

Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse first year students by integrating curriculum and pedagogy: an Australian case study. (0241)**Student diversity: implications of the Bradley Review**

In March 2008, Julia Gillard, then Minister for Education, initiated the Review of Australian Higher Education to examine the ability of the higher education sector to meet the needs of the Australian community and economy over the next decade (Access Economics, 2008). The committee, chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, recommended a simple solution to predicted skills shortages: persuade more young people to undertake university study, 40% of all 25-34-year-olds should have at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008, p 21). However, analysis of demographic data showed there were insufficient numbers of traditional middle class school leavers to meet the target. Avoiding a crisis depended on making university appealing to young people who would not normally include it in their career plans, particularly “those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas” (Bradley et al, 2008, p xi).

Persuading young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enrol at university one thing; retaining them to graduation is more difficult. They may not be convinced that the effort is worthwhile (Brooks, 2004) and they often face pressure from family and friends to leave (Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1995; Hatcher, 1998; Reay, 2001). They may lack appropriate academic skills; more importantly they lack the social capital that allows their classmates from more affluent backgrounds to take the experience of being at university for granted (Teese, 1981; Teese, 2000). The solution lies in providing experiences on campus that students, irrespective of their backgrounds, find relevant and engaging.

Evolution of a model to increase engagement and retention

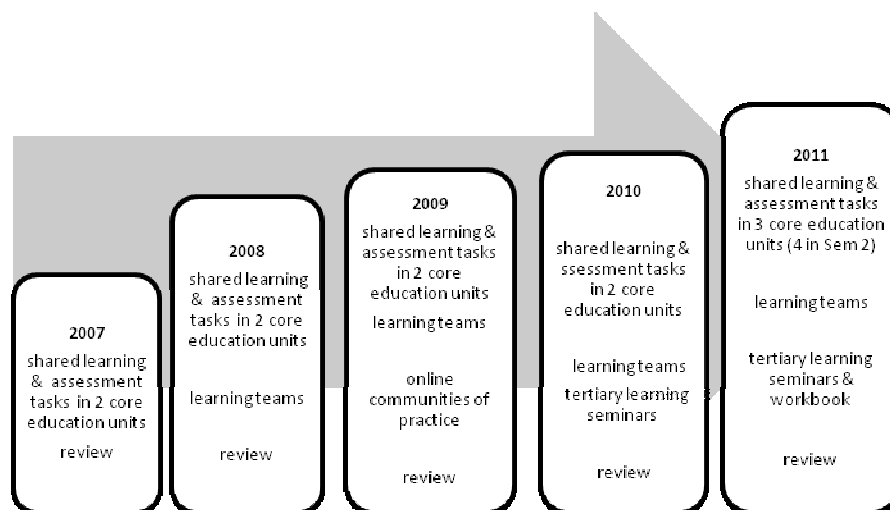
While much of the focus in recent years has been on the integration of students through transition programs of various types, the inescapable truth is that teaching and learning are the core business of a university and what happens in the classroom is crucial to the quality of students' experiences. Drawing on complementary approaches to engaging students in the learning process, I set out to develop a model that integrates curriculum-based approaches to engaging students with collaborative learning. This model addresses these aims by integrating curriculum based learning communities and organisational communities of practice to provide a richer learning experience that engages students, supports their transition to higher education facilitates the development of their professional identities as teachers. The model is (and always will be) “work in progress” as each new cohort of students enrolls. It is intended to be a platform for exchange and refinement of ideas about the most appropriate way of engaging students with the academic curriculum and the university community.

Reorganising the Curriculum - Tinto

Tinto's curriculum-centred approach to improving retention and improving outcomes is based on the 'learning community'. In the simplest of Tinto's three models explicit links are made between 2 or more discipline-based units, in some cases through a seminar that teaches

writing (Tinto, 12003). The first version of the integrated model introduced at ACU in 2007 was based on this concept. Learning and assessment tasks were shared between two first year units. Tinto (1997) asserts that student engagement and performance have improved wherever a form of learning community has been adopted. Students become more involved in academic and social activities, they participate more actively in class, spend more time talking about course content and working on assignments, develop more confidence in their ability *and* they became more engaged with other aspects of campus life because they know more people. Feedback from my students supported Tinto’s contention. The majority felt they had benefitted in terms of deeper understanding of the material, reduced workload and stronger social relationships, however some did not identify any significant benefit from this approach and some resented the emphasis on problem-based learning as it precluded a utilitarian, task-oriented approach.

Figure 1: Evolution of the integrated model 2007-2011



Reorganising the Classroom – Wenger

The 2008 version of the model drew on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) model of communities of practice in addition to Tinto’s model of learning communities. The idea of a “community of practice” recognises that learning is an intensely social activity in which people engaged in common activities share information and experiences. This shared or collective learning results in practices that reflect both the activity involved, and the social relationships surrounding that activity, while the nature of the situation has a profound impact on the type and extent of the learning process. I hypothesised that creating communities of practice – called learning teams – within each class would augment the effectiveness of Tinto’s curriculum based model. Feedback was very positive: students enjoyed problem based learning in teams, established strong social networks quickly and believed they had mastered the content more easily.

Online communities of practice

A new element was added in 2009. Within the first two weeks of term each learning team was given access to a private discussion forum through Blackboard allowing them to share ideas and experiences and complete assignments at all times, including during their field

placements. These were not successful; they were not linked to an assessment task and the students didn't use the facility. Feedback indicated that they preferred to meet face to face or use Facebook.

Tertiary learning seminars and the workbook

In 2010, I reverted to the 2008 model, but students were offered a weekly seminar taught by the Academic Skills Unit staff on academic skills and issues relating to transition to university. Timetabling problems reduced the effectiveness of the seminars, although the students who did attend found them very useful. To ensure that all students had some exposure to the academic skills program, a workbook linked to assessment was introduced in 2011. The weekly seminar remained optional, but was timetabled immediately after the lecture and attendance improved considerably.

Concluding Comments

The elements of this model remain constant although I am continually refining the details to ensure all my students will find the experience of studying at ACU satisfying, leading to an improvement in their academic performance and improved completion rates in the long run.

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