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Reflecting on Improving our Practice: Using Collaboration as an Approach to Enhance First Year Transition in Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with teacher collaboration in Higher Education. Specifically, it focuses on how a 'community of practice' emerged and developed during the process of enhancing first year transition for pre-service teachers. It is written from the perspective of five teacher educators and is situated within the literature of the first year in higher education and teacher collaboration. In this paper we describe how the process of conceptualising an innovative first year teacher education program, designed to facilitate student retention and engagement, increased our own engagement, motivation and teaching practice. Our experiences suggest that collaboration in Higher Education is not only beneficial to those involved in a community of practice, but also enhances student engagement and transition.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with teacher collaboration in Higher Education. Specifically, it focuses on how a "community of practice" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) emerged and developed during the process of enhancing first year transition for pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Physical and Health Education at La Trobe University, Bendigo Campus.

The community of practice came about as a consequence of a Faculty of Education based initiative to improve the delivery of the first year program of study to pre-service teachers. The project, "Connecting with education: The first year experience" (Masters, 2008) was conceptualised within a national and state context of improving the provision and delivery of pre-service teacher education (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; Victorian Parliament, Education and Training Committee, 2005) as a recognition of the relationship between quality teacher education and improved student outcomes (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2003). It was also framed within a global and national understanding of the importance of supporting and facilitating Higher Education students in their first year of study (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008).

The terms of reference for the review of La Trobe's Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Physical and Health Education, were to design and develop a program of study that would address a number of priorities considered essential for first year students in their transitional year. These included: embedding essential teaching and learning skills; addressing key Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS); integrating effective and authentic assessment; and incorporating online teaching and learning as integral to the program.

This paper is written from the perspective of five teacher educators involved in teaching first year undergraduate students. We initially situate this paper within two bodies of literature: the first year in higher education and teacher collaboration. We then describe the first year project and explain how and why it was conceptualised and implemented. Following this, we discuss how, in the process of collaboratively actioning a first year program of study to improve student engagement and transition, our own engagement, motivation and teaching practices were enhanced. Finally, we discuss some impediments to our collaborative practices and identify some future directions.

Background to the Study

Higher Educational research on first year student retention and transition has been an ongoing focus since the 1950s (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; McInnis, 2001). During the past decade research into this area has gathered momentum as Higher Educational institutions increasingly recognised the economic and social costs of failing to retain and transition future graduates (Kuh et al., 2008).

As a result of this research it is understood that concepts of engagement are critical to successful first year transition and academic persistence (Kift, 2004; Kuh, 2002; Moss, Pittaway & McCarthy, 2006; Skene, Cluett & Hogan, 2007). Accordingly, institutions of Higher Education, individual faculties, schools and programs have employed various and numerous measures to improve initial and ongoing student engagement. Kift (2008) and Krause et al. (2005) argued that successful initiatives should be broad in scope, encompass all departments within the institution and be co-ordinated at the highest level, essentially alleviating the tendency for such approaches to be piecemeal and unsustainable (Krause et al., 2005, p. 99). Such measures have characteristically taken the form of institutional, academic or social 'support' such as programs to assist students with their academic literacies, new student websites, peer tutoring and mentoring, and extra curricula activities that foster peer and staff relationships (Duff, Quinn, Johnson & Lock, 2007; White & Carr, 2005).

Given the impetus to make first year transition "everybody's business" (Kift, 2008) it is inevitable that the transition, engagement and retention discourse would impact on first year curriculum design and pedagogy. Arguably, student engagement has traditionally been a central focus of all curricula. However, the recent institutional led emphasis on transition and engagement has meant that first year curriculum designers have proactively sought to redesign first year curricula that scaffolds, supports, and mediates first year learning, pedagogy and engagement (Devereux & Wilson, 2008). Accordingly, what is taught, why and when it is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed and reported have become critical to first year pedagogy and curriculum (Yorke, 2007).

While there has been a plethora of research and literature on the First Year in Higher Education transition, pedagogy and curriculum design, this has not been the case for the relationship between teacher collaboration in Higher Education and student transition (Kluth & Straut, 2003). While Kluth and Straut, (2003, p. 237) noted that teachers' collaborative practices, also referred to as Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2004) or Communities of Practice (McDonald & Star, 2006; Wenger, et al, 2002), can improve teachers' professional development and their students' learning, it has been more common for research on collaborative practices to highlight the benefits and challenges for teaching staff rather than for student engagement. These benefits ranged from the cognitive to the psychosocial. Winn and Blanton (1997) noted that engaging in collaborative practices in pre-service teacher education had a positive impact on teacher educator's curriculum knowledge, their beliefs and assumptions, their own grounding, and their understanding of the challenges, realities and the benefits that their students will face as collaborative teaching professionals in their own classrooms. Hargreaves (1994) and Johnson (2003) identified some psychosocial benefits such as providing moral support, promoting confidence, increasing efficiency and effectiveness, reducing overload, establishing boundaries, and promoting teacher reflection, professional learning and continuous improvement. Wenger et al., (2002) suggest further benefits for those involved in communities of practice:

> Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. . . . (As they) accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. (pp. 4-5)

The literature on teacher collaboration has been more often concerned with collaborative practices in primary and secondary school contexts than with a tertiary context, although there have been exceptions to this, such as the research undertaken by Winn and Blanton (1997) and McDonald and Star (2006). Arguably, this primary and high school focus has been due to teacher collaboration being assumed to be incontrovertible practice in a primary school context and to an increasing extent in a secondary context. Collaboration is also reported to have taken place in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training (VET) sector (Mitchell, 2003), yet such research remains rare in the tertiary setting.

Even so, many of the fundamental principles of collaboration are relevant and transferrable across contexts. These include common ground based on a domain of knowledge, a *community* of people who care about that domain, and a shared *practice* that the community develops to be effective in that domain (Wenger, 1998). Collaboration also requires that participants have an understanding of 'mutual engagement', are able to generate relationships that are built on trust, and are comfortable in giving honest and constructive feedback and asking challenging questions (Weick, 1995; Wenger, 1998).

Interestingly, some challenges to teacher collaboration in Higher Education have been identified and tend to be explicated in terms of the *culture* of Higher Education. This culture is underpinned by a traditional concept of autonomy or

academic freedom (McDonald & Star, 2006). It is characterised by competition for recognition, promotion, publication, research funding, resources and students, and manifests as individualism and compartmentalism. Consequently, communication opportunities remain limited thus impacting on the sharing of personal philosophies and the establishment of viable common ground (Winn & Blanton, 1997).

Kluth and Straut (2003) called for studies that investigate the *why* and *how* of developing collaborative models in teacher education programs, and encouraged researchers to study the collaborative experiences themselves. In this paper we aim to make progress towards answering that call. We discuss how first year teacher educators worked together to develop a comprehensive program of study that would support and transition first year students and the unexpected benefits to themselves, that resulted from their collaboration.

The Common First Year Project

In 2007, as part of the Bachelor of Education review the "Connecting with Education: The First Year Experience" project (Masters, 2008) was initiated. This project was designed to offer a common first year for students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education and the Bachelor of Physical and Health Education that would be relevant to their future needs, foster student engagement and develop important academic and social skills for first year transition. The project's objectives were to:

- Promote an agreed and tangible set of essential skills for learning in the tertiary setting and for teaching apropos to the Victorian Institute of Teaching [VIT] (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2005).
- Develop two new units designed to enable pre-service teachers to address aspects of their own physical, personal and social learning.
- Establish a program of integrated assessment.
- Further embrace online teaching and learning mechanisms.

The program was designed to operate in two distinct phases, the Design Phase and the Implementation Phase (Masters, 2008).

Project Design Phase

The Design Phase began with a two day retreat in July of the previous year. Here, a team of teacher educators, educational designers and course administrators worked to develop a comprehensive design for the common first year program to be implemented in 2008. Two key features of the common first year were developed during this retreat. First, collaborative teaching teams for each semester were formed and second, comprehensive curriculum maps for both semesters of the common first year were developed.

Overall the retreat was an important stage in the development process. Despite initial reservations from some, the retreat proved to be an important springboard for development of the program. Working teams were established and participants were able to develop a shared set of understandings to proceed with the design and development of the common first year. Participants concentrated on efficient ways to deliver common content appropriately, with a direct and interlocking focus on the essential skills for graduating Victorian teachers (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2005).

Project Implementation Phase

The Implementation Phase came about after the retreat with material developed under the four key objectives (Masters, 2008).

1. *Embedding Essential Skills* - Essential Skills, or "Generic Skills", such as skills for academic writing, working in teams, analysis, information literacy and problem solving, considered critical for successful engagement and transition, were identified and their inclusion in the common first year units was mapped to ensure all were included. These generic skills were taken from the Faculty of Education and University Graduate Attributes. Currently under development, they are an intended strategic direction for La Trobe University (La Trobe University Learning and Teaching, 2004). These Essential Skills were also aligned with the VIT's Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers (Victorian Institute for Teaching, 2005).
2. *Foundations in Physical, Personal and Social Learning* - Two new foundational units were conceptualised at the retreat. "Concepts of Wellbeing" was to be implemented in first semester, and would focus on the personal health and wellbeing of the students. "Concepts of Community" was to be implemented in Semester 2, and would focus on the societal role of educators in the wider community. The transition from Concepts of Wellbeing in Semester 1 to Concepts of Community in Semester 2 was intended to reflect a progression from students "looking in" to "looking out". While relevant to their professional learning, the units were also relevant to their current personal, social and academic needs such as dealing with the psychosocial pressures of transition to university life and study (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2007).
3. *Integrated Assessment Design* - During the retreat, the semester teaching teams negotiated a complete assessment profile across the year. Together they designed complementary and sequential assessment tasks mapped across the two semesters. There were two main reasons for this activity. The first was to ensure there was a range of assessment tasks that were aligned with the generic skills. This would ensure that assessment focused on skills that had been taught and precluded the development of unrealistic expectations. The second reason was to ensure that assessment was evenly distributed to reduce academic stress caused by heavy assessment workloads.
4. *Online Learning and Teaching* - Each unit was to incorporate multi-modal forms of delivery, including online curriculum material. Two faculty educational designers, with expertise in online pedagogies, were available to provide advice and support for staff developing online teaching and learning materials. Integrating online learning and teaching across all subjects in first year was considered fundamental to the development of students' ICT skills for learning at university and their future professional needs. In addition, including a variety of learning materials was intended to assist student engagement in the subject material.

During the implementation phase there were a series of semester team meetings. The first and second semester teams met as individual groups prior to, and during, each semester to review, rewrite, and evaluate each unit, and their overall integration. The combined groups also met between semesters to ensure a smooth

handover and at the end of the year to again review, rewrite, and evaluate the year long program. While our focus was particularly on developing and implementing a program of study for the students' successful engagement and transition, our own engagement practices were enhanced. In the following section, we discuss how this came about by framing the discussion within the concept of a community of practice.

Discussion

The Retreat: Genesis of the Community of Practice

Although not its primary intention, the initial retreat played a pivotal role in fostering a community of practice. Wenger et al. (2002) argued that communities of practice shared a common structure and consisted of a unique combination of three structural elements: a domain of knowledge; a community of people and shared practice. These three elements were evident in the interactions that occurred during and following the retreat.

The retreat was organised for a specific purpose and goal, that being to produce a draft of a workable first year program of study within a tight timeframe. The retreat was a particularly conducive environment to achieving this goal. The move from the regular working environment ensured minimal distractions and interruptions, and encouraged sustained dialogue and sharing of ideas. The novel environment was conducive to engagement in new ways of thinking and interacting. Furthermore, the presence of the Academic Director, senior administrative and educational designers meant that ideas, suggestions and queries could be quickly considered and addressed. This allowed for rapid development of a workable first year program. While the program development was the stated goal of the retreat, an important by-product was a burgeoning community of practice. Essentially, the retreat provided a physical and conceptual space for sanctioned dialogue in which colleagues began working collaboratively to form sustainable communities of practice.

The domain of knowledge, identified by Wenger et al. (2002) as one of the fundamental principles underpinning the development of communities of practice, was in this instance the reconceptualisation of the first year program. It was this common ground which sanctioned the community by affirming the community's purpose and value. In line with Wenger et al. (2002), the project with its specific parameters guided what was shared, how ideas were presented, and what activities were legitimate. Furthermore, having common ground and a sense of common knowledge, inspired all involved to contribute and participate.

A community of practice is also characterised by a "community" or group of likeminded people who "interact, learn together, build relationships and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 34). As was evident in this instance, a culture of collegiality, reciprocity and trust developed. Worthwhile communication proliferated, contributions were valued, common understandings and sense of identity occurred, and stronger interpersonal relationships developed. Interestingly, while not all academic staff members involved in the common first year were present at the retreat, this sense of community was powerful enough to draw the remaining staff into the shared vision.

The third fundamental principle informing communities of practice is the development of shared practice, which generates community artefacts such as shared knowledge and resources. A community of practice is also characterised by

opportunities for learning about and reflecting on one's practice (McDonald & Star, 2006). The conceptualisation of the first year program constituted the domain of knowledge; the revised program and our shared understandings of all aspects of how it would be realised became the practice.

The following section focuses on the second principle of "community" and how it manifested as a culture of communication. We then look at how our practice was improved through our collaboration.

A Culture of Communication

The retreat was instrumental in forming a strong sense of community characterised by a culture of communication. During the planning process we were encouraged to articulate and reflect on our existing knowledge of first year pre-service teachers and their transition needs. This process aimed to develop clear, year long teaching strategies designed to make explicit content, curriculum and pedagogical knowledge. In the process we realised that we held many common beliefs and attitudes about the students, their engagement and their transition needs. While this may appear obvious, it needs to be understood within the context of the existing discourse of the university; a discourse which is not dissimilar to other intuitions of Higher Education. As noted by Winn and Blanton (1997) the higher education discourse is often about competition, individuality and silos of knowledge. While collaborative practices were not entirely foreign to members of our faculty, opportunities for constructive and critical conversations about how to improve student engagement and transition were not established practice.

As the academic year progressed, sustained and constructive conversations about how to engage the students continued. These conversations were often unscheduled and informal with colleagues seeking out opportunities to confer with academic peers across disciplines and curriculum areas. Ideas and scholarly critique were shared in a spirit of collaboration and with a common understanding of improving the first year transition.

Conversations were not limited to pedagogical knowledge and skills. More importantly, the discussions started to occur at a deeper level. For example, one of the changes to previous first year formats involved switching the second semester Language and Literacy unit with the first semester Mathematics unit. This was done to facilitate student transition into academic language and literacy practices by embedding these within the first semester units. This rearrangement prompted discussions on aspects of student engagement practices, such as the relationship between deep learning within unfamiliar contexts and student anxiety.

A further example emerged from the project's objective to embrace online teaching and learning, and to embed e-learning into the program of study. The process of undertaking this became an unexpected source of social learning through ongoing discussion of how pedagogy should direct and inform the choice of technology.
It was evident that the discourses were motivated by a strong sense of ownership *of* the entire first year program and a sense of responsibility *for* the program. There was also a sense of responsibility *to* other staff working in the first year program and a strong desire to see the project succeed. In the following section we discuss how our shared practice improved (Wenger et al., 2002).

Improving Shared Practice

Undoubtedly, our collaboration resulted in improved practice. Units that had once worked to a fair degree in isolation became attuned to the collective process of course and curriculum development. As a community we became alert to the benefits for both the students and ourselves of well structured, focused and coherent content. For example, a major consideration for the first year was not only to ensure that the Essential Skills for Victorian teachers (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2005) were embedded in the program, but to also ensure that this inclusion was made transparent for the students. During the planning process, it was decided that each unit would undertake to address one of the essential skills with a determined degree of depth. For example, the Mathematics subject chose to focus on assessment, while the Language and Literacy and Concepts of Wellbeing subjects focussed on the development of academic writing through explicit scaffolding of tasks.

All units were responsible for embedding ICT skills. Students, in the first semester ICT unit, were introduced to the types of ICT knowledge and practices they would be expected to use within the different first year subjects. For example, an Interactive Whiteboard flip chart introduced in ICT was integrated into presentation requirements in Mathematics in Semester 2. In addition, e-portfolio design, introduced in the ICT unit, was incorporated into and further developed in Concepts of Community. ICT collaboration ensured that online learning formats were consistent and this assisted student engagement and transition.

Collaboration in a Higher Educational context is hampered by a culture which favours autonomy, individuality and competition (Winn & Blanton, 1997). Some individuality and autonomy was evident in our community of practice. We discuss this in the following section as well as how institutional requirements affected our proposed practice.

Impediments to our Community of Practice

Embedding e-learning into the first year program and ensuring consistency in how students engaged with that learning was a stated goal of the project. While we had some previous experience with designing online units and working with learning management systems [LMS], the extent to, and the ways in which, e-learning was to be incorporated in the first year program differed considerably. We had previously utilised LMS essentially as an administrative tool or as an adjunct to traditional forms of content delivery. Its inclusion was considered useful, but certainly peripheral to our teaching and learning. Conceptualising e-learning and integrating it as integral to teaching and learning involved not only extensive consultation with the educational designers on how this could be achieved, but also a paradigm shift in how pedagogy could be conceptualised and delivered. The workload and cognitive demands of doing this were considerable, and impacted on our collaboration as our individual efforts were directed to understanding how to reframe and reconceptualise individual units to comply with the e-learning requirements. It is of interest to note that when under stress, our propensity was to re-silo rather than come together to collaboratively learn and work through the theoretical and pedagogical issues associated with e-learning.

Discourses of the university also impeded our proposed practice. Arguably, university infrastructure is designed to reflect traditional forms of teaching and learning such as set lecture and class times. This can and often does curtail and

discourage innovative approaches to teaching and learning such as collaborative practices and flexibility in classes and teaching arrangements. In our initial planning some units were designed to incorporate flexible delivery times such as alternating use of one, two and three hour workshops. This was considered appropriate in terms of providing opportunities for a variety of learning contexts, sustained conversations about critical content and concepts and deep engagement and learning. However, this did not always come to fruition due to an institutional need for routine and structure. Limitations of the university timetabling system meant that appropriate venues could not be booked for the requested times and days and so our practices had to be modified to comply with systemic requirements.

Any innovative practice will experience hurdles and certainly the pressure of engaging in new cognitive demands and institutional constraints did impact on our collaboration and our eventual practice. However, these hurdles are not insurmountable and our collaboration around the first year program of study will continue into the future. In the following section we discuss some possible directions that our future practice may take.

Future Directions and Conclusion

While the four goals for the original project were met to varying degrees, two particular goals have been given priority for further refinement and progression. These are embedding essential skills and incorporating e-learning. While essential skills have been incorporated into the first year units, further conversations about how these are scaffolded, taught, and assessed are required to further facilitate enhanced student transition and engagement. Ensuring that students have both a clear understanding of the importance and transferability of these skills for future professional careers and the ability to articulate this was found to influence their engagement with the course.

The initial integration of e-learning into first year units was successful given our limited previous experiences with understanding and implementing this form of teaching and learning. Student interest in the integration of e-learning both for their own learning, and for their future teaching, has encouraged us to pursue further collaboration and shared understanding about the principles and practices that underpin e-learning. How best to conceptualise and realise these into meaningful teaching and learning within each unit and across the first year program will be a future focus of our community of practice, both for our own learning and to add to the existing professional corpus of knowledge.

The community of practice that has been established for the first year program has become the model of practice encouraged at a Faculty level to be replicated across the other year levels, due to students' self-reports of increased level of student engagement and perceived benefits for staff. Subsequent year levels will be encouraged to engage in similar collaborative practices and to develop timely sequenced and integrated units of study that build upon the foundation developed in first year. Whilst there is established theoretical literature on the principles underpinning communities of practice, there is less discussion regarding the replication of communities of practice within or across sites. Critical professional dialogue will be required in order to analyse and respond to the challenges involved.

This paper has focused on how a community of practice evolved within the process of redesigning a first year program of study that would enable student

engagement and transition. The benefits of collaboration in an educational setting have been well documented in the literature reviewed. Our experiences support and deepen this literature. Our community of practice was characterised by a culture of communication where sustained and constructive conversations proliferated. We shared a common purpose, vision and commitment, our collegiality improved and our practice was enhanced. Critical to our successful collaboration was the sanctioning, support, and encouragement of the Faculty, and the assistance and guidance from educational designers. These areas of sanctioned space and educational design have not been foregrounded in previous literature.

Research on the relationship between teacher collaboration in Higher Education and enhanced student outcomes is less well documented, thus this paper is a timely addition to the professional discourse on first year student engagement and transition. Our experiences indicate that collaboration in Higher Education, not only benefits those involved in the community of practice, but also improves student outcomes. Our enhanced engagement led to a more coherent, relevant, and integrated program of study that ultimately enhanced students' engagement and effectively their transition.

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