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Developing the Synergy between University and Industry-based Nursing Courses: Lessons in Engagement

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Abstract

On the surface the process of engagement seems functional, however, if the engagement process does not take into account people dynamics and the effects of the wider social, organisational and cultural context, multiple tensions may occur. This paper shares the story of the tensions related to culture, relationships, communication and the impact of change in bringing a University-Community project to its completion. The scholarship of engagement revealed the nature of this complex process and uncovered the need for a richer understanding of the people involved and their mindset.

The challenges and opportunities encountered in the engagement process will be identified and the “how to” and “how not to” manage the process and the consideration of the people will be discussed.

Introduction

In response to health industry needs and to the demands of the University engagement, a postgraduate academic teaching team engaged in discussion and review of hospital based graduate nurse programs that were on offer in six hospitals in the state. Graduate nurse programs in Australia, are usually twelve-month employee bound arrangements which facilitate the transition of newly graduated registered nurses into the role of confident nurses. The history of such hospital based programs has not seen the conferment of academic credit to these workplace integrated learning courses, despite recent moves to use workplace learning to increase the employability of students. As such, the courses, though practical in content and based in competency attainment, did not have a formal assessment and appraisal components in line with higher degree assessment and conferring of award policies.

This challenge of university community engagement with the health sector in order to develop an industry-focused course which could be translated to academic credit and award presented the academic teaching team with the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to ‘community engagement’ in the real sense. For the purposes of this paper, ‘engagement’ is used as a generic inclusive term to describe the broad range of interactions between people. It includes a variety of approaches such as consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, to empower action in formal partnerships. The word ‘community’ is also a very broad term used to define groups of people and encompasses stakeholders and interest groups involved in the delivery of healthcare, defined by geographic location and professional identity. The linking of the term ‘community’ to ‘engagement’ serves to broaden the scope shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is given to the diversity that exists within any community [1]. This engagement alliance fosters learning and teaching programs responsive to individual and community needs and opportunities and links to specific learning goals and experiences for students required by University teaching outcomes. Programs are designed and managed in partnership with communities, and are socially inclusive and globally and locally relevant. University and community alliances are a vibrant field of interest for higher education institutions [2,3].

University engagements is an interaction between the University and the broader community characterised by a two way flow of perceived benefits to both parties and collaboration for mutual outcomes. Engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with nurse educators in hospital settings with the mutual goal of conferring academic credit to their hospital based educational programs. This ensures that the graduate skills the neophyte registered nurse presents with, in the clinical environment, are sustained and developed [4]. This model of education aligns so that the University and the hospitals work together to monitor partnerships, measure impacts, evaluate outcomes, and make improvements to their shared activities [5].

The purpose of this paper is to recount the process of that engagement. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of engaging and, the importance of working from the ‘same page’ or mental model, particularly when the engagement process is strongly aligned to change and the fears and confusion which surround the acceptance of that change. It also explores dealing with stakeholders who may not be committed to the changes brought about by the engagement, and the potential for sustaining the change over time. These are necessary attributes to build a sustainable mutually beneficial partnership over time.

The Community Engagement Project–Strategic Intent

Existing hospital-based graduate education programs are based on the premise and have a strategic recruitment function, to attract nurses to the hospital to undertake training, and at the most fundamental level, lock in the nurse’s labour for the duration of the program with the potential for ensuring an ongoing workforce in the longer term.

The University’s engagement is also strategic. That is, course development is reliant upon meeting the strategic intent of the University, which promotes the integration of engagement...
in the curriculum and the student experience. Further, postgraduate
nursing programs require an increase in student numbers in areas
relating to advanced clinical nursing for sustainability of the program.
Hence, the University entered the collaboration with an agenda to
align hospital-based programs with an academic award principally
to increase student enrolment. On the surface the strategic intents of
both parties was clear. For, by aligning the hospital based courses with
the University’s academic awards, the intent of the hospital to provide
education to ensure a well-educated and competent workforce in
demanding and technologically specialised areas in nursing, was met;
whilst the University’s requirement to secure student numbers was
also addressed [6].

The process of engaging

The process of engaging used the seminal work of Brown and
Isaacs [7] Model of the Six C’s of Community Engagement namely:
Capacity, Commitment, Contribution, Conscience, Collaboration
and Continuity as the framework for engagement. Capacity
provided the starting point as Mersino [8] believe that to assess the
capability of the people, not the project, ensures that the stakeholders
have an understanding of, and experience in, the tasks at hand before
commencement. This also requires commitment, contribution and
conscience. Commitment requires active participation in decision-
making processes which strengthens capacity to mobilise personal
resources. This is significant because the engagement often requires a
redefinition of goals and values challenging existing ideals and rituals.
Contribution or effective participation requires setting boundaries
that define participants’ roles and responsibilities to each other, not as
a matter of imposing control, but so that trust, shared understandings,
and a shared mental model may develop. When it occurs, each
participant willingly is accountable for their problems, and accepts the
responsibility to take steps to address them. In line with contribution
and commitment the concept of conscience creates trust and mutual
respect between stakeholders thereby strengthening the partnership
of the engagement. These abilities may be developed over the duration
of the project, but the project must commence with those who are able
to champion it because of their expert understanding of the processes
required to negotiate successful engagement, including collaborative
communication which brings together the stakeholders on an equal
footing to consider important issues.

Measurement parameters and analysis methods

In reality however, the story of engagement was not as simple as
following the principles described above. If all attributes of this model
are not present, the project will stall. This may be due to stakeholders
not having the personal and professional resources to understand
the agendas, nor the capability to decision - make or to focus on
what is important. Previous work by Hendricks, Cope and Harris
[9] highlighted the pragmatic truths of engagement which noted that
each stakeholder group may have underlying tensions that are
compounded by individual agendas and cultural artefacts which may
make the engagement process disheartening, conflictual and prone to
failure.

de Souza Briggs [10] terms this ‘process paralysis’. Interestingly
within this engagement the university academics focused on the
practical elements of nursing, the ‘doing’ to build graduate confidence,
whilst the hospital educators had difficulty in moving away from
theoretical and academic components. This is juxtaposed to the usual
intention of both parties, that is, hospital educators usually focus on
building practical skill and purport that newly graduated nurses are
not adequately prepared for the clinical environment [11]. From the
academic standpoint, academics were convinced that the preparation
of new nurses was being theoretically met and the focus should be
more on gaining confidence in their abilities and practicing their
skills. It may be postulated that hospital educators had not made the
‘transition’ themselves to having a previously un-awarded program, to
one that is offered by a tertiary education center which valued clinical
practice and understood the stages necessary to be met for graduates
entering the workforce.

The stalemate

The theoretical juxtaposing of the two foci of theory and practice
engendered a stalemate of this engagement story. This stalemate
caused the project to stall and almost ended the engagement as the
the basis of conflict of the fundamental necessity of managing the
‘people dynamics’ at play in the engagement were not fully anticipated
[9]. Mutual benefits were lost as the focus of the engagement turned to
the minutaie and to issues outside the projects scope. Unfortunately,
failures in engagement between stakeholders are often not accidental
[12]. Many engagements are limited to superficial planning, cursory
input, limited discussions of the real ramifications of decisions, and
poor supports to help stakeholders become informed and capable of
exerting a real influence. This may occur because the collaboration
begins with is an over emphasis on the rituals of the ‘doing’ rather than
on group dynamics. The ‘how-to’ management, tactics and process,
rather than ‘how to manage and work with people’ takes precedence
to get the project underway [10,13].

Reflection on the issues related to the stalemate from both parties
was required, and after deep retrospection it was gleaned that there
were many challenges associated with fulfilling the brief. However,
with a refocusing of direction and a focus on the opportunities that
the project afforded, the project could continue. With this redirection
as key, stakeholders decided to reconsider: What was important? Did
the hospital understand academic requirements and award bestowal?
Did the University academics understand the fears that accompany
organisational change?

The emphasis of the project now became intentionally focused on
’sameness’ rather than difference. This assisted in developing a sense
of group cohesion and common spirit. Sameness meant that the centre
of attention now moved from the content of the educational program
to a common theme central to nursing: patient outcomes, educational
standards, and the delivery of healthcare. This shared vision provided
the common ground for moving forward. Meetings became
productive with new ground rules established and cooperative rather
than competitive relationships came to the fore. Consensus formed
backed by action and acknowledgement of conflict as a natural
occurrence, rather than an obstacle to progress, reframed group

Lessons learnt

On paper, engagement seems so simple. However, there were
many lessons that were learnt when the story was told. The process
of engagement is exciting and creates a self awareness of all stakeholders’
abilities if one is able to step back and reconsider what is important.
That is, the achievement of what practitioners consider to be the
skills and behaviours of an effective people project manager getting
the job done! [13]. Lessons learnt from face-to-face encounters and
self-completion evaluation similar to those described by Hart and
Northmore [14] included: the valuing of culture; the importance of

communication; the establishing of respectful relationships; and the impact of change. It is important to remember that the process for engagement is interactive requiring common goals and the creation of different solutions to problems and concerns [3].

**Culture and Communication**

Culture is comprised of the assumptions, values, norms and tangible signs or artefacts of an organisation and its members [15]. It is a learned set of shared interpretations which affect the behaviour of stakeholder groups and therefore needs consideration prior to commencing any community engagement project because to be truly ‘engaged’ necessitates shared interpretations of the reasons for engagement, as well as mutuality in benefits.

Inherent cultural differences became evident when the mapping of the alignment processes or the initial development stage began. Two mental models, one academic and one hospital based became overt. The academic team failed to initially acknowledge the importance of the hospital based culture. The seminal work of Schein [16] asserts that members operate unconsciously with learned responses to the groups problems when a perceived threat to survival from external environment is presented. Vis a Vis the University and the hospital both represented the external environment in this case. Hence, the threat came from a lack of understanding of the others values and the inability of either party to clearly articulate or acknowledge them [17]. Maginn [18] state that resistance is a signal that something is wrong with the change and that resistance should be a legitimate reason behind one's thought can help others to see its merit. Finally, views of others, group members are provided with enough information to confer an academic award and of the academic guidance they have felt fortunate that the University was collaborating with them to confer an academic award and of the academic guidance they were providing to them. However, understanding of educational curriculum and its ramifications and merit may not have been the remit of educators within the hospital employ. Lack of synergy in goal orientation left both stakeholders feeling frustrated and resistant, indicative of multiple tensions [3].

Lack of agreement about the direction of the alignment of the program, tensions within and between groups, individuals working in silos, lack of openness, role ambiguity and unclear lines of accountability resulted. Competing goals undermined the project as the lack of focus on collective performance and shared objectives saw both stakeholder groups considering individual output and not working together. University stakeholders relied on the appointed project manager, the local champion to ‘deal with’ the personalities and problems within the hospital group, to ensure a shared purpose and to get the work done. This placed the local champion in a precarious role, torn between the culture of the organisation and allegiance to hospital peers and the university project for which they were employed. The local champion whilst wearing the lens of the University was cognisant of work related requirements of staff to the hospital and this relationship, from their perspective, still took precedence.

**The Impact of Change**

The process for Community Engagement and the Six C’s Model while providing the framework for engagement is limited by the Model's lack of support in ways to manage people, communication and culture. This is particularly apparent when that process is strongly aligned to change and the fears and confusion which surround the acceptance of that change in the first instance. The model also does not fully support the potential for sustaining the change over a period of time when dealing with stakeholders who may not be committed to the changes brought about by the engagement. Here, this meant that the hospital educators were required to amend their programs and support the enrolment of students into the University award program over a sustained period of time.

To deal effectively with change, it is important to realise that every change requires psychological adaptation or a period of transition so that time for adjusting to shared interpretations of meaning and a shared vision develops [21]. This is difficult even when the change is wanted. Therefore, ‘engagement champions’ should anticipate stakeholders going through an ending of the old ways and an adjustment time in the beginning phase of planning to the new ways of the engagement process. This takes considerable energy and it is easy to run out of reserves, which can lead to unwise actions and frustration.
that may, in itself, thwart the engagement project. This is aptly described in the seminal work on psychological response to change developed by Russell-Jones in 1999[22], explaining the movement from uniformed optimism, to informed pessimism, hopeful realism, and informed optimism. Finally the completion of a project is a healthy characteristic human reaction to the acceptance of a change plan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the process of engagement seems functional, however, if the plan does not take into account individuals, their different representations of the situation, and the influence of the wider social, organisational and cultural context on their individual perceptions, behaviours and actions, the project is bound to stall. The denouement of this engagement story is that this paper has highlighted the need to consider culture, relationships, communication and the impact of change to develop a shared mental model to generate a shared commitment to the project at hand. Reflection on the scholarship of engagement and discussion between the parties involved aided the explication of a complex process and uncovered important features in engagement and the need for refocusing on the vision to be achieved for both.

This experience illuminated the need for a richer understanding of the people and their systems, partnership dynamics and a rethinking of the process of community engagement to promote a shared stakeholder vision and ensure engagement success where engagement is a rich platform for social learning.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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