about synergy

Synergy is a scholarly forum for the discussion and debate of higher education teaching and learning at The University of Sydney. Produced by the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), Synergy is published twice per year – usually May and October – and is circulated to staff through academic and research departments. This issue of Synergy was edited by Dr Christine Asmar in consultation with the Director and staff of the ITL.

Contributions to Synergy

Synergy’s purpose is threefold. Firstly, it is intended to showcase the variation in learning and teaching initiatives taking place across the university. Secondly, it is a forum where staff (particularly those new to researching and writing about teaching and student learning) can publish their innovations in a scholarly manner. Thirdly, it acts as a vehicle for critical and public discussion of key learning and teaching issues.

The Editor welcomes contributions from the university community all year round. Synergy particularly welcomes contributions written collaboratively by staff and students that:

• report on, or are critical reflections of, an aspect of teaching or students’ learning;
• report on a teaching, learning or curriculum initiative designed to engage students in active learning or inquiry;
• use disciplinary research/concepts to develop ideas about teaching and student learning;
• report on curriculum initiatives designed to bring teaching and research together to improve student learning;
• draw on research and scholarship to comment critically and thoughtfully on an aspect of teaching and learning in the university;
• theorise or problematise the contribution of teaching, learning and pedagogy to the nature of higher education.

Scholarly and research-based contributions to Synergy attract points on the University’s Scholarship Index. Further information about the Index is available at http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/qual-index.html. On occasion, the Editor will invite contributions to Synergy in accordance with the focus of the issue.

Synergy publishes contributions of varying word lengths – anywhere up to 5000 words. We strongly encourage contributors to read through previous issues at: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/back-issues.cfm. The Editor encourages all potential contributors to make contact before the submission of an article. We welcome the addition of graphics and visual images to enhance your contribution.

Referencing standards

Contributions to Synergy should be formatted using the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines. Further information can be found at http://www.apastyle.org/.

Design, layout and photos

Rachel Williams, Web and Publications Manager, ITL. Email: r.williams@usyd.edu.au
Cartoons by Tamara Aesar. Email: tamara@aranafil.com.au

Transcription (Talking Students and Profile): Sue Robinson

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being involved in this special issue of Synergy, with its focus on diversity, has been an exciting experience. The issue draws on a rich array of teaching initiatives, leaps of the pedagogic imagination, and systematic research into the very nature of student learning. With our usual aim of highlighting teaching and learning in relation to over 45,000 demographically and culturally diverse students and faculty across more than a dozen campuses, we have come across some inspiring examples of excellence in reflective, innovative, and inclusive practice. While some may see a focus on cultural diversity as being at odds with the commodity we hope our students will achieve as they work towards their learning outcomes, others would argue that teaching with sensitivity to difference is simply good teaching. If this is so, then exemplars of, and approaches to good teaching are plentiful in this issue.

Readers will immediately notice the strong Indigenous focus of this particular issue, a perhaps overdue first for Synergy. Acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which our respective campuses are situated is something of many of us do in our classes, as a matter of simple respect. The University itself acknowledges the connection to Country of nine different groups of Aboriginal peoples – (Gaal) (of the Eora nation), Derrabbin, Tharawal, Ngarawal, Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Bundjalung, Wiljali and Gurrang Gurrang. Awareness of such plurality, we feel, informs our own global understandings of the many diversities woven into our daily lives as educators in Australia today.

Our wide-ranging leading article by Yasuko Claremont, William Renner and Fredericka van der Lubbe reports on a research initiative investigating student and staff perspectives of Arts learners from designated equity groups. Findings from their study indicate that the student experience of some of the students had specifically asked for: a web-based resource where students could both share their stories and access resources, and where the student vignettes are accompanied by inclusive teaching strategies from which others can benefit.

Peter Doehr-Hall adopts a research-enhanced perspective on dimensions of music teaching, sharing with his Conservatorium students (and with us), the research and learning outcomes he achieved in studying with Balinese musicians. Peter’s subtly argued piece weaves together themes of the cultural specificity of teaching and learning styles, how to implement teaching and learning strategies that resonate with students’ diverse backgrounds, and how to address the aims of multiculturalism.

In her rigorous analysis of factors influencing Indigenous post-graduates’ chances of successful completion of higher degrees, Diana Day reminds us of facts which we may be aware of cognitively, yet which are easy to overlook in the personal dynamics of student-supervisor relationships. How many of us, for example, would connect published statistics on Indigenous health, to the impact of chronic illness on an Indigenous college’s chances of completing her thesis?

Richard Seymour uses problem-based learning and authentic learning strategies to teach social entrepreneurship. Far from seeing student diversity as a potential ‘problem’ for teachers, he sees that very diversity as essential for the successful execution of open-ended student projects, with students’ new perceptions and insights acting as a catalyst for student learning and engagement.

How to apply elements of a Teaching Quality model to university teaching in Education is the subject of a piece by Michael Anderson, Relyn Ewing and Relyn Gibson. Insisting on an evidence base, they highlight the way non-traditional teaching approaches such as drama can bring into the learning process students who might otherwise have been left on the margins.

Focused on similar concerns is an account by Minh Nwa Rise, Sally Fillinger and David Rose of an intervention to scaffold the learning of students who have entered academia with few formal skills in academic literacy. Although the students in this group were all Indigenous, the authors argue strongly for broader applications of such an approach - including internationally.

The student voice is something we have consciously tried to capture. From the ITL, a happy and safe holiday to all.

Christine Asmar

Inclusive equity

A fair go for all

Yasuko Claremont, William Renner and Fredericka van der Lubbe

Faculty of Arts

Students do not participate equally in higher education. Inequality can be observed in the statistics of low participation and less-than-satisfactory retention rates. Universities and governments have been keen to redress this with policies aimed to support and assist students who are at risk or disadvantaged in their learning. Yet, these figures and policies mask the reality of daily life – the broader range of issues and needs which students experience over the course of their studies. In this qualitative study of student equity, we sought to amend this imbalance of perspective with a focus on the experiences of both students and staff, and to identify positive approaches for dealing with inequity and with overcoming disadvantage.

The research was supported by a Teaching Improvement Grant, and led to a collection of vignettes of the experiences of students themselves which are presented on an interactive web site. It is hoped that students and staff can find value in the stories and accounts made by those respondents who have willingly agreed to share their experiences with others in the university community.

The ‘Inclusive Equity’ research project

The ‘Inclusive Equity’ research project grew out of a project proposal for the Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education) offered by the Institute for Learning and Teaching at the University of Sydney in 2004. The premise of the project was to create a website for the Faculty of Arts, drawing together all the services available to students from equity groups. At the same time we aimed to conduct research into the situation of such students from the perspective of both teachers and students, and showcase innovative methods of managing equity issues where they impact on learning, including the notion of inclusivity. It was to provide academics with examples of how other colleagues have overcome issues of equity. The aim was to help students within equity target groups, not only within the Faculty of Arts, but within the whole University.

The 2002-2004 University of Sydney’s Equity Plan set the goal of ‘providing the conditions of access to, and successful participation in higher education’ (EP 2002, 1: 1) for students from all equity target groups, and of facilitating ‘a positive educational experience for all students, irrespective of...’ (EP 2002, 1: 3). The plan listed the following five groups were considered by the University as equity target groups: people with disabilities; people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; women in non-traditional areas of study and in postgraduate study, students of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, and people of non-English speaking background. The University’s objectives are to increase the number of people from the nominated groups who enrol and complete their studies at the University. These groups were first nominated in the University’s first Equity Plan of 1990 and, then as now, no priority was set for any particular group, the assumption being that equity issues will be integrated into mainstream activities.

Formally, this effort was to help address Recommendation 5 of the Academic Board Phase Two Review and the Faculty of Arts Teaching and Learning Strategy 1.5, namely, that the Faculty should develop more strategies to increase the participation of and retain students from all equity groups. This project is closely related to the Not Dreaming, Waking Program within the Faculty of Arts, which seeks to assist and support students at risk to identify and adopt strategies likely to help them complete their courses, improve their experience and learning outcomes at University and also to develop awareness on the part of academic staff of the needs of such students. This project is closely related to the Not Dreaming, Waking Program within the Faculty of Arts, which seeks to assist and support students at risk to identify and adopt strategies likely to help them complete their courses, improve their experience and learning outcomes at University and also to develop awareness on the part of academic staff of the needs of such students.

In order to gather the information needed for this project, we conducted both online and face to face interviews in second semester, 2005. Our focus was on the following groups of students:

- disabled students
- low income students
- international students
- non-English speaking background students
- rural students
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students
- women studying in a non-traditional area or postgraduate areas

Our concern was not to concentrate on minority groups within the Faculty, or on groups which experience discrimination, but simply on key identified equity groups.
We also surveyed all students on strategies for managing their problems and the responses were overwhelmingly positive. While the role of the tutor or teacher figured strongly in answers, respondents which focused on what the students could do were as follows: asking to record tutorials; preparing for a topic by conducting online background reading; asking neighbouring students, asking teachers and presenters to speak more slowly; trying to participate more in group activities; trying to understand Australian culture better by reading old newspapers; watching local TV and trying to make more Australian friends. The need to understand Australian culture was emphasised by one student, who spoke of the benefits of having had Australian friends before arriving.

Where the role of the teacher was emphasised, respondents spoke of ‘teachers who “understand” international students’ and who were prepared to be patient when students were used to a different style of learning. The same student also spoke of the need to meet expectations and become more ‘active’ in class. Others spoke of the need to ask tutors for the meaning of words, while others expanded at length on the qualities of a good teacher. A good teacher is approachable and has time at the end of the tutorial to explain terminology. Going through the main points of the tutorial or lecture is helpful, and again, taking the time to explain terminology or ‘Western’ concepts is helpful, or providing weblogs so people can chase up the information themselves. Three students were also aware of the burden this places on the lecturer and were reluctant to become ‘troublemakers’[1].

Another student praised small group work as an opportunity to speak more and become more involved.

We also asked students what they thought were the most important things that an academic tutor/teacher should be doing.

Strategies which respondents suggested were helpful in managing their situation involved becoming more organised (down to filing techniques), working out their most productive period, making best use of Union facilities and scholarships, making more use of email to talk to lecturers, planning time to meet with other students for study, negotiating with staff for times to hand in work, being organised enough to avoid library fines, and personal prioritising.

Existing services and resources of benefit to this group were the legal service; the ‘Women’s Coffee Room’; the University Counselling Service, the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA), the International Student Support Unit, the Library, and microwave-equipped common rooms.

Three respondents suggested improved access to information on financial assistance, more opportunities for on-campus employment, and more assistance to postgraduate research students not receiving scholarships (as there appears to be an assumption, in the opinion of one respondent, that all are on scholarships). One suggestion was for free tutors for subjects; and another two respondents praised the computing resources on campus but called for better subsidisation. Another service highly praised was the availability of electronic journals, for which the cost of printing is either cheaper than photocopying or free if done via the Postgraduate Arts Research Centres which provide desk space and computing facilities to research students.

Students with a disability

There were 5 responses from this category. The diversity of disabilities is such that each impairment impacts on the individual’s learning situation in different ways. All, however, spoke of missing lectures, and of an inability to participate fully in social events. Individual student strategies for managing disability were as follows: telling the lecturer or tutor in advance if the disability is a chronic or ongoing condition and disruptions were to be expected; finding and using the services provided by the University; asking for help (even if you feel self-conscious); using the Security Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. New services that respondents would like to see included more assistance at libraries other than the main one, such as the mobility service; the note-taking service; special provisions for exams; University parking passes; the Counselling Service; and Disability Services. All respondents indicated that awareness on the part of staff was very important in managing their disability, including teachers making allowances for the individual respondent’s condition, such as exemptions from in-class participation in some instances, or allowing extra time. 

Summary of student views

A number of issues raised by students cut across the equity categories discussed above. The key concerns were as follows.

Time

An important discovery about students with equity issues is that they are time-poor. Poverty may or may not be an issue, but time is a premium for students. Unable to meet financial commitments typically seek employment, and students who work as well as study are time-poor. They complain less about their poverty than their lack of free time, and go to great lengths to explain their time-management strategies, down to how to punch the holes in photocopies - a trivial example, but illustrating the levels of stress upon such students. Time is a serious problem for other equity groups also. Students
who have children are time-poor, as are students with a disabil-
ity making it take longer to get to class or appointments, or hand in work, and who have to make special efforts to access disabled facilities or lecture materials.

Cultural backgrounds

A difficulty for non-English speaking background students was the lack of linguistic knowledge, but assumed knowledge on the part of lecturers. Many lecturers seem to assume that if a person speaks English well, and has lived here for some time, they will share the same cultural knowledge. However, some students reported a lack of Australian cultural knowledge, and found it particularly disadvantageous when for example, a lecturer used an excerpt from Monty Python. What might seem like a shared joke to a lecturer leaves NESB students scrambling for the Internet.

Technolog

Some students see their disadvantage manifest in the ever-
creasing gap between those comfortable with modern technology and those lacking even basic computing skills. For such students there is a real need for human services, such as increasing the availability of drop-in clinics. WECTT training in the first week of semester, and advertising computer sup-
port services via posters rather than through online communicati

services to join the computer age. The staff are struggling with limited resources and skills…'

For others, technology was seen as a great leveller. Twenty-five respondents identified technology as an important means of redressing inequity. Of these, 12 saw potential for more online academic services; 6 felt there was scope for more online communications; and 4 felt that technology could be harnessed to overcome the feeling of isolation and to build a sense of com-

munity. One mature age student lamented on loss of com-

munication, and suggested that internet communications could help put like-minded people in contact with each other. Several students commented on the Research Cluster web site which connects staff and student researchers in the Faculty of Arts. Contemporary tech

nologies such as blogs and chat sites were cited as suitable tools for building online research communities and for sharing academic resources. Others saw the role of the internet essen-

tially as an informational medium, best used to inform students about the range of available events and services and to bring these people together in face-to-face communities.

Those students who were time-poor, and/or overcoming a disability, saw great value in the provision of online academic resources. One respondent argued that ‘some kind of online presence should be compulsory for all courses’, citing the benefits of having access to ‘spare or fast-tracking journal articles’, online documents, lecture notes, and discussion activities, all of which were considered ‘very helpful when my attendance at the physi-
cal campus location was limited’ (for example, during time off recovering after surgery). Students also expressed an interest in services such as online submission of assignment and self-help online programs which could overcome the travel and cost barriers of their particular circumstances.

For one rural student, who evidently resides outside of Sydney, there is six hours of travel associated with each lecture. He cited as helpful the greater use of bulletin boards so as to bring these people together in face-to-face communities.

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yence. Encouraging Indigenous Australian students into university science and technology. Koori Centre, University of Sydney.
Since October 2002, a Working Group associated with the Institute for Teaching and Learning has been investigating relationships between academic staff members’ research and their university teaching. From my perspective, working in an environment where employment results from expert status in one’s research field, and where research feeds directly into teaching materials and methods, this did not at first seem something that required much discussion.

However, from my presentations on this at faculty level, from discussions with colleagues, and from the activities of the Working Group, the possibilities of what is now called ‘research-enhanced teaching’ have become increasingly apparent and have developed into a personal reflection on my own teaching. In this article I explain one aspect of this – how my fieldwork research methodology acts as the basis of my teaching approach. This is a different slant on the topic of research-enhanced teaching from those usually discussed.

This article does not focus so much on university strategic plans and policies that further the links between research and teaching (eg Brew & Weir, 2004): on investigating how information produced during research is used as the material of lectures and seminars (eg Colbeck, 1998); or on demonstrating how a lecturer investigates her/his students into research practices and encourages them to think of themselves as researchers (eg Marsh, 2000). Rather, this article considers the more opaque topic of the delivery of teaching. I think it is important to offer this reflection, partly to broadcast this aspect of academic work and partly to raise the issue of how teaching is done within the research-enhanced teaching area.

To understand how my fieldwork experiences influence my teaching, it is necessary to know about my students. The majority of my undergraduate teaching is with students undertaking a four year program in preparation for professional placement as music educators. These students usually intend to work in schools, in private studios, with community music groups, as liaison staff with arts organisations, or in radio and television as presenters of children’s music programs. The degree program these students complete focuses on development of reflection on pedagogy: namely, the ability to analyse how learning occurs and to devise and implement teaching strategies to address this. An important part of this is engagement with literature on learning styles, teaching strategies, cognition, and theories of pedagogy. As I explain below, activities drawn from my research experiences, when introduced into workshops situations with my students, are intended to further this aim of my undergraduate teaching.

Fieldwork

Since 1999 I have been conducting fieldwork in Bali. My research focuses on pedagogies used among Balinese musicians – how Balinese musicians teach and learn – and how these can help us understand cognitive and physical processes utilised in music transmission. The purposes of my fieldwork are numerous. Chief among them are: (i) to demonstrate that understanding of music pedagogy associated with a specific music assists in understanding that music; (ii) to investigate the cultural specificity of teaching and learning styles and their backgrounds; and (iii) in the Australian educational climate, to provide ways in which knowledge of, and the ability to implement teaching and learning strategies that resonate with those from students’ diverse backgrounds, addresses the aims of multiculturalism. To carry out this research, I began learning to play a Balinese instrument from a teacher in the village of Ubud. At first, I thought this would reveal a certain amount of objective information on his methods and expected outcomes. Fairly quickly a different agenda emerged as I began to observe not only how my teacher worked, but how I was learning in response to him and how my learning was adapting to a teaching style I had not previously encountered. My reflection on the experience emphasised that understanding teaching results from understanding learning.

A fieldwork method grew out of this experience. In this method, I am both the object of study and the person doing the study. I think of this as a form of schizophrenia – the presence of mutually contradictory activities - as it relies on my cognisant simultaneous occupying of two opposing positions. On the one hand, I am a student learning Balinese music as a beginner. When I started this learning, not only did I not know the music, I had no structured way of learning music to rely on to predict how the music should sound or how it should be interpreted. Such prediction is a significant part of music learning, and one heavily relied on in teaching situations by teachers and students alike (see Skobla, 1990). Its absence from the situation meant that I became a tabula rasa and an ideal object of study. On the other hand, as a university trained musicologist and a music educator responsible for preparing pre-service music teachers, I could draw on my understanding of pedagogy and music transmission to observe, analyse and theorise facets of what was happening, including my teacher’s methods; my learning, and how we both identified and solved problems in our own culturally influenced ways.

This manner of researching led to two sets of publications: one on the methods of Balinese teachers and how these methods could benefit Western ways of teaching music (eg Dunbar-Hall, 2002); and one about learning music in cross-cultural settings (eg Dunbar-Hall 2003). Other publications combined the two fields and used the voices of my teacher and myself (eg Dunbar-Hall & Adnyana, 2004). What became evident through reflection on my fieldwork was that this lived research experience increasingly became a way to help my students think about teaching.

Encouraging teachers to think as learners and learners to think as teachers

My lecturing is based on the premise that learning to teach relies on knowing how learning occurs. As my fieldwork research method provides a way of experiencing learning to understand teaching, I use it with my students. For example, in the four-step model shown in Figure 1, students move from experience as learners through stages of reflection to positions as teachers. For students, this separates learning and teaching as observable components of pedagogy, while allowing relationships between them to be investigated. It provides a conceptual framework in which practical activity leads to and helps create theoretical modelling, and makes clear that becoming a teacher relies on having been (and continuing to be) a learner. For students, the model becomes a template applicable to a range of music teaching contexts. Based on and exemplifying research, it demonstrates how one’s personal experience is a valid topic of research. This introduces students to a range of research methods and styles, among them autoethnography, which Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) define as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research’, and phenomenological research, which van Manen (2003, p. 5) explains as linked to personal experience: ‘to do research is always to question the way we experience the world.’
Figure 1 exemplifies how I work with students. It shows the stages they progress through to transcribe a piece of Balinese music (writing music in notation after listening to it). This is an activity that underpins much music education, and links listening to music to the ability to represent it in written symbols. Even though it is not the primary aim of the activity, the setting up of the activity raises musical issues that students will need to confront in their own teaching. There are also ideological issues arising from writing down music that would not exist in notated form in its original cultural context, and why transcription of music (usually considered the domain of ethnomusicologist) is being undertaken in a seminar about music learning and teaching.

Encouraged to discuss these issues, students experienced the initial ambiguity of a learning situation and the need for learners to negotiate the possible intentions of a teacher in the choice and implementation of an activity.

As with the original fieldwork model, this relies on students occupying the positions of student and teacher, and being called on to reflect on each one separately. The process from learning to teaching is through reflection and theorising, and these middle steps are the most important for teacher preparation as they provide justifications for the design and delivery of learning activities. Because this model includes a range of positions, I think of it as a form of value added teaching. It teaches methods for music transcription and raises issues that surround the act of transcription; it helps define learning and teaching through types of subjectivities; it raises questions, both about music and about how music is studied. Pedagogy, experienced first as a learner and then as a teacher, provides a model for students’ own planning of teaching; it offers students an example of how they can develop as researchers of their own experiences; and it demonstrates the symbiosis between learning and teaching, reinforcing that teaching is an activity that focuses on learning.

The idea of staff members as learners and the benefits of this to their work is not novel. For example, in a 2005 issue of Synergy, Patty Kamvounias (Faculty of Economics and Business) commented on her own student status in a Graduate Diploma in Higher Education program and how this helped her, as a teacher, understand the problems her students might be facing:

1. . . . found it interesting from the point of view of being a student in a new discipline and that made me more aware of perhaps how our own students feel when they’re exposed to our disciplines. It’s not easy. (Kamvounias et al, 2005: p15).

This echoes reactions from my students to being placed in the position of learners to allow reflection on their development as a teacher. As one of them commented: ‘I hadn’t thought about it before. This encourages further investigation of the implications of teachers as learners, and learners as teachers, as a focus of research-enhanced teaching.

Figure 1: Four stage process for encouraging reflection on learning and teaching

1. Students as learners
Students transcribe a piece of music under the guidance of the lecturer.

2. Students as thinkers about learning
Students reflect on the activity from a learner’s position, focusing on (1) problems experienced and how these were solved, and (2) how processes for completing the task had been devised.

3. Students as thinkers about teaching
By reflecting on and discussing their work in Step 2, students theorise about how learning occurs and how teaching could be planned.

4. Students as teachers
In their own teaching, students apply their understanding of learning to achieve effective teaching.

References

Associate Professor Peter Dunbar-Hall is currently Associate Dean (Graduate Studies) at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. He has a number of publications on music pedagogy. Email: p.dunbar-hall@usyd.edu.au

This pedagogy shows students how they can develop as researchers of their own experiences.
Supporting Students with Disabilities

Hilal Elsaker & Christine Kumar (ITL)

Supporting the needs of students with disabilities is essential when trying to maintain an inclusive teaching and learning environment. Adjustments to your teaching strategies and extra considerations may be needed to accommodate the learning needs of these students. Given the range of possible disabilities, it is understandable that many staff may not know where to begin. Below, the ITL provides answers to some frequently asked questions that may guide you:

How can I ensure my teaching strategies are appropriate for disabled students?

The University of Sydney’s Disability Services (part of Student Services) provides a wealth of information designed specifically for staff about ways of accommodating disabled students in classrooms. They provide specific teaching strategies for teachers of students with hearing, vision, speech, physical, learning or mental disabilities and impairments: http://www.usyd.edu.au/stuserv/disability/staff.shtml

What services can I direct students to?

The first point of contact for students - as for staff - should be Disability Services: Ensure your students are registered with this service.

Fisher Library Disability Services provides technological support for disabled students in its assistive technology rooms. The library can also assist students with photocopying and retrieving books. For more information, see http://www.library.usyd.edu.au/libraries/fisher/disability.html

What other useful resources can I access?

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (AD Conce) provides information about inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies, and support services, for people with disabilities in higher education. http://www.adcet.edu.au/

Creating Accessible Teaching and Support (CATS) provides resources and practical strategies to assist teachers in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Also includes information about upcoming conferences. http://www.adcet.edu.au/cats/

Reasonable Accommodations: Strategies for Teaching University Students with Disabilities. A guide endorsed by the University of Sydney, the Australian National University, and other major universities. http://www.anu.edu.au/disabilities/resources_for_staff/reasonable_accommodations.php

Who can I talk to about these issues?

Contact Mary Teague of the University’s Disability Services (m.teague@usyd.edu.au) or Annetta Cairnduff of Equity Support Services (acairnduff@usyd.edu.au).

2007 Teaching Awards

We offer our congratulations to members of the university community who were successful in receiving 2007 Carrick Awards for Australian University Teaching. Alongside the University’s recent success in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, these awards continue to showcase the excellent teaching practice. Two categories of Carrick awards have been announced so far: (i) Citations for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning and (ii) Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning.

Citations for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning

Mr John Baguley, Dr Christine Hawke, Dr Susan Mathew, Ms Melanie Robson, Mr Frederico Costa

For the development of authentic, varied and rigorous assessment procedures that foster independent and lifelong learning in veterinary professional environments

Dr Janette Bobis

For empowering students to learn and to teach mathematics with understanding through inspirational teaching approaches and innovative embedded assessment practices

Dr Lyn Carson

For sustained, innovative approaches to teaching that create democratic environments, within and beyond the university, which spark students’ democratic imagination and inspire lifelong, active citizenship

Mrs Joanne Elliot, Professor David Handelsman

For creating an unique opportunity for undergraduate students to experience genuine biomedical research in a state-of-the-art research environment with world class researchers

Ms Jacqueline Hicks

For specialised expertise in supporting the diverse learning and information literacy needs of students across a range of subject areas and candidate levels

Ms Jill Kelton, Ms Nadia Bradley

Enhancing the overall student experience by building a lasting sense of belonging and engagement through a Faculty-based postgraduate peer mentoring program

Dr Donna O’Connor

For specialist expertise in the unique design and outstanding implementation of an innovative MEd course resulting in a diverse learning environment that promotes student engagement

Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning

Educational Partnerships and Collaborations with Other Organisations

Associate Professor Scott Kable, Dr Simon Barrie, Dr Adrian George and Mr Justin Read

Advancing Chemistry by Enhancing Learning in the Laboratory (ACELL)

Below, Simon Barrie – a member of the team – writes on the origins, purpose and outcomes of the ACELL project.

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Universities are working on this, yet in the main we have a situation of mostly non-Indigenous supervisors adopting western scientific and cultural approaches to supervision. This takes little account of cultural differences, other values, traditional knowledges, Indigenous research methodologies or even the personal reality of the student.

Even more significantly, supervision approaches and processes may take no account of greater work-life pressures on Indigenous postgraduate students and staff, who are predominantly academics who are women with wide educational and socio-cultural support responsibilities.

Poor recognition of educational development
Indigenous staff undertake considerable cultural and educational work outside the range of academic promotional service criteria. While this is lauded by universities, it is neglected by them in work load policy calculations and promotions. As well, these multiple contributions may enhance professional satisfaction, but impede academic career development.

Commitments can include: working to achieve much needed Indigenous educational innovation within the walls of Western academic institutions; serving in community and government educational support organisations of direct relevance to tertiary educational reform; direct contributions to new university policy on Indigenous educational innovation and Indigenous staff professional development; mentoring many Indigenous undergraduate students with major life, study and health challenges; providing an Indigenous presence at the university in its many functions and graduations; assessing numerous Indigenous student educational funding and scholarship programs; supporting Indigenous students in their own mentoring of other secondary and tertiary year Indigenous students; and, outreach to enhance Indigenous student enrolments.

Personal pathway
My pathway to examining the issues of Indigenous higher degree research students at the University began with my appointment to support research training and mentoring for Indigenous postgraduate research staff and students, and to undertake research within the Indigenous focus. Undertaking the University of Sydney Development Program for Research Higher Degree Supervision, conducted by the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), was a means of updating my supervision skills after time in the public and agri-environment research sectors, and, of evaluating my role in postgraduate support for Indigenous students.

The course was to help with several priority issues:

• the need for the University to encourage an increase in the number of Indigenous postgraduate research students enrolling in and completing these degrees;
• the need to mentor and support postgraduate students in their own research, writing and supervision relationships.

Initial personal reflections
A key element of the Supervision Program was a reflective case study. In my case I chose to develop questions and a scholarly approach to the issue of whether postgraduate supervision and research culture development should be different for Indigenous students. Do we need better and more non-traditional supervision strategies or not? To evaluate this question I examined my academic experiences of being a doctoral student, and of later mentoring and supervision. The ITL course necessitates introspection!
To begin in a reflective way I examined some of the concerns and contradictions that my work in a number of university contexts has raised for me:

• supporting Indigenous students undertaking higher degrees by research appeared to have a higher degree of complexity compared to non-Indigenous students;
• the need to account for the teaching impacts of a large number of Indigenous academic staff undertaking higher degrees at the same time;
• the additional pressure of community service, student mentoring, and health issues impacting on delivery of teaching and research services and professional development of Indigenous staff;
• the need to further support and develop research cultures in the University’s Indigenous teaching and research units.

Motivation can be a difficult issue for higher degree students fully employed in university teaching, consulting, small research projects, and mentoring and community roles. A lengthy time delay in completing degrees, as Hockley (1996) noted: ‘The most fundamental problem encountered by supervisors related to students who displayed inadequate motivation to pursue a PhD’ (p. 361). The reluctance of students to produce early written work was also noted: ‘…these kinds of blockages appear to have arisen out of a lack of intellectual confidence’ (p. 361) and I agree. Supervisors need to work harder to promote confidence in individual researchers developing their voice. Research journals are just one tool that can assist new researchers in gaining confidence in developing their perspectives.

In Australia the majority of Indigenous academic staff within Indigenous centres have a poorer research training background than their non-Indigenous peers. This extends to the important field of support for Indigenous research training (IHEAC, 2006). Some may have a bachelor or masters degree but less research experience. This poses challenges for academic staff trying to complete doctorates as part of their professional development in line with University policies.

Supervision and development of a stronger research culture
As part of my reflective participation in the Postgraduate Supervision Development Program it became apparent that a number of Indigenous postgraduate students (who were also staff) had not progressed well in their thesis work at many academic institutions. This could be influenced by the high demand for personal mentoring support by their Indigenous students. In addition, there may be considerable extended family support demands and significant health issues which are more prevalent in Indigenous populations at a chronic level. There appear to be a collage of issues impeding research progress, as suggested by Ives and Rowley (2005), including time commitments with teaching and family, motivation, and supervision support.

Research candidates without children and those without chronic illnesses tended to progress more quickly with their research, a not unusual finding for academic women in particular (Dewsbury, 2004). One senior Indigenous academic suggested to me that the key barrier to research achievement was ‘just tiredness’ brought on by many of the above factors. The high levels of continuous fatigue that women experience in particular, with their concurrent roles of teacher, researcher, community educator, extended family nurturer, and mentor to Indigenous undergraduate students (who sometimes have considerate problems of their own), take their toll. Yet this is largely unaccounted for in academic human resources policies and professional development support across universities.

In research training, the University of Sydney has provided Indigenous staff with the opportunity to attend national and specially developed research methods training workshops and seminars. Koori Centre Indigenous academic staff have an opportunity to take Special Studies Program (SSP) leave in order to complete a large component of their theses. Those supports in place have allowed two doctorates to be awarded over the past decade and recent submissions for examination of a doctorate and a research masters (Honours). Five further research theses are well underway. So it is a very encouraging prospect for the University of Sydney that there will be a number of hard won postgraduate degrees awarded over the next few years to Koori Centre staff.

Barriers to research achievement
Since working with Indigenous staff as an equity group I am convinced that the criteria for good policy and practice in supervision should embrace the following:

• focus on the development of confidence in the research process;
• encouragement to develop one’s own voice;
• consideration of the applicability of Indigenous research theory and methodological options;
• facilitation of breaks from the thesis, for work and family issues, and development of a non-threatening process for return to the thesis on a positive trajectory;
• acknowledgement of the constant pressure of time allocation for family, students and community for Indigenous women in particular (Daly & Davison, 2010).

I found the work of Ives and Rowley (2005) useful in affirming the most productive attributes of supervision of successful students:

• two very active supervisors;
• choice in supervisor selection;
• a good match of student interests and expertise with that of the supervisor;
• an experienced supervisor.

In comparison, students who discontinued postgraduate study had the following in common:

• only one active supervisor;
• a moderate match with supervisor specialty;
• male supervisors were at lower levels of appointment and were only moderately experienced in supervision.

Significant numbers of Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia are in need of innovative research support which takes account of a range of cultural and epistemological essentials.

Enhancing success for Indigenous postgraduate students

Diana G. Day, Koori Centre

Synergy Issue 26
Critical reflections

My observations are that the following factors are relevant to supervisors and tertiary institutions encouraging Indigenous students and staff to undertake doctoral programs:

- while there may be university pressure to undertake doctoral studies there may also be some reluctance to do so, especially for older staff members;
- lack of research training opportunities can lead to poor motivation and conceptualisation of the overall task of a research thesis; and, an unclear understanding of the research process and what research can achieve;
- many researchers who have difficulty with progress towards a higher degree by research have immediate and constant child care responsibilities;
- poor supervision practice is not unknown: from the overly dominating and prescriptive supervisor who becomes closely involved in data generation and analysis, to the indifferent supervisor;
- postgraduate students without good supervision often seek diverse inputs to their research; this can be valuable, but students new to research can become confused by a range of often conflicting inputs from friends, colleagues and mentors as well as their supervisors;
- supervisors may need to support the student's confidence in research, in terms of both speaking and writing;
- another issue is the need to support the use of research methodologies of interest, rather than enforcing an 'alien' research methodology;
- the stress of time conflicts with teaching, research, community responsibilities, and mentoring undergraduate students can be significant;
- a number of Indigenous postgraduate students require further training in academic writing skills;
- some students are reluctant to access the plethora of mainstream institutional research support programs.

These personal reflections indicate to me that support for an Indigenous postgraduate student does often need to be different. The work of DiGregorio et al (2000) and Farrington et al (1999) at the University of Sydney shows that small projects combining groups of early career researchers have merit as an introduction to the research process. Yet this work takes considerable time and comes as a significant investment that universities are reluctant to provide. An Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Working Group's perspective suggests that Indigenous academics remain on the riverbank, the symbolic home for disenfranchised Aboriginal peoples (IHEAC Working Group, 2005).

Culture

My diverse academic roles and my case review demonstrate to me that multiple cultural isolations constitute environmental factors more significant to the doctoral research experience of many, but not all, Indigenous postgraduate students. These isolations include the physical separation of Indigenous centres from mainstream university staff on many campuses, unfamiliarity with and non-inclusion in mainstream postgraduate research training programs, as well as poorly supported networking and mentoring programs within academic. Further issues include: problematic supervisor relationships where students are reluctant to speak out; available time to promote continuity with the research and complete the thesis; few mentors to talk with about the thesis and supervision relationship; and, difficulty with the research methodology chosen. Certainly some of these issues are experienced by postgraduate researchers in general.

Community obligations, university cultural activities, work on unpaid educational community boards, and participation in private philanthropy/state government education initiatives for Indigenous researchers, all take significant academic and personal time commitment. For these women (in the main), their social, cultural and academic lives are highly integrated with the communities they serve as educators.

New approach to the PhD

Even today Indigenous academics often engage in postgraduate research programs that are difficult to pursue with the additional academic, teaching, administration and community responsibilities that surround them. As my external reviewer, a supervisor and mentor of Indigenous postgraduate students, has said regarding student withdrawal from candidature:

"Part of my role was to support Indigenous staff gain higher degrees. Only one staff member is currently enrolled and a number have let their enrolments lapse, despite initial meetings where we came up with feasible research topics. The pressures on these staff are enormous."

Often a postgraduate research project ends up piecemeal, fitted around work commitments. One way to view this would be that parcels of work could be completed in the way of traditional scientific methods applied to social or physical science research. This appears to tie in to Brew's (2001) characterization of a more linear and compartmentalised research approach which he termed a 'domino variation'.

The problem with an atomised approach to the traditional formulaic doctorate or research masters degree, is that there may be little opportunity for an Indigenous researcher to explore Indigenous research methodologies. This may be reinforced by having non-Indigenous supervisors. The very few Indigenous supervisors are usually heavily committed, as my external reviewer suggests:

"She... has little time for active supervision due to over commitment and the pressure of having the only available Indigenous supervisor.

Ripple impacts of poor health

It would appear that in some university Indigenous teaching and research units, poor health issues can create wider negative impacts. Such impacts include other Indigenous staff having to undertake additional teaching loads and also curtailting their own work on higher degree research due to extra teaching or temporary promotion to acting roles. This serves to reduce the postgraduate progress of all staff involved. My reviewer also gave her experience:

"With my Indigenous students health is a huge issue. One had triple bypass surgery in the first few months of candidature last year and I have just visited my most active and enthusiastic student in hospital after emergency surgery. Both are women in their early forties with huge family and community responsibilities."

Recurrent illness in the university environment can lead to:

- reluctance to enrol in higher degrees given the long term time commitment;
- slower progress with the research, especially the writing;
- temporary withdrawal from a thesis; or
- permanent withdrawal.

These issues may be compounded with poor supervision practice by uninterested supervisors, or even by popular supervisors who have so many students they find it difficult to provide additional support. Non-Indigenous supervisors can be unaware of the range of research training needs of some Indigenous postgraduate students and may remain unclear of student concerns, especially when some Indigenous students may be reluctant to discuss them.

Advancing successful postgraduate outcomes

Different support

Significant numbers of Indigenous postgraduate students need further and different research support. This may vary between regional and metropolitan university contexts and with the fields of research. Some universities are attempting this through providing research support such as at the University of Sydney and Southern Cross University; through an Indigenous postgraduate training week held at the University of Melbourne; and through Indigenous theory and practice training for Indigenous researchers for example..."
Supervision of many Indigenous postgraduate students, who often have full academic loads of their own, must be dedicated and active. The supervision may need to account for intellectual and administrative demands; diverse research training programs (from handling qualitative data to academic thesis writing); extended community obligations; and time out. More intensive support for a quick trajectory back to postgraduate studies is an overlooked essential. Exposure of early career Indigenous researchers to successful Indigenous academics is fundamental to an enhanced richness of diversity, of both Indigenous researchers and of the research agenda.

Conclusions
My case study reflections suggest that Indigenous postgraduate supervision issues have specific themes and certain differences of practice from non-Indigenous models. Many Indigenous academic staff and postgraduate students are from diverse life and learning experiences. They come from a range of regional, remote and urban communities and may need additional research training and supervision support. This is resource and time intensive, but such investments can result in wins not only for the successful students but in the development of new intellectual traditions, research methodologies and teaching and learning practices.

Universities are encouraged to further invest in Indigenous student postgraduate research training and career development by enabling those involved to contribute to the design of policy and program development. Universities must also recognise the dire impact of reduced health status or chronic illnesses in Indigenous communities and that such health issues do not escape Indigenous university staff – or students and their extended families. Recurrent health issues can have direct and significant impacts on the academic development of Indigenous academic staff.

Indigenous staff also make significant, often unknown and unmeasured contributions to the wellbeing of Indigenous students and to Indigenous community education. Staff should be encouraged to codify such contributions into performance and promotional assessments. Non-Indigenous supervisors of Indigenous students are encouraged to learn more about Australian Indigenous cultural and educational issues as part of their supervisory relationships.


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References


profile

Chris Roberts, Faculty of Medicine

Travelling an atypical pathway into academic life has characterised a surprising number of teaching colleagues profiled in Synergy. Chris Roberts, musing on ‘just how much I hated the first two years at the university’, not only had ‘no real realising of being an academic’ but was completely put off by his negative experience at medical school in the UK. Focussed on job prospects, he had graduated, completed his vocational training and gone into general practice. It was only when somebody asked him: ‘Would you like to teach some medical students?’ that he could re-engage with a career of teaching and learning that had proven so dispiriting in his student days.

Influenced by the works of Roger Neighbour, Chris moved from teaching students to tutoring in professional development programs for GPs. These programs were traditional in format: ‘We called ourselves the “manchester bunch”,’ we turned up at didactic lectures, get some points, and consider ourselves educated’. Chris became a fully-funded GP trainer, ran the local GP training scheme and soon after, began to sense his real calling: ‘It was getting to my mid thirties and thinking: I would really like to go into the academic side of this. I decided to take a year out of practice and do a Masters. The education component of the course was the bit I enjoyed most so then I made a huge decision - for the family as well - I gave up my full time practice (earning lots and lots of money!) to pursue a career in academia.

Learning fields necessitated a change in hemisphere, after Chris applied successfully to the University of Sydney for the job of Director of what was then the Office of Teaching and Learning in Medicine. ‘Launching into his vision of how he would change the way the Graduate Medical Program (GMP) was taught, Chris was set straight by the Dean: “All very interesting, but I don’t want you to do that. I want you to work on educational research: that’s the direction we are going”.

Chris found a complex array of forces at work: little educational research; few researchers; a world famous - but ageing - medical program; and - fortuitously - ‘a group of people who had got fed up with this fossilisation in the Faculty of Medicine’. Working with them, Chris developed a new direction and set up the Centre for Innovation in Health Professional Education and Research (CIPHER) to support quality teaching, but also to become a leading health education and development group, with a focus on the three areas where we already had an international reputation: professionalism and patient safety; the scholarship of teaching and learning; and interprofessionalism.

Chris’s group recently attracted nearly $2 million dollars through the federally funded Cancer Education Project. ‘At the same time we started promoting the research culture, and got people in the Masters thinking more about getting into research. Some of these things started to show results with an increase in PhD registrations and in our Scholarship Index’. At the level of teaching and learning practice, Chris set up a learning-outcomes based mode ‘articulating both what educators think and what the faculty think about learning outcomes, written so they are actually aligned with assessment’. His work embraces other areas of health, complete with inter-disciplinary tensions. ‘We get a lot of reports about marginalisation of dental students, even verbal abuse, and this went right up to the Dean, so we developed a project where we did shared problem-based learning from which the deniers were previously excluded. We wanted to improve the experience of dental students, give them more respect’.

‘Do students actually gain from these things? We feel they do, but it is a slow process. Medicine does reasonably well in the CEQ, but we are stubbornly stuck in some areas. We’ll be looking at how our new curriculum affects CEQ results. I think the major issue is what people are expected to learn. The curriculum is supposed to be problem-based. But people still want to do disciplinary teaching. For a conservative Faculty, it was an extraordinary revolution that they stuck out a traditional six year learning course and instituted problem-based learning’. For Chris, it is interesting that ten years on, ‘the very people who were passionate for change have become stuck in their ways and do not want any tinkering with the course. The revision favours a return to traditional tenets, particularly in anatomy and assessment but is creative in the area of professional development, patient safety and clinical education.

Many interlinked challenges face Chris: How to get quality teaching and learning into the clinical contexts where most of the formative teaching and learning happens; with the patients? How to support that learning with new technologies, with interactive media? How to simulate procedures which we don’t want to practice on patients? How to get people to use ePortfolios? ‘I think we have 1000 students and 2000 teachers, many of them not actually paid. So how do we reward and develop those people, and promote the scholarship of teaching and learning so people are considered academic and innovative?’ Another tricky area - and one on which Chris has done important research of his own - is admission procedures: ‘Given the lottery conditions we operate under, how do we select the type of doctor that you and I and our families would want to see? We shouldn’t have to decide between brilliance and values - how do we ensure that non-cognitive characteristics are given equal credence in the admission procedures?’

On diversity issues, Chris’s personal commitment to equity and fairness has sometimes meant frustration: ‘Nowhere in the University has a project suffered more from the restructuring than in the Indigenous areas. As a Faculty we were about to recommend senior appointments; promote outreach, support and retention; and make everything more culturally sensitive around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues… but that didn’t happen. To keep things going the Faculty appointed a senior lecturer in Indigenous Medical Education providing support to our Indigenous students and promoting recruitment’. Encouragingly, however, all the medical schools in Australia and New Zealand have now set up standards each school has to reach in integrating its own curriculum, ensuring an institutional obligation to reach those standards in order to get accredited. Students are also a reason for optimism: ‘Students are the great impetus agents of change, and whilst we have been stuck in committees they have run some really interesting activities themselves’. Australia, says Chris, needs rural medical students to become rural doctors: ‘We try to make sure they have a positive, well-supported rural clinical experience - both metropolitan and international in education, with 45 to 60 international students, mostly from Canada - but also from Europe, South East Asia, all over’.

Throughout our chat, Chris articulated a view of stereotyping which extended beyond ethnic or cultural difference. His comments made it clear that disciplinary and professional boundaries can be equally difficult to surmount. Speaking, for example, of his work on interprofessionalism - ‘the idea of doctors and nurses in the allied health professions all working together as a team’ - he noted that it is sometimes difficult to overcome the negative stereotypes held by various groups. Chris and his colleagues (Jill Thistlethwaite and Charlotte Rees, respectively) are currently involved in innovative research projects which could impact directly on how medical education happens. ‘In traditional medical education there is a triad of people - the clinical tutor, the patient and the student - and the typical indication is that the patient is passive and the teacher transmits knowledge and principles. But we are looking at it as a three way dialogue where the student can learn more from the patients. Patients know how they would like to be treated and how they want to participate, and if these are respected they are more likely to engage in the teaching and not be treated as a sort of convenient body. We’ve also been looking at research on the students themselves, and whether, or how they are happy with their bodies being used for medical education. As you can imagine, there are some cross cultural issues in this area.’

‘We are very interested in collaborations within and beyond the University, to learn from each discipline, and approach common problems of teaching and learning. We’d like to see our members in earnest discussions with other academics around projects of mutual interest’.

A/Professor Chris Roberts is Associate Dean (Education) in the Faculty of Medicine, and Director of the Faculty’s Centre for Innovation in Professional Health Education and Research (CIPHER). Chris can be contacted at: croberts@med.usyd.edu.au
The significance of culture and context in entrepreneurial learning and teaching

Richard G. Seymour, Faculty of Economics and Business

People reading my business card for the first time have a range of responses. The title ‘Sesquicentennial Lecturer in International Entrepreneurship’ can evoke a smile, or a raise of the eyebrows, but typically it’s a squat. Holding my card as far away from their squinting eyes as possible, people generally ask one or more of the following questions: (i) ‘What the hell is that?’ or (ii) ‘Can you really teach it?’ or (iii) ‘Why’s it different to normal business?’

As has been mentioned, for functional disciplines such as accounting or finance there is generally a well-defined skill set. Entrepreneurship cannot be associated with such a well-defined skill set, and furthermore, requires students to be richly embedded in the context of opportunity and creativity. An apprenticeship or organised programme of ‘learning by doing’ may therefore be the most appropriate means of teaching and learning about entrepreneurial activity. We propose two frameworks for facilitating such ‘learning by doing’: Problem-Based Learning and Authentic Activities.

This paper is organised as follows: I will quickly introduce the relatively new teaching and learning activities at the Faculty of Business & Economics. The concept of entrepreneurial activity and the ‘philosophy’ guiding our efforts are then presented. This is followed by a discussion of the significance of our aligning entrepreneurship teaching, research and outreach activities. The paper concludes with examples of our involvement in remote Indigenous entrepreneurship, and the extraordinary learning that can result.

Entrepreneurship & the Faculty of Economics & Business

There is a common perception that entrepreneurship is not something that can be taught, as it is as much a mindset as a set of activities or skills. Academics and practitioners alike have debated whether entrepreneurs are born or made, whether ‘scholarship’ or ‘street-smarts’ are important, and whether the realm of discovery and creativity can ever be ‘taught’. Further complicating debates is the fact that entrepreneurship is not a collection of functional knowledge such as finance or accounting can be. It is, rather, an amalgamation of general business skills, insights and projects.

Despite these debates, there are many organisations actively engaging with entrepreneurship and innovation at The University of Sydney, including the Warren Centre, Australian Centre for Innovation in the Faculty of Engineering, ATP Innovations, Cooperative Research Centres, and Sydneywide (previously the Business Liaison Office). The Faculty of Economics and Business is a relatively late entrant (formally) into the ‘space’. We have no interest in ownership of intellectual property nor have any wish to take equity stakes in ventures. We aim to become a leading centre of excellence for the research, teaching and practice of entrepreneurial management and innovation.

Our students include those wishing to undertake entrepreneurial ventures (a small minority); those wishing to work in the entrepreneurial community as advisors, analysts, brokers etc. (a majority); and those wishing to commercialise their research (the balance). Reflecting this, around one quarter of our students are studying outside the Faculty, and 20 received Commercialisation Training Scheme scholarships as they complete their PhD studies at the University.

Returning to the original question…

What is Entrepreneurship?

The study of entrepreneurship has a long tradition, with literature arising from diverse fields including sociology, anthropol-ogy, economics and management. It is not surprising that with such a diverse lineage, there is no widely accepted definition of the term ‘entrepreneurship’. Adding to centuries of tradition, I propose an additional definition. Entrepreneurial Activity is:

… the enterprising human action in pursuit of the generation of value, through the creation or expansion of economic activity, by identifying opportunities and exploiting new products, processes or markets (Seymour & Ahmad, forthcoming). Picture an entrepreneur as having ‘two-faces’ (see Figure 1) so they can look forward and backward (as did the Roman god of doorways, Janus). These two faces are simultaneously looking back to their finances, land and inventions (and combining these resources in new creative ways) and forward to markets (and recognizing new or untapped opportunities). The entrepreneur, Janus-like, perceives and recognises a fit between their creative resources and opportunity. In engaging their perceptions, entrepreneurs play the social role of projectors (Collins, Moore & Ulinwalla, 1964; Defib, 1887/2001). In doing so, and if proven to be right in their foresight and ‘projecting’, the entrepreneur creates value (see figure 1).

It is important to note that this value created need not just be economic value, as it can also include social and cultural value. For example, an artist may primarily create cultural value through their entrepreneurial actions, or an academic may prioritise the significance of social value over the economic. Nor must this value be ‘captured’ by the entrepreneur alone. The entrepreneur can share this value with others, whether they be society, customers, the community, or other groups.

This raises the concept ‘social entrepreneurship’. The term has rapidly become a buzzword in the development and not-for-profit sectors. Ashoka, a leading organisation celebrating social entrepreneurship achievement, defines social entrepreneurship as those people ‘with innovative solutions to society’s most pressing social problems… Rather than leaving societal needs to the government or business sectors, social entrepreneurs find what is not working and solve the problem by changing the system, spreading the solution, and persuading entire societies to take new leaps’ (www.ashoka.org). In contrast to traditional entrepreneurship – where the value that is created goes mostly to owners, employees and/or shareholders - in social entrepreneurship, the value created is more broadly spread through the community. The social entrepreneur creates value that is captured by others.

Certainly, we are not all destined to be successful entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, co-founder and CEO of Apple Inc; and hopefully we will avoid the Australian media (think Brad Cooper of FAI Insurance - now in gaol). Many will not have thought of Muhammad Yunus of the Grameen Bank as a social entrepreneur, though entrepreneur he is indeed (with Business Week considering him in the top 30 entrepreneurs of all time - see http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/jun2007/sb20070627_564139.htm).

Authentic Problem-Based Learning

Returning to the original question: How can one teach entrepreneurship? Criticisms have been directed at business schools for failing to address the issues of creativity and entrepreneurship (Vinten, 2000); for failing to impart the ‘soft’ skills associated with management (Mintel, 2004); and for failing to impart useful skills, prepare leaders and develop norms of ethical behaviour (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). In the Faculty of Economics and Business, the pedagogical sub-titles of learning and teaching entrepreneurship aims to address some of these broader criticisms as well as specifically addressing the question of entrepreneurship education.

As has been mentioned, for functional disciplines such as accounting or finance there is generally a well-defined skill set. Entrepreneurship cannot be associated with such a well-defined skill set, and furthermore, requires students to be richly embedded in the context of opportunity and creativity. An apprenticeship or organised programme of ‘learning by doing’ may therefore be the most appropriate means of teaching and learning about entrepreneurial activity. We propose two frameworks for facilitating such ‘learning by doing’: Problem-Based Learning and Authentic Activities.

Problem-Based Learning was first adopted formally in the 1960s and 1970s by schools of medicine in the United States, Canada and Australia (Biggs, 2003; Boud & Feletti, 1997). It is not a method, but rather a total approach to teaching that can be implemented in a single unit of study, or across an entire course (Biggs, 2003; Engle, 1997). Similarly, thinking that there can be no learning without action, and no action without learning (McLaughlin, 2004; Revans, 1998), Authentic Activities are those based on real-world problems or projects that define the problems, tasks and sub-tasks required before they are able to complete the activity. The tasks are complex, with multiple paths to solution, and require collaboration if they are...
Entrepreneurship cannot be associated with a well-defined skill set; it requires students to be richly embedded in the context of opportunity and creativity.

The importance of context and cultural issues is best made with reference to the engagement with remote Indigenous Australians and their communities. Support from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has meant that students have travelled to remote communities, and community members have travelled to Sydney. The learning has been equally shared amongst the participants, with the cultural, social and historical realities of remote regional Australia a particular insight for us. Students undertaking their own social entrepreneurship projects have combined with ongoing ‘teaching’ projects, with students winning awards at the 2006 and 2007 Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) Australia championships.

Within our entrepreneurship units of study, a typical students’ project is to develop an Information Memorandum (IM) for a real technology/idea/invention/business over the 14 weeks of study. An IM is similar to a business plan, however the document is written for an external party, typically an investor or funders. For early stage opportunities, the students are challenged to develop a business around the product and pitch to raise equity or secure a grant. For expansion-stage opportunities, the students will choose to pitch their ‘business’ to: (i) a professional investor if expansion capital is required; (ii) a banker if debt funding is required; or (iii) to the board of the company if internal funds are sufficient. For the later stage opportunities, students will typically pitch to a private equity fund, bank or corporation (depending on the strategy that they develop).

The ‘problems’ that students solve are very open-ended; they can focus on a particular market, develop the offering, improve business processes ... and so on. All of this is very much student led, with students identifying intellectual property and confidentiality agreements with the entrepreneurs/investors. In addition to the involvement of the entrepreneur, there is a lot of input from group members, and of course the judges.

We utilise a panel of judges in the second-last week of semester for a number of reasons: to ‘raise the stakes’ for students, to ensure that practical feedback is given to students prior to their submitting their final IM, and in recognition that neither the students nor the lecturers have any magic answers to the problems. Judges include a mix of experienced entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, intellectual property lawyers and advisors (amongst others). For the social entrepreneurship projects, Indigenous and community leaders participate (special thanks go to Traralgon Aboriginal College for their input and time).

The ideas/businesses that students have recently worked on include a meningococcal vaccine, sports energy drink, coconut oil from East Timor, designer seating, sheepskin teddy bears, fake landscaping rocks, an internet ‘portal’ for divorcees, pure soaps, renewable energy for lighting in the developing world, and a suite of business concepts for remote Indigenous Australians. The diversity of the projects is intentional, with some businesses clearly based on technology, creative design, or social change. We are continually seeking involvement from University researchers who can also benefit from students’ learning projects.

We seek input and involvement from across the University, whether that be by offering projects for our teaching, collaborating in research projects, or encouraging higher-degree research students to consider a Commercialisation Training Scholarship.

The challenge for these social entrepreneurship projects is to facilitate ongoing student involvement outside the classroom. We are doing this through the vehicle ‘Student Ventures’, which will complement existing student clubs such as the Young Entrepreneurs’ Society, Students in Free Enterprise; and Social Entrepreneurs. Student Ventures will enable students to undertake projects over multiple years and with multiple student participants, as well as provide protection for students with regard to their intellectual property and responsibility.

Another example of our recognition of the importance of culture and context in entrepreneurship learning and teaching is our 2008 Summer School unit ‘Growing into India – the Entrepreneurial Challenge’. The unit aims to develop students’ entrepreneurial abilities and understandings of developing economies, with a two-week intensive programme delivered in Bangalore, India. As with our other entrepreneurship units, students are challenged to ‘learn by doing’ and will be supported by the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, and industry experts, entrepreneurs, sociologists, and Government agencies.

Small Steps

This is a quick introduction to our research, teaching and outreach programmes. We’ve taken some small steps towards our aim to become a leading centre of excellence for the research, teaching and practice of entrepreneurial management and innovation. Our plans include expanding our undergraduate offerings to the University (to match the postgraduate reach); formalising the already-significant involvement of alumni, industry experts, donors, entrepreneurs and other professionals developing our engagement with Faculties across the University; launching an annual symposium and commercialisation competition in 2008; and intensifying our social entrepreneurship activities.


Illustration (Figure 1) is reproduced with the permission of Sam Newsread www.each2each.com.au

Richard Seymour is the Sesquicentennial Lecturer in International Entrepreneurship at the School of Business, Faculty of Economics and Business. Email: r.seymour@ecan.usyd.edu.au
Mentoring in the Graduate Certificate: Safety in numbers?

Christine Asmar (with Vicki Bradford, Paul Ishiguchi and Leah Lui-Chivizhe)

In early 2007, three Indigenous staff enrolled for our 2007 Graduate Certificate: Vicki Bradford (Nursing & Midwifery); Paul Ishiguchi (Rural Health - Northern Rivers); and Leah Lui-Chivizhe (Koori Centre). In planning for the mentoring which is routinely part of the ITL course, I recollected an earlier comment, from a Māori colleague of mine, that western-style one-to-one mentoring was not always appropriate for Indigenous individuals. I therefore proposed to my colleagues that we try some group mentoring, with the extra option of individual email or telephone contact, if needed. Given that I would have three mentees, time efficiency was also a factor, for me. Fortunately, they all said Yes! In Semester 2 of the course the mentoring arrangement changed: they were allocated ‘critical friends’ in other disciplines. In October I asked them to reflect on the whole mentoring experience, and here are some of those reflections.

Overall, Vicki saw the mentoring as a ‘supportive mechanism’, and Leah similarly referred to how the support ‘helped me cope with the workload’. Paul focused more on the mentor’s role as a facilitator: ‘You didn’t give me the answers but helped me access them’.

All three had definite - but noticeably different - views on how the dynamics of the group worked for them, as compared to individual mentoring relationships and interactions. Leah, fresh from an Indigenous Knowledges conference, realised that the group had given her an initial ‘space to talk about Indigenous knowledges’, and that ‘working in universities did not mean I had to teach old, unchallenged knowledge’. Leah also noted that they all transferred their in-class learning to the group context, where ‘we learnt from each other’.

Vicki, who had not previously known her two colleagues very well, had joined the group ‘with some hesitation’, since for her, ‘one-to-one was safer’. Vicki’s confidence was boosted by one-to-one interactions: ‘Where I was coming to you and getting feedback, I should have been asking the lecturer - and [so] from day one of this [second] semester, I’ve been pestering them. The mentoring helped me get to that point’.

Paul’s view was the reverse of Vicki’s in this respect: ‘Being in a group is much better for Aboriginal people because it’s safety in numbers… One-on-one can be quite good but it takes time to gain trust… In my past that trust has been betrayed’.

Although all three agreed that mentors from disciplines different to one’s own were beneficial, it was for a variety of reasons. Paul said: ‘It brings some fresh energy… Someone from the same discipline [is] more focused on what they think I should learn.’ Vicki, on the other hand, was initially unsure about not knowing who her mentor would be in semester 2, and not having any input into that. ‘That’s what happened to Aboriginal people for years - having things forced upon you’. However she could have become ‘less self-reliant, compliant, if it had been someone I was more familiar with’, hence, she learnt to value the relationship with Faculty colleagues.

Looking back on the whole experience, Leah acknowledged the ‘cultural safety net’ provided by the Indigenous grouping, but saw her professional development as ultimately better served by working beyond it, with senior academics in disciplines other than her own. Paul, on the other hand, was adamant: ‘Indigenous academics should always be offered group mentoring’. For him personally: ‘I love the idea of being mentored - it keeps me on track, keeps me motivated’. For Vicki the full benefit of mentoring - both with her peer group and later, within her Faculty - came with regular meetings: ‘I’m fairly new to the University so I am still open to change’.

Christine reflects:

In an ideal mentoring situation there is mutual learning, and I was the beneficiary of new insights thanks to Paul, Vicki and Leah. Thus, while it seems clear that group mentoring should be an option available to Indigenous staff, it also appears that having access to other options - if not initially, then later on - will support Indigenous staff in further developing, professionally. Issues such as perceived lack of consultation, and the need for building trust, seem to persist in academia (and beyond), but sharing our ‘Aboriginality’ with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues emerged as a source of strength, and of new learning.

Selected ITL Staff Highlights

Teaching and learning research continues to be a focus of ITL’s work. The highlights below indicate selected achievements in 2007.

Professional recognition

Angela Brew was elected to be a Fellow of the Society for Research into Higher Education, UK.

Keith Trigwell became Co-Chair of International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and was promoted to Lecturer. She was also invited to the role of Associate Editor for the International Journal of Academic Development.

Simon Barrie was promoted to Associate Professor.

Christine Asmar was invited to Chair the Plenary Panel on Indigenous Perspectives on Knowledge and Epistemologies at the 2007 Conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Research grants

Barrie S.C., Hughes C. & Smith C. (2007). Embedding Graduate Attributes in Curricula and Assessment (Funded by the Carrick Institute $210,000)

Barrie S.C. (2007). The use of student feedback surveys for teaching quality assurance in Australia. (Funded by DEST & the Carrick Institute $80,000)


Refereed Publications


Keynote presentations


In previous issues of Synergy we have reported on conversations with staff around topics of current interest in academia such as ethics and assessment. In this issue, with its special focus on themes of cultural diversity, we turn our attention to the voices of students, and talk with three international undergraduates about their expectations, perspectives and experiences in their first couple of years at this University.

Our participants

The students were all volunteers. Although we had originally planned to give them lunch to compensate them for their time, the fact that it was Ramadan meant that two of our group were fasting. We therefore agreed to skip lunch, and participants received Coop Bookshop vouchers, instead.

We ran a standard focus group, with the discussion taped and transcribed. The students signed and were given copies of the Information Sheets/Consent Forms we had developed. We offered them the opportunity, later, to make changes to the transcript, and one sent us a few clarifications by email. (Colleagues intending to run similar focus groups with their students are welcome to contact us for our model Consent Form.)

Raja Alsaffar is a first year international student from Saudi Arabia. She has been living in Australia for almost two years and studies Radiation Therapy at the University’s Cumberland Campus, Lidcombe.

Tai Qisheng is a third year Economics and Business student from Malaysia. As a Student Ambassador for the International Office, part of Tai’s role is to promote the University abroad, and organise events for prospective agents and government officials.

Tan Mun Lin is a Malaysian international student. She is currently in her third year of a combined Law and Commerce degree and aims to complete her Commerce degree at the end of this year.

The conversation was facilitated by Christine Asmar, with administrative support from Ifdal Elsaket, who is doing her PhD in Islamic Studies and History. Ifdal is currently working as a Research Assistant on the ITL’s Global Citizenship, Internationalisation and Inclusivity Project. We have edited the transcripts in minor ways, but only where the meaning needed to be clarified; mostly, the students’ voices speak entirely for themselves.
Christine: Before you arrived at this University, what were your overall expectations of what your learning experience would be like?

Tai: Can I just say something on that? I think for international students you have to consider that everyone comes from a different background, every student from a different nationality would be taught in a different way in a different education system. So maybe someone in America will be taught to think critically compared to students from Asia. That is what I think. Because back in Malaysia we always have a private tutor that comes to our house and teaches us everything, in fact summaries notes for exams and things like that. But if you come here, you just have to ask questions or be left out. It is a bit of … you know, it is quite different.

Christine: So in terms of whether those expectations were realised or met, or whether there is any difference between what you expected and what you found - any other comments on that?

Tai: I think Blackboard and WebCT are quite helpful in the sense that you can access your own notes and stuff, but of course there is still a gap in technology issues. And also I think that the tutors are quite helpful when you ask questions, (they) try and get the answer. But when you try and send emails to lecturers they do not reply most of the time. I am not too sure if it is … policy, or whether it is they have too many emails to reply.

Christine: Do you have any suggestions for improving the teaching and learning at this University? That’s a big question, so maybe focus it particularly on the needs of international students, if you think there are any particular issues there. In other words, what would you like to see done better, or differently, if you had a choice?

Mun: I would prefer that the instructors/lecturers pay attention to the international students. Because they are not so extrovert, so they are restricted in terms of their opinions, because - one thing - they are not so well articulated, and the other one is that our education system back home is more spoon-fed and we have just one opinion. … We should be encouraged to speak, but I guess we need the courage to. So sometimes you had better not be asking something because you just can’t make it in time. And if you ask the tutors, some tutors are just casual tutors and they might not even be sure of the topic because it is not their field yet.

Mun: I think Blackboard and WebCT are quite helpful in the sense that you can access your own notes and stuff, but of course there is still a gap in technology issues. And also I think that the tutors are quite helpful when you ask questions, (they) try and get the answer. But when you try and send emails to lecturers they do not reply most of the time. I am not too sure if it is … policy, or whether it is they have too many emails to reply.

Tai: I got the acceptance and the offer, it was just that I must take the course (later) because my Taylor’s finished in the middle of the year and Radiation Therapy starts every March. So I had five months without any study. I just asked permission for me to go to the lectures. That way was really helpful for me.

Christine: So you were not actually enrolled at that point?

Tai: Back home we get this method of learning, like memorising the facts, just stick with the facts without even thinking about it.

Tai: I don’t challenge the formula.

Tai: I cannot imagine myself getting into University and still memorising this bunch of facts. So it has changed the way of studying.

Don’t think too much about that, since this is my first degree, so definitely things were changing from, say, 11 years of primary and secondary education, and then I moved on to Taylor’s. It was a good place for me to have a good transition, from being spoon-fed and being taught everything from scratch, to starting to learn things by yourself and pro-actively learning in class. I thought it was a good experience. -Tai’s College - but it is still nothing like compared to the University, where everything is totally dependent on yourself. That is what I thought. But it is still not as difficult as I think it is, it is manageable I think.

Mun: I think it is just generally….

Mun: The expectation that was realised was actually higher than what I expected. In terms of not so much from the outcome that you learn, but more on your thinking, your mentality. It is different to what you get from back home.

Tai: Back home we get this method of learning, like memorising the facts, just stick with the facts without even thinking about it.

Tai: Don’t challenge the formula.

Tai: I cannot imagine myself getting into University and still memorising this bunch of facts. So it has changed the way of studying.

Christine: It is interesting that you have come from such different backgrounds but you have had similar experi-ences. Let’s move on to the actual learning experience. What did you find most helpful here, in terms of the teaching and learning?

Tai: Well, the University’s lecture and tutorial experience every week for one week. It is different because back home you have a teacher, and that is how you learn. And that teacher teaches you A to Z. If you don’t understand anything from the class, which includes the tutorial homework and stuff like that, you just ask the same person. But here first we ask the tutor and then if it still cannot be settled, we would want to find the lecturer. Because our timetable is different and everyone in the University is so different, sometimes the lecturer only has a very small window.

Christine: Before you arrived at this University, what were your overall expectations of what your learning experience would be like?

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Christine: Before you arrived at this University, what were your overall expectations of what your learning experience would be like?
Mun: Just on the assignment part, they just write back very brief comments on what you have done generally. When you approach the lecturer about the details he said, for example, you should have had more details and when I ask (about that), he just explains very briefly on the general assignment. I ask him how to improve my critical thinking skills and (he said) ‘You should read more’. But how?

Christine: Just one more question. What about the idea of interactions with other students or learning from other students? As you said, before you came here it was with one teacher and it was all about the teacher. I imagine all three of you would now be doing some group work, for example. So what happens, in terms of your learning, in interactions with other students? It must be a relatively new thing for you.

Raja: It is a new thing, and it is beneficial for most of the students. I believe like if we finish this particular assignment and everyone had done their assignment individually and then we get together to revise this assignment, that will improve the assignment and will add in higher marks. I think it is really important to have a group of people. On the other hand, I am really disappointed when I see these people from a particular country just get into each other without even talking with any others. Sometimes, some of them, they even reject to help you or they sometimes just give you a wrong answer, which is really what I don’t like. I am not saying everyone, but there are the helpful group, and (then) there are these people.

Christine: Do you think the teachers are aware of these things?

Raja: I don’t think so.

Tai: I am talking about group work and I am sure you are aware that Economics and Business actually have the PASS Program, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions. That is a really good program because I did one of the units last semester and I thought it was very good because, for Management Accounting, every answer is a bit subjective, so you know in groups like that, you can have different opinions. We see different people having different answers, you know, and different reasons for doing certain things, so we had local Australians, we had Koreans, we had Chinese. You know, different people, and we also talk about different countries, how people would do things there, maybe with social boundaries and things like that. That was a good way of exposing not only to the question but getting to know each other’s cultures better and it may be useful next time in the future when you do something about that. Discussion is definitely a good thing because that is voluntary. So those who really want to learn, and want to share, go there because there is only like three or four classes for that, for say 400 people, and one class is limited to 20 people. Those who really want to go there are the actual ones that can contribute, and want to contribute, in comparison to what Raja was saying about (people) giving wrong answers. I think that is something that is unacceptable, so a voluntary program would be a very good idea.

Mun: I would like to add on to that, (about the) PASS Program. I think it is very beneficial to all students but I also think it should be open to more courses and subjects, not just Economics and Business subjects, so more people can benefit.

Christine: Do you have anything like that where you are, Raja?

Raja: No, not really.

Tai: With the PASS Program it is usually only for first year subjects, so like the first Accounting, first Economics class etc. But I actually wanted to enrol more, but I couldn’t. That’s it, there is only one in the second year. Sometimes you just want to limit interaction between students because of assignment purposes and stuff like that, but again there is nothing wrong in learning more, and to discuss and come up with a better assignment than expected by the lecturer. So it would be good to have more PASS classes - if you could get that through Synergy...

Christine: It’s interesting, in the last issue of Synergy there was an article describing exactly that scheme, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions, because they are trying to publicize it across the University.

Tai: My friends are PASS tutors so it is quite easy on them as well, because they have done very well in the first year. It is actually just revising the topic again, and then they might also have Accounting, different ways of debiting and crediting, easy ways to memorize. One of the other things, you know, memorising things - they have short phrases that make it easier and the students are usually top achievers so they know how to memorise it, and different students who volunteer to go there would have achieved a certain sort of grade so they are more concerned about their studies as well.

Christine: Any other general comments? I’ve reached the end of my formal questions. Any comments about being an international student at the University of Sydney, that come to mind? Like when people back home say: ‘So, how was it?’ What would stand out?

Raja: I actually recommend to have this experience to study abroad actually, especially as I heard that Sydney University was the strongest University in Australia and in the world as well. I will be proud when I graduate from Sydney University.

Christine: What is your plan for when you go back, Raja?

Raja: After I finish my bachelor degree in Radiation Therapy I really would like to continue my studies to get my Masters in Sydney at the University. Because I really do need more information and experiences as well as getting deeper in the field so I can decide later.

Radiation therapy is one of the most needed majors in Saudi Arabia. Due to the shortage of universities and the limitation of the majors in Saudi Arabia, radiation therapy is not being taught yet at the universities although it is really wanted. Cancer became a serious illness in Saudi Arabia recently and many hospitals need therapists, so it will be advantageous for me and my country to carry out my skills in my home country after I finished. I really like my staying here in Australia and Sydney particularly, I loved this country and I like dealing with people here. It was really hard for me when I left my home in 2005 but I think it will be harder if I leave Australia and my friends.

Tai: For me, I am thinking of continuing into a Masters next year, because I feel that every University, for every country, would have its own limitations of accommodating different people, because some cultures would just not take it in and stuff like that. But you always have to look at the positive side of things, (like) being able to learn from people who have been to Cambridge, who have been to Harvard or top universities. You actually get a very good overseas experience from them, things like that which are different opinions, that is a good thing. It is actually quite popular, this University, back in Kuala Lumpur. My father’s friends ask me, ‘Where are you studying?’

And they are like ‘Wow’, because it has a different reputation, different expectations and opportunities.

Mun: With Sydney University you get greater opportunities compared to other universities, especially the Economics and Business Faculty and also the Law Faculty and not to forget to mention the Medicine Faculty. They have a really high reputation, not just in Australia but I guess abroad as well.

Christine: You have a few more years of studying, Mun, don’t you? How many more years?

Mun: Another two more years after this and then I will go back to Malaysia and do my College of Law there, and then a year of practice.

Notes:
1. Two of our participants mentioned Taylors College, a private institution popular with international students which provides foundational studies for students preparing for their entry into University proper.
2. A program found helpful by the two students in the Faculty of Economics & Business is PASS, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions scheme described by Kellie Morrison in the June 2007 issue of Synergy (25, pp 3-7).
3. On issues such as the relative importance of language barriers, compared to the overall perceived quality of students’ experiences of teaching and learning, see the ITL’s report http://itl.usyd.edu.au/diversity/itl_diversityreport.pdf

We thank Mun, Tai and Raja for giving up their time to share their thoughts with us, and we wish them all the best for their future studies and careers.
the ongoing improvement of student learning outcomes. This article focuses on the NSW Quality Teaching (QT) model, exploring its potential as an effective pedagogical tool in the Higher Education context. Examples of QT projects currently underway in the Faculty of Education and Social Work are used as exemplars to demonstrate this model’s applicability to tertiary students.

What is Quality Teaching?
Quality teaching has been a strong focus of professional development programs in school education for at least ten years. The term has appeared under various guises including (but not limited to) Authentic Pedagogy, Productive Pedagogies and the NSW Quality Teaching Framework. In a university setting such an approach supports the valuing of diversity in two distinct ways. It acknowledges students’ diverse backgrounds as a learning resource and recognises that meeting the learning needs of all students requires a range of pedagogical approaches. Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools (NSW DET, 2003) acknowledged three dimensions of the model. They are: i) intellectual quality; ii) quality learning environment; and iii) significance. Table 1 below elaborates on the elements of each dimension.

There is much in common between the aims of this pedagogical model and the set of pedagogic aspirations outlined in the University’s overarching Graduate Attributes, namely: scholarship, lifelong learning and global citizenship. For example, scholarship maps very closely to the intellectual quality dimension of the NSW QT model while global citizenship relates to the significance dimension. Furthermore, global citizenship implies an understanding and recognition of the rich diversity of our student population, seeking to support their engagement with a global community. In this sense, such a pedagogic model engages learners in teaching and learning practices that support diverse approaches and maintains a commitment to intellectual quality learning environment. But how applicable is QT to a university context?

Teaching for Diversity
One of the most potent ways to identify, acknowledge and integrate the diverse perspectives and approaches of students is to recognise their diversity as a resource, not as a deficit. Viewed thus, students’ differing gender, socio-cultural, religious or even socio-economic make-up all contribute to a vibrant intellectual culture. If, as teachers, believe this is a valid starting point, we can work to connect our students and ourselves to that diversity through a systematic and deliberate pedagogical approach. That said, these connections are not always easy and the possibility that students will rely on stereotypical understandings of difference is still a consideration.

The QT model accepts and embraces the diversity of student experience as a learning and teaching resource. This model also engages with diversity by recognising that students learn in different ways (Kolb, 1984). However, certain preconditions support a learning environment that provides a diverse range of pedagogies to meet the varying needs of all learners.

Authentic Negotiated Assessment
Authentic assessment is a key feature of the productive pedagogies model. This approach seeks to align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and argues that assessment should be more demanding on students (Hays, 2005). Alignment allows for the content and form of assessment to recognize pedagogy and the curriculum.

A feature of the ‘supercomplexity’ that Barnett (2000) identifies in contemporary tertiary teaching relates to the diversity apparent in our students’ learning needs. The challenge for tertiary educators is not to despair of this but rather develop assessment strategies that are authentic, and value this diversity. For instance, in one QT project in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, negotiated assessment approaches are being trialled where final year students negotiate the type of assessment most appropriate to their learning styles.

In a QT model, negotiated assessment can support student connectedness by allowing assessments to fit students’ needs and aspirations. Such approaches allow students to apply their own diverse skills and understandings to learning. We describe below how some of these aspirations are being pursued in the QT Project in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at this University.

Quality Teaching in Higher Education Project
This project, funded by a Faculty TIF grant, focused on how quality teaching models implemented in other educational settings might be adapted to support the enhancement of quality learning and teaching in university contexts. The continuing program is founded on the notion that the scholarship of teaching involves deliberate, ongoing, critical reflection into a teacher’s own practice (Schön, 1983). An additional feature of the QT project allowed teaching practice to be evaluated using a validated self-reflection framework (Hattie, 2003). This evaluation could then be critiqued and reviewed by colleagues with individual educators reforming their own teaching practice as a result. In the current projects, members of Faculty undertook some preliminary peer assessment based on four identified elements of the NSW QT model. These were: a) Substantive communication; b) Higher-order thinking; c) Problematic knowledge; and d) Engagement.

In Phase 2, the approach and processes were expanded to encompass all interested members of the Faculty. Currently, there are more than 20 members critiquing and evaluating each other’s teaching practice using these elements.

Coming from disparate fields, we focus on interdisciplinary approaches. A colleague in School Counselling was interested in using drama-based simulations in her teaching. We used this as a starting point with her students, evaluated its effectiveness against the QT model, and obtained encouraging results. Another team in Creative Arts used innovative arts-based strategies, with student focus groups discussing their relevance for beginning teachers’ own practice. Results revealed how creative teaching can engage and empower individuals who lea...
This article describes a literacy intervention with Indigenous students in health sciences programs at Yooroang Garang (Innisfail Indigenous Health Studies), Faculty of Health Sciences, in 2006. The aim of the intervention was to improve the academic literacy of students thereby improving their educational outcomes.

**Background and Significance**

There are often significant social and education disparities between Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous students entering higher education. Literacy has been identified as a core issue at the heart of these disparities, with academic literacy remaining a challenge for many Indigenous students entering university. As Rose et al. (2004) report ‘Few Indigenous adults who are now re-entering education had successfully completed high school, and many were forced to leave with little more than primary schooling.’ This lack of formal education experience places Indigenous students at a disadvantage, as they often require extra time, support and opportunity to develop the necessary academic skills for success at tertiary study. Exacerbating this issue are standard academic pedagogies which do not meet the literacy needs of many Indigenous students who enter university with limited education experience.

Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students in undergraduate health sciences programs is one strategy that stands to make a difference to Indigenous health, both at the individual and population level. Research suggests that at an individual level, higher levels of educational attainment are associated with better health outcomes (MCERTS, 2001). In addition, Indigenous health professionals fulfill a key role in health care provision for Indigenous Australians (Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, 2002). So, improving the academic success and completion rates of Indigenous health science students is therefore critical, not only to improve educational status, but also health service provision and outcomes for Indigenous communities.

**Context**

Yooroang Garang offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Aboriginal Health and Community Development, as well as an Aboriginal Health Sciences Preparatory Program. The undergraduate degree and preparatory programs are offered in block mode whereby students alternate between a total of six, week-long intensive sessions on campus per year, separated by off-campus periods when they study and work in their communities. All students in these two programs are Indigenous Australian students. Although common practice in Indigenous tertiary education programs, research suggests that block mode programs constitute a different learning experience to that of semester based programs and present particular challenges to success (Page et al. 1999). For example, large bodies of knowledge are usually studied over a semester of face-to-face lectures and tutorials must be acquired instead in week-long on-campus blocks. Furthermore, during off-campus breaks, many students must juggle study and competing employment, family and community responsibilities, with relatively little experience of independent academic study.

The academic literacy demands of these courses include technical fields such as anatomy and physiology, and social science fields such as Indigenous studies, primary health care and professional practice. The nature of these academic literacy demands entails different but complementary patterns of academic discourse. Technical fields involve hierarchically organised bodies of empirical knowledge, while social sciences tend to involve more contingently negotiated arguments for abstract concepts (Bennett 1999) describes these as hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures, characteristic of discourses and humanities, respectively. Access to these discourses typically involves being taught to read, write and discuss them in secondary school, which few Indigenous tertiary students have had the advantage of.

**The Intervention**

The Scaffolding Academic Literacy pedagogy, developed in part at the University of Sydney (Rose et al. 2004) offered a promising alternative to existing approaches to academic literacy and standard academic teaching by incorporating the teaching of literacy skills into the social and cultural context of the courses. The learning of the field of academic texts involves reading (and writing) the language patterns in which it is expressed; this process involves a combination of a single pedagogic process. The pedagogy entails teachers guiding students through a detailed reading of texts in the curriculum, drawing attention to the organisation of texts and their language patterns, as well as the concepts, classifications, arguments and technical terminology used in the field, and then using what students have learned from reading, to write successful academic texts. The approach thus enables students to develop a more thorough understanding of the academic fields they are studying, at the same time as they learn to read and write about them.

**Implementation**

Over two semesters in an academic year at Yooroang Garang the scaffolding technique was implemented in several units of study within the Preparatory and Bachelor programs. The Scaffolding Academic Literacy strategies were delivered concurrently as core course units in the Bachelor programs, and in one unit per semester in the Preparatory program. One text was selected from the curriculum for study in each week long teaching block. Each course unit included 7.5 hours class time in each teaching block, generally in 1.5 hour lessons.

**Research Design**

All students enrolled in those units of study were exposed to the scaffolding technique used in the classroom but not all students consented to participate in the research. Out of the total enrolment, twenty five students agreed to partici- pate in the research in one year Preparatory program, eight students in the first year of the Bachelor degree course, and twelve in the second year of the Bachelor course. The following table summarises the research process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Pre-test to evaluate students’ academic skills in their writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Implement pedagogy in two units of study in each of the three courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Written assessment tasks at conclusion of semester 1 &amp; semester 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Comparative analysis of all writing samples, using assessment criteria</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The first step in the research project was a pre-test to evaluate students’ academic skills in their writing. The pre-test required students in each cohort to read a short academic text, and then write a short summary paper about the key information in the text. The tests were then evaluated using an intensive writing assessment schedule, adapted from MASUS and designed for the project, to provide precise qualitative feedback about students’ written language skills and a numerical score to indicate quantitative measures of learning gains.

The second step in the project was to implement the pedagogy in two selected units of study in each of the three courses. This was supported by a series of professional development sessions, lectures, and demonstration by a senior scaffolding academic literacy expert in a number of classes. The pedagogy was implemented consistently over two semesters by one lecturer, and in one semester only by three other lecturers. Other staff members chose not to participate in the project. This allowed a comparative analysis of results between classes where the pedagogy was more or less consistently implemented.

The third step was the collection of student academic writing samples. Writing samples included the pre-test writing task at the beginning of the year, and written assessment tasks submitted by each of the three student cohorts at the conclusion of semester one and semester two. Students were not required to complete any additional writing for the purpose of the research project. All the writing samples were written tasks set as a component of the standard assessment schedule for each unit of study.

The final step was a detailed comparative analysis of all writing samples, using the assessment criteria. For each course, writing samples were grouped in high, average and low levels of achievement. This enabled precise measurement of academic literacy improvements for each group of students.

Results of the case study were measured using a writing assessment schedule that gives precise qualitative feedback on students’ written language skills, together with a numerical score that provides quantitative measures of learning gains. This assessment schedule is similar in several respects to the MASUS test used at University of Sydney for some years (Bonanno, 2000), but is based on more recent research in education linguistics (Marin & Rose, 2003, 2007), and provides a numerical score for various aspects of text; that can be systematically compared with other scores in the student cohort, and with expected scores at different stages of education. This enables rates of literacy improvement to be objectively measured against expected rates in the educational sequence. A representative sample of student’s writing over the two semesters of the case study was analysed using this assessment schedule, giving statistical averages of learning gains.

**FINDINGS**

The results of the intervention show overall improvements in academic literacy skills over two semesters across all three student cohorts, with the most rapid improvements in the Bachelor program. In Year 1 this represented an improvement from a mean junior secondary level to matriculation level. In Year 2 the improvement was from a mean middle secondary level to a higher academic literacy standard expected at first year undergraduate study.

Improvements in the Preparatory course were slower due to two factors. The most significant was less consistency in implementation of the intervention as it was implemented in just one unit per semester, and applied in a social science oriented course unit in semester one, and then in an anatomy and physiology unit in semester two. The radical switch to an upwards trend, although scores for the science writing at the end of semester two were similar to those for social science at the end of semester one, demonstrating the potential for improvement.

These outcomes indicate that the rate of literacy improvement is directly proportional to the time spent on the Scaffolding Academic Literacy strategies in teaching blocks. Consistent literacy implementation in two units, around 60 hours face-to-face teaching in a year, resulted in a gain from junior secondary school level literacy to matriculation level, or from middle secondary to undergraduate level. This improvement rate is consistent with results for the scaffolding literacy pedagogy in schools, ‘consistently more than…double the expected rate of literacy development’. Furthermore, 20% of students made gains of more than four times the expected rate of literacy development (Culican, 2006).

**Issues of implementation**

The results of this research indicate that the use of the Scaffolding Academic Literacy strategies has had a positive impact on student literacy. The benefit could have been amplified by a more systematic and comprehensive implementation across the whole programs. However, the staff development to enable all academic staff to incorporate the techniques in every unit of study across the whole program, academic Literacy not to participate in the research, if not to confound the results of the research it was decided that only those staff committed to using the intervention would...
meet the needs of these groups of students, despite the political will to improve their educational access and outcomes. By con-trast, the pedagogy applied in this project has been specifically designed to overcome this problem, developed over almost a decade of research (Carberry, Ayan & Robb, 2005; Rose, 2005; Rose & Acredolo, 2006), and more recently in universities.

Whilst this research was conducted with Indigenous Australian students, its findings suggest that the Scaffolding Academic Literacy methodology could be valuable for teachers working with international and other students for whom English is a second language. This should be of particular consideration at universities where non-English speaking background stu-dents comprise significant proportion of the student intake. Currently the Scaffolding Academic Literacy pedagogy is also being implemented and researched in universities in China, South Africa and Latin America, in both English and Spanish.

References


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Improving student outcomes in higher education: New Zealand teachers’ views on teaching students from diverse backgrounds Nick Zepke; Linda Leach Indigenous, pre-undergraduate and international students at Central Queensland University, Australia: three cases of the dynamic tension between diversity and community Don Bower, Patrick A. Danaher, Jay Somasundram

An overview of research on student support: helping students to achieve or achieving institutional targets? Nature or nurture? Rob Smith

New imaginations of difference: on teaching, writing, and cultivating Deidra Chavis; Amanda Rodrigues Diversity, identity and belonging in e-learning communities: some theories and paradoxes Goyenchi Hughes

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Supporting cultural and religious diversity in higher education: pedagogy and beyond Emma Tomalin

Diverse futures: gender mainstreaming in higher education Louise Merley


Miranda Rose is a Project Manager at the Australian Centre for Health Promotion in the Faculty of Medicine.

Sally Farrington is Acting Head, Yooroong Garang, Faculty of Health Sciences.

David Rose is an Associate of the Faculty of Education & Social Work and the Department of Linguistics.

In any project of significant change in teacher practice, only certain practitioners will take the lead; the enthusiasm of others will take longer to develop.
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<tr>
<th>JANUARY</th>
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<th>MARCH</th>
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| **Association of American Colleges and Universities**  
Honoring the New Academy: Emerging Challenges and Evolving Roles  
23-26 January  
Washington, D.C., USA  
http://www.aacu.org/meetings/annualmeeting/index.cfm | **Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching**  
Learning by Design  
8-10 February  
University of North Carolina, Greensboro, USA  
http://www.uncg.edu/lc/lflyouth/index.html | **3rd Symposium on Social Learning Space: Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe)**  
Redesigning Universities  
17 March  
Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK  
http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/learningandteaching/aske/news.asp |
| **Teaching and Learning Forum 2008**  
Preparing for the Graduate of 2015  
30-31 January  
Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia, Australia  
Does Teaching and Learning Translate? Learning Across the U21 Network  
21-22 February  
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland  
31 March-2 April  
Technical University of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain  
http://www.guni-rmies.net/k2008/|
| **APRIL** | **MAY** | **JUNE** |
| **Native American and Indigenous Studies: Who Are We? Where Are We Going?**  
April 10-12, 2008  
An International Scholarly Meeting at the Institute of Native American Studies, University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia, USA  
5-6 May  
Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloni and the University of Piraeus  
Hildiki, Greece  
http://www.netlearnconfer.org/index.htm | **8th International Conference on Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations**  
17-20 June  
Montreal, Canada  
http://d08.cgpublisher.com/|
| **Quality in Postgraduate Research Education**  
Research Education in the New Global Environment  
17-18 April  
Adelaide, South Australia, Australia  
http://www.qgrr.edu.au/2008/ | **7th London Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) International Conference**  
SoTL Connect: The Challenge of Boundaries for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning  
15-16 May  
London, England  
http://www.city.ac.uk/csep/sotlconference/ | **Thresholds Concepts Conference**  
From theory to practice  
18-20 June  
Queen’s University, Ontario, Canada  
http://thresholdsconcepts.appsec.queensu.ca/index.php |