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Forging partnerships that support curriculum renewal

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Abstract: *There are a series of challenges facing academic developers in forging relationships with academic staff engaged in curriculum renewal. During 2003 and 2004 the School of Law at the University of Western Sydney engaged in a curriculum renewal project in partnership with the University's Educational Development Centre. The challenges identified as a result of working on this project illustrate levels of engagement within relationship development, and provide substance for further exploration. This paper argues that awareness of these challenges is a significant factor in enhancing engagement and building productive relationships between academic developers and academic staff.*

Keywords: *academic development, curriculum renewal, constructive alignment, engagement*

Introduction

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) is comprised of six large campuses stretched across an 80km arch in the western half of the Sydney metropolitan area in New South Wales, Australia. Created in 1989, from an amalgam of three former institutes of higher education (then known as 'network members'), UWS is one of the 'new' universities in Australia. That is, based as it is upon former institutes of higher education (which were traditionally teaching institutions) it has a stronger history in teaching than research, although this is changing. On the basis of student numbers UWS is also one of the largest universities in Australia. In common with other higher education sectors around the world, Australian universities are having to operate in rapidly changing, more competitive and market-driven environments. Current federal government higher education policy is forcing institutions to increase external, non-government sources of funding while, in the case of UWS, operating on significantly reduced government support. The challenge is to continue to provide quality learning experiences for our students despite the increasingly tight fiscal environments. In addition to the above pressures, UWS is scheduled to undergo an Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit in 2006. This high level, independent, quality audit of the university will result in a public report on the outcome of the audit and will provide UWS

with a guide to its standards within the Australian higher education system and its international standing.

The School of Law and the Educational Development Centre

After a decade of separate co-existence, economic rationalism and logic¹ meant that the previously 'autonomous' network members were compelled to minimise course duplication and replication of services. For the School of Law (SOL) the result was the forced amalgamation of two discrete and arguably quite different law programs in 2002. The bringing together of two sets of academics with (arguably) philosophically different perspectives on the appropriate learning outcomes for their students created some concern for participants in the law school merger. The newly 'harmonised' program while workable was not ideal for either group. Readers who have experienced significant institutional change, such as has occurred at UWS, will have an insight into the complexities and dislocation experienced by staff in such a situation. The program continued to carry the tensions of two broadly divergent views about the teaching of law. One of the key tensions to emerge was the different approaches and attitudes held by staff about student assessment methods. This tension led increasingly to inequities and complaints from both students and staff. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that the SOL maintains a multi-campus provision with its concomitant communication hurdles. As a result of emerging problems with assessment practices, a forum was convened in late 2002 by one of the Educational Development Centre (EDC) authors and the Head of the SOL whereby assessment issues were brought out into the open for examination and debate

In 2003 another of the authors, an academic within the SOL, chaired a follow-up session during a School Teaching and Research retreat. It was proposed to examine the assessment regime in the law degree in conjunction with the University's newly established graduate attributes project. In addition one of the academic developers from the Educational Development Centre facilitated a session that introduced staff to the concept of assessment mapping. As a result of these presentations the Head of the SOL encouraged an association between the SOL and the EDC to focus on curriculum renewal within the Law program. As evidence of the School's commitment to the project, the Head of the SOL encouraged an academic from within the SOL to co-lead the project with the EDC staff. The result of this encouragement was the development of a curriculum renewal project based upon the concept of "constructive alignment" (Biggs, 2003).

Project parameters

The overall aim of the project was to improve alignment within and between units of study, and to validate learning outcomes and assessment tasks. However, the underlying tensions still evident from the amalgamation would clearly impact on any attempt to review the whole program and a decision was made to restrict the project to the first year core units, four in all. This was purely a pragmatic decision to allow work to commence in an environment where larger structural change was on the University's agenda. Additionally, from the observations of the EDC staff it was evident there was not the degree of readiness on the part of many of the SOL staff to engage in a broader review process. Thus we settled on a smaller project with the view that any processes developed and insights gained could be used to inform work on later years of the Law program. The project became known as the Curriculum Assessment Mapping Project (CAMP). We also hoped that in time the outcomes of the project would be proof enough to stimulate a broader interest in further curriculum renewal work thus allowing the project to take on a life of its own within the SOL.

¹ Logical in the sense that having three versions of the same institution, by virtue of the autonomous network members, was confusing to the marketplace.

While it was recognised that a project of this kind provided an ideal opportunity to engage SOL staff in reflection on the relationships between student learning and learning design processes for teaching Law, the academic developers also foresaw that the project would provide an opportunity to develop a model, or mechanism, by which curriculum renewal projects across the entire UWS could be based. While CAMP was strategically supported by the Head of the SOL, it was made operational by fostering a learning partnership relationship with those staff most directly involved in the delivery of the program.

The project team

With the boundaries of the project having been agreed, we began the process of actively encouraging participation from SOL staff. An open invitation to participate in the project was extended to the whole of the SOL. Initially there was a flurry of interest, but by the second and third meetings, membership of the project had settled to a core group of four discipline staff who were directly involved in the teaching of the first year units and two academic developers from the Educational Development Centre. The SOL team members were dedicated and experienced academics, all of whom were keen to share expertise and learn more about curriculum renewal processes through participation in the project. All expressed a keen interest in enhancing learning experiences for their students. The objectives of the project were established as follows:

Objectives of the project

1. To examine the congruence between the project team's beliefs about teaching, their intentions and their actual classroom practice;
2. To encourage the project team to reflect and articulate their beliefs about the knowledge, skills and attributes of a student at the end of the first year of their LLB program;
3. To raise the project team's awareness of some of the literature surrounding teaching and learning in higher education;
4. To provide opportunities for the project team to understand and apply the Biggs constructive alignment model to critique the unit curricula;
5. To identify and develop tools that would facilitate the interpretation and application of the Biggs' model to their curricula; and
6. To use the results from the critique of the curricula to reformulate and redesign the four units of study.

Project processes

Meetings were held monthly and rotated between the different campus locations of the University. The team's journey through the project was an iterative one. Both academic developers and SOL staff learned with and from each other. Although objectives were set for each project meeting, these were frequently modified as our learning unfolded, and the need to address newly emerging issues became obvious. In the initial stages of the project, we planned set agendas with follow-up activities to occur between meetings. In a practical sense, this did not work. Staff workloads were such that once they left the meeting, they often found it difficult to commit additional time to project work. Thus, we reconceptualised the way these meeting times were used by expanding the time allocated originally from two hours to four or five hours, allowing for a deeper, collaborative and more engaging process. This simple change in strategy resulted in a more satisfactory process for all project team members in terms of tangible outputs. A project website was established using WebCT as a way of enhancing team communication and providing relevant resources that were easy to access. As the project progressed, the academic developers recognised the need for one-on-one

support of project team members on particular issues. Although email and telephone were primarily used for this type of support, with hindsight some of this contact could have been enhanced with face-to-face meetings.

Research has shown that academics themselves frequently hold views that are incongruous with their actions (Prosser & Trigwell 1999). Clearly, to be involved in a project where alignment or congruence was the main goal, examining how the individual participant thinks and behaves will assist personal reflection and development. In this case SOL staff considered the alignment of their classroom practices with their intentions about what they think they do in the classroom and their overarching teaching perspective, or beliefs about learning and teaching generally. To assist with this self-analysis academic staff were invited to undertake the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (Pratt & Associates, 1998). They also sought advice about their students' perceptions of the current units, and surveyed students in two of the four first year units.

Curriculum framework used in the project

Having assessed the different theoretical and practical models available for use in this project, the EDC authors decided to use the “constructive alignment” model of Biggs (2003) as a framework for the project. At early project team meetings this model was presented as a framework from which project processes could be based. All project team members saw the benefits of having a scholarly, well-developed theoretical underpinning for assistance in process and decision-making and therefore the model was adopted (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin & Prosser, 1999). Although the academic developers were familiar with the Biggs model and had read of its use throughout the literature, neither had used the model in a project such as this before. This project provided an opportunity to test the robustness of its application in a live setting.

Adopting a systems approach, Biggs maintains that a fully integrated system attuned to learning will support higher-order learning processes in students of all levels. In Biggs' view, the constructive alignment of a curriculum presents the optimal conditions for quality learning and a teaching environment where teaching and assessment practices are aligned to the aims of teaching. In Biggs “constructive alignment” model, the “construction” is the process adopted by students to deal with the learning activities and environment they find themselves in. The “alignment” refers to the consistency between learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment events so that a learner must learn what is intended by the teacher. The application of Biggs' model forces the user to examine their teaching in extremely fine detail. Adapting the Biggs' model, we constructed a mapping tool that focused on each assessment item in each of the four units of study. A copy of this mapping tool is provided in Appendix 1.

The application of this tool allowed staff to critique their individual units and led to deeper levels of understanding about the learning process. Team participants developed an extensive table of ‘ideal’ characteristics for first year LLB students. Against this list was matched the most appropriate assessment task and learning activity, and the extent to which the newly developed UWS Graduate Attributes list aligned with these ideal characteristics. The use of these mapping techniques revealed significant overlap in assessment and the narrowness of the teaching methods adopted relative to the stated learning outcomes within each unit.

Academic development within the context of the discipline

To realise the full potential of workplaces as learning environments, the academic developer as part of a project team has to structure experiences and provide guidance to academic staff in ways 'that provide access for them and press them into problem-solving (thinking and acting), collaborative and guided approaches to learning (Billet, 1999, p. 162). This view is supported by Taylor (1997) who argued that academics' knowledge in the area of teaching and learning is largely accumulated and transmitted orally by watching others and talking to their peers. Part of the role of the academic developers in this project was to encourage the academic staff to engage with a significant body of research literature and to recognise that discipline expertise does not make one an expert pedagogue. We were mindful of the need to help academic staff to continually 'make meaning' of the terms and frameworks contained in the educational literature presented to them. We focused on demystifying, unpacking and putting the language into a context that the academic could identify with and could apply in their discipline context.

Concepts associated with the "constructive alignment" model were discussed, debated and then applied to specific issues of concern within individual units of study. For example, as the assessment mapping process occurred, and each assessment task was examined in detail, it became clear that the assessment tasks did not always closely align to specific learning outcomes of the particular unit under scrutiny. Discussion would then focus on how best to specifically assess the achievement of particular outcomes, which, in turn, gave rise to debate about the alignment between the student activities engaged in throughout the semester and the learning outcomes of the unit.

Academic development and resource-based support

From the beginning of the project, resources were made available to the project team members initially by the academic developers in the form of readings, literature reviews and websites communicated early in the project by email to individual project team members. As the project progressed, resources were shared by all team members in response to particular issues and problems raised in the project meetings. What was clear, however, was that the project needed a place that would become a resource repository for the project and would facilitate learning by project members outside of regular scheduled meetings. Our solution was to establish a WebCT site for the project. The site made use of the WebCT Discussion Tool and Calendar. It provided specific resources relevant to the "constructive alignment" model of Biggs (2003) and direct links to the site of the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (Pratt & Associates, 1998). Resources were organised within the site under specific headings of conference papers, Internet sites and journal articles. Records of meetings and progress reports tabled at two School of Law teaching and research retreats about the project were also placed on the site. Although we encouraged staff to reflect on the meeting processes immediately after each meeting, this valuable activity invariably fell victim to growing pressures of teaching, research and business associated with working in an institution undergoing constant structural change. However, the site met a number of arguments for using a resource-based support approach in this way: it allowed for project team members to continue their learning beyond project meetings by making resources accessible; it provided records of meetings for those staff unable to attend on a particular day; and, in the context of the multi-campus nature of the University, with project team members based on different campuses across western Sydney, it provided a single, unitary focus for the project (NBEET, 1994).

The academic perspective

The project, conducted in the midst of turbulent times achieved a series of successful outcomes: some explicit and others implicit, but significant. The objectives associated with the development of the academics within the project team were achieved. This is best reflected by the considered feedback provided by one of the project team members:

I found the experience of CAMP to be extremely positive. The process was one in which I was able to see and hear how my colleagues thought about the fundamentals of what we do in a classroom. That sharing of perspective was fantastic but in addition we were led by experts in curriculum design and the language of teaching and learning. What we were articulating as a [relatively] novice group was able to be contextualised within the research literature in a way that most of us had not had time to do... my active participation meant that some of my ideas were taken and thought about by my colleagues; in the same way thoughts of my colleagues proved useful to me and thereby allowed me to modify and improve my practice. Given the mentoring of the EDC staff I was able to more correctly place my ideas and those of my colleagues in a framework that could be intellectually defended – not just a ‘let’s try this new idea because it is new’ approach...I was able to clarify my thinking about the literature. I was also able to see how it is necessary to take certain steps in developing a new curriculum, as opposed to simply jumping into what one might have a gut feeling is right.

These reflections suggest that the nature of the learning by the academics within the project was a deep form of learning; something that is going to be long-lasting as opposed to a temporary, ‘quick-fix’ solution. They also suggest that the academic involved has taken a view that modifications to teaching practices, to be successful, (a) need to be grounded in the relevant literature, and not simply supplied by an expert, and (b) placed in a context in which the academic will really use them and be tested against that reality.

The final objective for the project - to use the results from the critique of the curricula to reformulate and redesign the four units of study - was the practical result being aimed at by the SOL. This objective was achieved in part. The difficulties associated with implementing the redesign of the four units of study have been expressed in our comments above; however, the key impediment was fact that the University’s change processes diverted the time and attention of CAMP members from engaging in the full redevelopment process to achieving a result that was workable for them. Specifically, the team were unable to completely reformulate the curricula in the way they desired because they had been working on the proposition that changes to curricula and assessment would be implemented in class sizes of twenty to twenty-five students. Decisions taken by the SOL during the course of the project made the average class size forty-five to sixty-five students. Despite this, the project team were able to modify, and integrate between units, the assessment regimes to better work with each other and provide their first year students with a more cohesive pattern of study. This was a satisfactory conclusion for the team participants at the time of writing this paper. It reflects the fact that there is always a tension between the ideal and the real. Here the ideal occurred in the form of the learning undertaken by the project team. The reality was that many of the ideas and desires could not practically be implemented and therefore research-based, informed compromises were reached.

Conclusion

One of the key reasons that this project was able to achieve success was because of the excellent working relationship between the academics, and between the academics and the academic developers. The development of this excellent relationship was due to the fact that all project members, including the developers, were interested in discovery during the course of the project. For the SOL staff, they discovered ‘how to be better teachers’ and ‘how to design their courses for better learning’. For the academic developers, they learned ‘how to better help academics apply principles espoused by Biggs (2003) to their teaching in the SOL program’ and ‘how to manage a project in a complex and unstable environment that developed in slow iterations’. Despite working in an environment where new decisions are emerging on what seems like a daily basis, what we achieved in the end was deep learning amongst the project team staff and some fundamental changes in the way the academic staff involved in the project viewed their teaching and student learning.

All participants communicated a strong sense of satisfaction with the project. The collective learning went well beyond the narrow parameters of the project and the SOL staff are in a strong position to support ongoing work within their School. The academic developers will continue to refine the mapping tool and support processes as they work with other groups in the University. Indeed, the model proved foundational in a very challenging environment.

APPENDIX 1: CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT MAPPING TEMPLATE

Adapted from Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university*, (2nd ed). London: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Assessment No. 1																												
CRITERIA	UNIT NAME							UNIT NAME							UNIT NAME							UNIT NAME						
Type (circle selection)	P	FE	Q	E	FR	AR	GW	P	FE	Q	E	FR	AR	GW	P	FE	Q	E	FR	AR	GW	P	FE	Q	E	FR	AR	GW
² See coding below	PF	LC	PR	PJ	IS	CP	O	PF	LC	PR	PJ	IS	CP	O	PF	LC	PR	PJ	IS	CP	O	PF	LC	PR	PJ	IS	CP	O
Comments / Notes																												
Rationale provided (Y/N)	YES / NO							YES / NO							YES / NO							YES / NO						
Comments / Notes																												
Criteria provided (Y/N)	YES / NO							YES / NO							YES / NO							YES / NO						
Comments / Notes																												
Standard provided for each criteria (Y/N)	YES / NO							YES / NO							YES / NO							YES / NO						
Timing / week of semester																												
Comments / Notes																												
Weighting (%)																												
Comments / Notes																												
Length																												
Comments / Notes																												

² **P**=practical; **FE**=final exam; **Q**=quiz; **E**=essay; **FR**=field report; **AR**=article review; **GW**=group work;
PF=portfolio; **LC**=learning contract; **PR**=presentation; **PJ**=project; **IS**=independent study; **O**=other; **CP**=class participation;

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Adapted from Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university*, (2nd ed). London: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

CRITERIA	UNIT NAME				UNIT NAME				UNIT NAME				UNIT NAME			
Formative / Summative																
Comments / Notes																
Learning outcome/s (objective/s) addressed by assessment task (indicate # of learning outcome/s)																
Comments / Notes																
Level of understanding encouraged by assessment task. US = uni-structural MS = multi-structural RL = relational EA = extended abstract	US	MS	RL	EA	US	MS	RL	EA	US	MS	RL	EA	US	MS	RL	EA
Comments / Notes																
Relationship of learning outcome/s (objective/s) to assessment task	ALIGNMENT				ALIGNMENT				ALIGNMENT				ALIGNMENT			
	Full	Partial	Questioned		Full	Partial	Questioned		Full	Partial	Questioned		Full	Partial	Questioned	
Comments / Notes																
Relationship of TLA to assessment task	Full	Partial	Questioned		Full	Partial	Questioned		Full	Partial	Questioned		Full	Partial	Questioned	
Comments / Notes																

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