Engaging professional staff in the discourse of engagement

Rhonda Leece and **Alison Jaquet**
University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, Australia

Abstract*

The shift in higher education away from traditional, transactional service models and toward innovative, transformational approaches, has led to a reframing of professional identities. At the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), the creation of the Student Engagement team in 2015 took a learner-centred, theory-driven and evidence-based approach. However, the new team has been drawn from diverse backgrounds and is building a new, shared identity. To create a common language and understanding of practice in the team, the theory and scholarship of higher education was integrated into team leader discussions. These staff participated in a series of discussions, were encouraged to apply this learning to their daily practice in work with students and in communicating and contextualising their work among staff. The participants have shared their perspective on this new approach and results indicate that, while we are successfully achieving some objectives, the initiative can be adapted to become more effective.

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Student engagement at USC

USC is a small, multi-campus, regional university in Queensland, Australia. In 2015, the university reviewed Student Services, subsequently implementing its new engagement framework in 2016. The aims of this new framework were to create a student-centric model of support for learning; to eliminate duplication in services to students; and to embed effective transition and engagement pedagogies into the business of the University.

To this end, USC's Student Engagement and Retention Blueprint (2017) provides a guiding framework and its four pillars are to: 1) Strengthen first year experiences; 2) Design and enact curricula that engage students in learning; 3) Promote opportunities for access, equity and diversity; and 4) Enable and support student learning. During 2016, the Student Engagement team structure included staff in six teams: support for learning; communications and events; intervention and monitoring student learning; enquiry management and student contact centre; program and progression advice; and access and equity.

A key focus for the Student Engagement team is in partnering with academic staff to ensure that its work is contextualised, embedded and aligned with the curriculum. In order to partner in an effective and informed manner, a clear grasp of the language and purpose of our work needed to be articulated. Given the diversity of professional backgrounds and roles in the Student Engagement team, it was thought that the opportunity to discuss the theory and scholarship that underpinned student learning engagement would allow the team to develop a common discourse. This included managing the change from any administrative, process or deficit thinking and language towards a more student-centred, partnership approach to engagement. This

development, however, relied upon all staff being familiar and comfortable with the scholarly literature and discourse.

Creating a discourse of engagement

Professional staff identity in universities has shifted over the past few decades. Recently, the concept of the third space has emerged in the higher education literature to encapsulate the more significant roles being undertaken by professional staff in student learning (Whitchurch, 2008). Some perceive the limitations of this boundary-crossing as a problematic erosion or blurring of traditional roles (Lewis, 2014; McFarlane, 2011). However, many others (Veles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch, 2012) argue for the benefits of this new landscape, including Courtney (2013, p. 48), who suggests that 'inter-professional' teams of academic and professional staff in universities can produce student-centred outcomes in the same way that interdisciplinary teams in healthcare have produced more patient-centred practice.

Traditionally, staff in higher education have been categorised in the binary terms of an academic domain and an administrative domain that supports the work of the academy (Whitchurch, 2008). From this position, the way in which professional staff construct their identity is strongly associated with the language used to describe them. The lack of a precise vocabulary to embody the new professional generally reflects a "lack of understanding about the roles and identities" of these staff (p. 379). Commonly used terms such as 'non-academic', 'support', 'allied', and 'assistant' result in many staff in these positions feeling 'less' than their academic counterparts (Szekeres, 2011). As new forms of blended professionals are emerging, comprising elements of both professional and academic domains, "staff who work across and beyond boundaries … are re-defining the nature of their work" (Whitchurch, 2008, p.

394). For these staff, building confidence in the use of scholarly language and an appreciation of the research that underpins professional practice is integral to the redefinition of these new roles. A key element is developing an appropriate language that speaks to both academic and professional world views. This requires being able to use language that resonates with academic colleagues, appreciating the disinterested nature of academic debate, and being able to hold their own in such an arena (Whitchurch, 2008).

The implementation of a reading group at USC aims to create informed conversations around complex challenges in student engagement and to equip the professional staff to bridge the administrative and scholarly divide, thereby creating 'transacademic' professionals (Brundiers, Wiek, & Kay, 2013). This initiative comprises "professional staff seeking to re-design their roles and their professional identities while challenging the status quo and creating new operational excellence" (Veles & Carter, 2016, p. 527). The ultimate goal of this work is to provide an informed and collaborative professional workforce to improve outcomes for students.

Overview

A series of team leader meetings were established to discuss common trends and issues across Student Engagement, and, as part of these meetings, a reading was assigned to frame the discussion. In engaging with scholarship, the objectives were to 1) develop our collective understandings of student learning engagement, 2) deepen our understanding of each other's approaches, and 3) create a shared language or discourse around our work. These readings have included diverse topics such as: encouraging growth mindsets in learning, the contribution of professional staff to student outcomes, gamification of education, and evaluation theory and practice. The use of professional

reading is a standard practice in many organisations, often undertaken informally, directed by the manager or team leader, and not generally documented or discussed as a critical element of professional development. The introduction of this strategy was undertaken in direct response to emergent needs of a restructured team and not based specifically on approaches being used in other educational settings.

To evaluate the evolving initiative, an anonymous online survey was conducted. The aim was to draw out the backgrounds of participants, discover their prior experience with scholarship and measure their developing confidence in communicating their work in this new team. Nine responses were received and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Participants rated their experience by responding to questions on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). Participants were also invited to expand upon their views in open text fields.

Themes and future directions

The responses indicated that the team has diverse previous career experience, including private sector (n = 2), public sector (n = 1) and a range of prior higher education professional roles (n = 7). There is significant experience in higher education in the team, with only one respondent indicating less than 5 years in the sector. Most indicated experience of 5-10 years (n = 3) and 10-15 years (n = 3), with 2 respondents indicating over 15 years in the sector. Despite this, only two respondents indicated (on a scale of never, rarely, occasionally, regularly or frequently) that they 'regularly' or 'frequently' referred to the scholarship of teaching and learning in their careers, with most indicating they referred to it occasionally (n = 3), rarely (n = 3) or never (n = 1).

There was strong agreement regarding the value of the reading group with a mean response of 4.67. A key theme was that the readings enabled staff to think more critically about their work in student engagement. This is reflected in the following comment:

> Keeping up with research in the area in which we work allows me to monitor best practice and assess emerging ideas. All academic readings assist in broadening my knowledge, encourage critical thinking, improve my writing skills and allow me to converse with colleagues on a more professional level.

While respondents expressed high confidence in communicating their work to senior leadership and academic staff (mean confidence = 4.55), there are gaps. A shared understanding of communicating with senior staff is variable. Experienced staff feel 'confident' reporting on work achievement, but not necessarily confident in their capacity to be influential or persuasive with academic and senior leaders, as one participant indicates:

> I have been very confident in the positioning of the Engagement team. I have become less confident however, when confronted with views and opinions from senior staff from outside the immediate area, which take an alternative view to the engagement framework. It is for this reason, that I think a shared engagement discourse is critical to the future acceptance of the work of this team.

This comment indicates that the transformation of an institutional approach to student engagement can be uneven and prolonged, requiring persistence and patience.

In engaging with scholarship, the objectives were to 1) develop our collective understandings of student learning engagement, 2) deepen our understanding of each other's approaches and 3) create a shared language or discourse around our work. Initial outcomes from this approach are evident in the ways in which the reading group members now articulate and promote their work to key stakeholders. They are advocates of a shared 'engagement' discourse, they refer to 'critical first encounters' from the literature, they use the Kahu (2013) framework and the internal Engagement Blueprint confidently as points of reference in their daily work. The impact of this emerging transacademic confidence is evident in the submission and acceptance of four professional conference papers, traditionally not the practice of the staff in these teams; contributions to sector-wide discussions, and; a willingness to engage in institutional activities such as Learning and Teaching Week presentations.

As an outcome of the anonymous survey, staff recommendations to improve the effectiveness of this emerging initiative included suggestions to expand membership of the group, create more time for reflection and to align the readings to future projects. In 2017, there are some plans by two Student Engagement team leaders to extend this initiative into a community of practice in collaboration with Indigenous Services staff. This aims to create a community of practice for their student-facing teams in support for learning and widening participation programs, using professional readings to frame discussions around pedagogy.

The value of a reading group such as this should not be underestimated. Reconceptualising professional identity contributes to informed decision making and best practice engagement approaches; it expands the opportunities for staff to contribute in both a practical and a scholarly way.

The Emerging Initiatives presentation at the 2017 STARS Conference posed two questions for consideration. 1. How important is it for student success that we share a common

language and purpose among teams working with students? And 2. What does the relationship between professional and academic staff look like at your institution? The discussion which proceeded from these questions, confirmed that professional staff identity in universities has shifted into uncharted territory over the past few decades: staff, irrespective of their career of origin, are being required to act in a blended professional arena. There was little support for the notion that blended professional roles were problematic and an erosion or blurring of traditional roles (Lewis, 2014; McFarlane, 2011).

The construction of identity for "staff who work across and beyond boundaries..." (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 394) emerged as a challenge for numerous institutions represented at the Conference presentation, as evidenced by: one senior professional staff member undertaking a PhD third spaces in higher education; multiple attendees from the same institution, highlighting the same matters of concern; requests for more information about how to progress this idea; and overwhelming support for the creation of the reading group to build confidence in the use of scholarly language and an appreciation of the research that underpins professional practice.

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