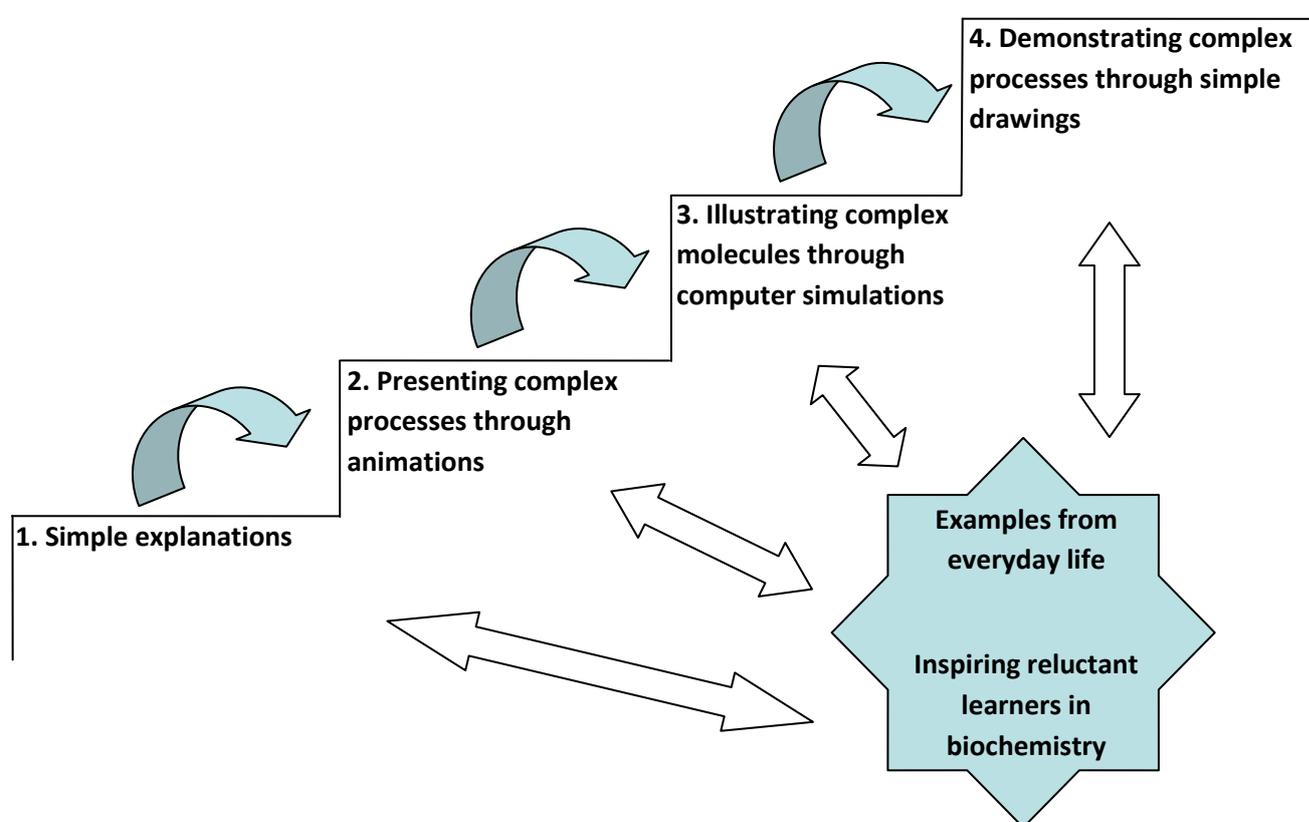
On reflection, I identified this single meeting as having the greatest impact on how I view myself as a biochemistry educator. In analysing this meeting further, I explored current literature using search terms such as ‘reflection’ and ‘transformation’ and ‘safe place’. I found myself engrossed in reading literature describing the role of a therapist in exploring the stories of their clients, particularly an article by La Torre (2005), and references therein. I see Coralie as playing the role of a therapist who created a ‘safe space’ so I could uncover my own ‘story’, which enabled the reconceptualisation of my teaching practices in a way I had never previously considered. I believe that as an ‘external enabler’, she ‘guided’ my reflection through listening, drawing and asking questions (Johns, 1999).

Other teaching award recipients have similarly commented in surveys how the preparation of materials for an award submission, particularly when a portfolio approach has been used, allowed them to view their teaching differently: “Being asked, usually for the first time in a long time, to enunciate their educational philosophy “revealed themselves to themselves”, and aided them to learn what they really valued and what “drove” them as teachers” (Dinham & Scott, 2002). Whilst the ALTC citation application was not a portfolio based upon agreed professional teaching standards, as is used in, for example, the NSW Quality Teaching Awards (Australian College of Educators, 2010), I experienced similar outcomes through the support of one key individual. Would a more explicit portfolio approach to the citation application have enabled me to reach the same outcome? I don’t know, but I suspect my transformation through this period would not have occurred without guided reflection.

### **The End – Renewing my self-confidence**

The bulk of my application is finalised over the next four weeks. I focus on collecting evidence to support the specific teaching tools I identified. I am pleased that, whilst preparing my university citation application, I finally organised all of my student evaluations and peer feedback in one folder for easy reference. Three people play a crucial role in these few weeks, forming a support team to help me prepare an application I was proud of, building self-confidence in both the learning and

teaching processes I was describing, and in the teaching award application process: Coralie, Patricia and Daniel. I have already introduced you to Coralie. In the 'safe space' already created by Coralie, we meet frequently to talk about my writing style. She highlights my overuse of 'filler' words which have no meaning, and helps me to think about how I could best use the limited space in my application to present aspects like sustained student feedback over time. My final application ends up including graphs of student feedback, quotes from students and peers and an image to summarise the set of approaches I take to motivate and inspire students to learn (Figure 1). The image represents a set of steps, with each being one of my teaching approaches. Through each approach, I weave examples of relevance to students from everyday life, as represented by the arrows and star. This image helps visually demonstrate how I motivate and inspire students to learning. Preparing this image also helped me develop my final citation statement to include reference to 'step-wise' knowledge building approaches.



**Figure 1** This is an image which summarises how I use 'step-wise' knowledge building approaches to help motivate and inspire students to learn. A modified version of this image was used in my final citation application, with a relevant student or peer quote supporting each 'step' and the points in the star.

Coralie has also put me in touch with Dr Patricia Kelly, a higher education consultant. I have only known Patricia for a few months. I met her when she came to the university to hold some workshops for staff applying for university teaching awards. She has extensive experience in mentoring learning and teaching staff, and is employed to assist staff applying for teaching awards. While I do not have the opportunity for any face-to-face meetings during this ALTC application process she is easily accessible by email. I trust her expertise and am open to the comments she has to say about my draft applications. In total, I prepare five separate drafts in four weeks. Both Coralie and Patricia provide detailed and very prompt feedback on all five drafts. Specifically,

Patricia suggests I explore my teaching philosophy more deeply and articulate this more clearly in my summary statement. So, I speak with a colleague with an education background about whether there was a literature base to support the way I teach biochemistry, and indeed there is! I discover my teaching philosophy is to use constructivist and authentic approaches to learning, as I believe that all language and knowledge in biochemistry can be understood by even the most disengaged student through a process of building on everyday experiences using multi-dimensional scaffolding techniques (Vygotsky, 1978). Patricia also pushed me to develop a unique and 'sexy' citation statement, to 'get beyond the desperately earnest and boring to the kernel of what you do'. My final citation statement ended up being: *"For using 'step-wise' knowledge building approaches to help reluctant learners understand and apply complex concepts in difficult biochemistry areas"*. I am still not sure if it is as 'sexy' as Patricia would have liked!

The third person I need to mention at this stage is my husband Daniel. A lecturer in management, Daniel has the amazing ability to translate my jumbled mess of thoughts into crystal clear, easy to read written products. He has helped me prepare many written documents, and will no doubt scribble his constructive comments over drafts of this very paper with his red pen. During the beginning and middle stages of my journey, he primarily listened quietly as I debriefed each night, again providing the safe space I needed to help to think out loud. After preparing my fourth draft, I finally asked Daniel for his comments. Once again magic was woven through my writing with the scribbles of his red pen. He particularly helped me re-organise my summary statement, to better explain the perceived 'difficult' nature of biochemistry, so the context of my application would be clear for someone in a different discipline.

In the final few weeks, my support team helped me identify appropriate referees, and then I assisted my referees to prepare their referee reports. I have learnt from Coralie that it is most important that the referees are specific in examples or claims they made about me as a teacher, and that they avoid general 'motherhood' statements.

On reflection on this stage, the positive support provided by Coralie, Patricia and Daniel was crucial to restoring my self-confidence regarding my abilities as a teacher. All three supporters provided a 'safe space' for deep, guided reflection to occur. All three supporters listened to my concerns or ideas, asked questions, and reflected on what she or he heard. Using a biochemical term, all three supporters were 'catalysts' in my development of a new sense of self-awareness regarding how I teach. My support team provided detailed, supportive and prompt feedback on my draft applications, and together motivated and inspired me to prepare the best application I could.

## **Discoveries and conclusions**

Using an autoethnographic approach to describing my experiences in applying for a teaching award has practical relevance to potential teaching award applicants. As well as highlighting the key mechanics of applying for a teaching award, this approach exposes potential applicants to the possible 'rollercoaster' of emotions which may be experienced by a teaching award applicant. As I write this section of this paper, I do not yet know the outcome of my award application. Regardless of the outcome, I feel I have learnt not only more about myself as a teacher, but more about the process of writing a teaching award application.

My key discovery was about me as a teacher. I found that it was OK to admit I did not know if I was a good teacher or an excellent teacher, and to realise I needed support to explore this idea further. I discovered that, with support, I was able to reflect more deeply than ever before on my teaching approaches, and rethink how I teach, to re-conceptualise and explicitly describe how I help students learn. It has also become blindingly obvious that support from learning and teaching academics and family is invaluable in promoting deep reflection and in being able help me simply and explicitly

describe my own teaching practice. I needed help overcoming self-doubt in my abilities as a teacher, with conceptualising how I help students learn, and with writing my application. I would not have been able to submit the application I did without significant support from Coralie, Patricia and Daniel.

I have also learnt that it takes a great deal of time to focus on preparing a quality teaching award application, not unlike the amount of time it takes to prepare a promotion application. I had not anticipated the sheer amount of time it would take both to reflect and to write this application. The application was only four pages long, but a significant amount of time was required for face-to-face and/or email discussions with Coralie, Patricia and Daniel, collecting and sorting evidence, personal reflection and writing time. During this eight week period, every spare hour not spent on teaching, student consultation or marking was devoted to working on the application. I also spent time out of working hours thinking about my application and seeking feedback from Daniel. I cannot overemphasise just how time consuming the application process was, and how focused I needed to become to allow timely submission of an application that would receive university approval for submission at the national level. Indeed, the time-consuming nature of teaching award applications is noted by Dinhman and Scott (2003) as a negative aspect of the process.

A third discovery has been realising the value of maintaining a system for collecting evidence from students and peers regarding my teaching. I, like most academics, collect regular student evaluations of my teaching. But it became apparent that student evaluations alone would not provide sufficient evidence in a national teaching award application. Patricia prompted me to set up a 'thank you' file, to collect unsolicited comments from students or peers. Coralie pointed out that comments made in performance and development reviews, promotion referees, and comments on past teaching award applications or learning and teaching publications could all be used to support my claims in a teaching award. I was also encouraged to solicit feedback more widely, from former colleague or fellow academics at other institutions. I have also begun to think about how I can collect my own personal reflections in a more structured manner, perhaps in the form of a blog.

Applying for a national teaching award, despite having received two previous university teaching awards was initially a confronting and terrifying experience. However, it was my journey and sense of personal transformation that occurred during the application process, rather than the outcome of the application, that has been the most exciting and empowering for me. Regardless of the outcome, I am now more confident in my ability to write about my own teaching practice, and more confident in the process of making a claim and providing different and appropriate evidence to support the claim. Finally, I feel brave enough to share my story in writing this article. I look forward to future dialogue with peers on whether the telling of my story has had an impact on others.

## **Notification of results**

Late on Monday July 5, I received an email:

*On behalf of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, I am pleased to advise that your nomination for a 2010 Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning has been successful.*

I wrote the bulk of this article not knowing the outcome of my award application. How do I feel now that I know my application was successful? My immediate response was that finally, I know with certainty that I am an excellent teacher who has an impact on student learning. The sense of 'finally' was confusing. Despite the empowerment I felt in discovering the excellence in my practice, why was my own opinion insufficient? Why did it take external recognition to truly feel like I am a teacher of excellence? I feel disappointed that I have these feelings, which has masked the excitement of the news. Perhaps it was my compelling need for external recognition that led to me to apply for this award in the first place. And perhaps it was this need that was the driving force

behind the sheer enormity of effort that went in to both the rethinking of my practice and the application itself.

I am not alone in placing significant value on the external recognition that comes with receiving a teaching award. In a study of successful US and Australian teaching award recipients, Dinham and Scott (2002) report that the recognition of achievement and resultant positive feelings was the most frequently cited intended outcome made by award winners. Furthermore, this study highlighted that I am not alone in feeling the need for external affirmation, with other award recipients noting that teachers tend to lack an adequate frame of reference to judge their own worth. This article once more highlights the needs of teachers to access specific mechanisms which promote deep reflection on practice, achievements and professional development. I wonder what further insights the reader will gain on the teaching award application process upon reading this article.

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