Collegiality, collaboration and communication: Innovation in a first year Business Unit development. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development of first year "core" units in the new Bachelor of Business (BBus) at Murdoch University. These units evolved from a curriculum renewal program and presented opportunities and challenges in their development. The units needed to develop not only the essential numeracy, literacy and research skills for students to transition successfully to university studies, but also the core technical skills in discipline areas common to all BBus majors. Developing these units in a collaborative manner with ongoing interaction between academic and professional staff helped to scaffold skills development on an inter-unit basis.

Introduction

In education, curriculum innovation is given much attention but the difficulties surrounding its implementation are often ignored. Teachers are required to interpret and adapt an innovation so that it fits not only their understanding of the curriculum, but also the expectations of the stakeholders within a particular educational context and culture. When working towards successful innovation and change, research suggests that effective communities of practice can provide a strong foundation of support for the challenges faced by individuals. Accordingly, communities of practice emerge in response to a common interest or goal and are defined as a "forum through which members can meet and exchange ideas and form support networks" (French, 2011, p. 50). Members of communities of practice are willing participants prepared to teach and learn from each other and build innovations. These relationships develop to solve problems, "share tacit knowledge" and "experiment with new methods and ideas" (Hendry, 1996, p. 628). Communities of practice are self-organising, self-managing groups and the emphasis is on shared learning, shared understanding and shared practice around what matters to the group members (Sadler, 2014; Wenger, 2011).

In the School of Management and Governance at Murdoch University[1], a community of practice was born of a shared desire to provide improved student learning and retention. This group of academic and professional staff worked together to foster positive working relationships and greater communication of knowledge and ideas. This approach led to the development of a more coherent set of units, sensitive to the specific needs of first year students and implementation of the units in a more informed and supportive professional environment. This paper looks at the findings and successes of this process and the impact of collaboration and collegiality on the development of first year business units.

Murdoch University initiative to enhance teaching and learning

In early 2012, Murdoch University established the Murdoch University Curriculum Commission (MUCC) to comprehensively reevaluate its degree offerings. The aims were to enhance the university's reputation for quality teaching and learning, ensure compliance with international standards and promote a better balance between teaching and research (Murdoch University, 2012, p. 10). It is within the context of this broader strategic agenda of renewal that staff in the School of Management and Governance began a comprehensive rethink about the purpose of foundation units.

Core skills units

The MUCC White Paper defined two roles for the foundation units: to teach the basic skills necessary for academic success at university (including writing, analysis, basic numeracy, and academic integrity and referencing skills) and to provide students with an introduction to the concept and practice of interdisciplinarity (Murdoch University, 2012, p. 14). As such, two core skills units were created in the School of Management and Governance; the "transition unit" BBS100 Academic Skills for Business to address basic academic skills and the "breadth unit" BBS150 Transforming Business to introduce students to inter-disciplinarily and develop their breadth of knowledge. With the transition unit, a whole of university approach to the development of the skills was adopted, while for the breadth unit, guest lecturers were used to ensure that students received exposure

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[1] Murdoch University is a large metropolitan university in Perth, Western Australia.

to the depth of experience across the school (Table 1).

Coordinators for the units were approached in August 2013 and working parties with both academic and professional staff began meeting regularly to design the new core skills units. The units were designed by the working parties in consultation with each other and a First Year Advisor (FYA) was attached to each working party to ensure the units would facilitate the transition to tertiary education. FYAs were able to provide insights into the common difficulties students experience and transition programs and courses across the university, as they act as a hub for access to university programs and initiatives and provide support for students (Kemp, Lefroy & Callan, 2013, p. 75). The two working parties finalised the structure and content of the units by late October 2013.

Core technical units

The school decided BBus students would take two additional core technical units in their first year—BUS176 Foundations of Management and Governance and BUS130 Foundational Mathematics for Business—bringing the total number of core units to four. These were developed from existing units.

Collaboration between academic staff

At the early stage of the unit development, it was agreed there was a real need to coordinate the four units to ensure the objectives of the new program were successfully implemented. In addition to the working parties meeting on a regular basis, the four unit coordinators met on

Table 1: *Comparison of transition and breadth Units*

| Session | Transition Unit – Core skills | | Breadth Unit – Core skills | |
	Topic	Lecturer	Topic	Lecturer
1	What is University study?	CUTL	Introduction	Unit Coordinator
2	Reading: Identifying an author's position	CUTL	Globalisation	Economics Politics
3	What is research?	Librarian	Finance	Economics Sustainability
4	Why do we reference?	CUTL	Governance	Community Development Politics
5	Writing: Developing your own arguments	CUTL	Governance	History Politics
6	Revisiting your writing	Unit Coordinator	Governance	Sustainability Economics
7	Academic Writing	Unit Coordinator	Resources	Politics Sustainability
8	Presentation skills and working with your peers	Unit Coordinator	Resources	Indigenous Studies Sustainability
9	Sources and types of data	Numeracy	Resources	Asian Studies Politics
10	Working with formulae	Numeracy	Culture	History Management
11	Presenting data: What does it mean?	Numeracy	Culture	Tourism Asian Studies
12	What next? And exam preparation	Unit Coordinator	Conclusion	Unit Coordinator

* CUTL – Centre for University Teaching and Learning

a weekly basis from the end of September 2013 until the beginning of the new semester in February 2014.

This high degree of communication and coordination was championed by the school's academic chair who felt strongly that the design of the units offered an opportunity to avoid some of the perceived problems of the past, including a lack of integration between first year units and concerns about the amount and type of assessment required of first year students. In the previous version of the foundation units—which almost all commencing students were required to take—there were instances of students being required to submit six or more assessment items, with no clear thought given to the purpose of the assessment or whether they were formative or summative.

Accordingly, the four unit coordinators and the academic chair met to analyse what assessment items students were required to take and looked to ensure three things:

1. *Avoiding over-assessment*

The types of assessment that students were required to take across the four units were reviewed and thought given to how assessments could be built on across more than one unit. One example of this was the way in which oral presentation skills were introduced in the transition unit, but were not an assessed component. These skills were then applied in the breadth unit where students were assessed via an individual presentation, as well as in the Foundations of Management and Governance, where students were assessed via a group presentation.

2. *Assessment timing*

Second, assessments were staggered across the four units to avoid students having three or four assessment items due in the same week, which occurred under the old degree structure. This was detrimental to student retention as the heavy workload at certain points of the semester often resulted in students either failing one or more units or dropping out of university. There was also thought given to how feedback received in one unit could be applied to assessment items in another. For instance, in the transition unit, students are required to

Table 2: *Assessment timing*

Session	BBS100 Core Skills: Transition	BBS150 Core Skills: Breadth	BUS130 Core Technical Business Mathematics	BUS176 Core Technical Management
1			Diagnostic	
2	Diagnostic			Diagnostic
3		Diagnostic		
4				Written Analysis
5	Essay Plan			
6			Mid-Semester Test	
7		Reading Log		
8	Essay			
9				
10	Numeracy diagnostic	Essay	Assignment	Group report
11		Oral Presentation		Presentation
12	Online numeracy test			
Other	Workshop Participation	Workshop Participation	Workshop Participation	Multisource Evaluation
	Final Exam	Final Exam	Final Exam	Final exam

submit an essay plan in Session Five and the full essay in Session Eight, which is marked and returned by the beginning of Session Ten. In contrast, the major essay for the breadth unit is not due until the end of Session Ten, affording students the opportunity to assess their performance in one unit and, if necessary, make revisions to the essay in the other unit (Table 2).

3. *Incorporating diagnostic exercises*

Third, diagnostic exercises were incorporated into the four units to ensure students' written English and other areas were assessed before the end of Session Three, allowing time for additional support to be offered well before the major pieces of written work were due to be submitted. As part of the diagnostic follow-up, the academic chair and the four unit coordinators agreed that there needed to be a degree of integration of academic and professional staff to support first year students, with the new units utilising the support already being provided to students by the FYAs.

Linking with Professional Staff

In the School of Management and Governance, the first year student experience has been enriched by the strengthened collegiality between the four core first year unit coordinators and FYAs based within the school. Wojcieszek, Theaker, Ratcliff, MacPherson and Boyd (2014) found that "a reflective, collegial approach is of paramount importance if staff are to effectively support students in their first year of study" (p. 150). This collaboration between academic and professional staff was integral throughout the development and implementation of the curriculum innovation, beginning with FYA participation on the transition and breadth working groups.

At the start of semester, the unit coordinators, FYAs, academic chair and tutors involved in the new first year units were invited to an information session. The unit coordinators

continued to meet during the teaching semester to monitor students' progress and assess the implementation of the units. Online surveys were also introduced for students to provide feedback on their engagement and progress in the unit workshops. This provided an opportunity for comment and response between students and their tutors on the students' progress in the unit, an activity to assist in student retention.

During the early stages of the implementation of the units, FYAs were critical in providing training to tutors on how to identify and report students showing "at-risk" behaviour such as not attending classes, not submitting assessments, failing assessments or failing a diagnostic test. Research suggests that identifying students as "at-risk" and contacting them in this way, results in higher end of semester grades and has a positive influence on student retention for at least 12 months (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012). The FYAs also played an important role in keeping the lines of communications open between students and staff so students could access academic help and staff were aware of the help students had received. This collaboration began during Orientation Week when FYAs welcomed new students to the school and introduced the four core unit coordinators, who each delivered a short presentation with the topics covered in their unit, materials required, assessment details and study tips for new students.

From Session One onwards, there was a formal process of identifying students "at-risk" of disengaging in individual first year units. Unit coordinators and tutors were encouraged to report students showing signs of being "at-risk" through the *RightNow* database system (*RightNow* Technologies Inc., 1997-2011). This software collects student data from across the university and distributes it to the appropriate FYA for outreach campaigns and support (Callan, Kemp, & Wojcieszek, 2012). For

instance, in the transition unit, findings from numeracy, reading and writing diagnostic tests were used to refer students to academic workshops and FYAs.

Through consistent reporting from tutors and unit coordinators, FYAs were able to identify those students who show signs of being "at-risk" across multiple units. These students were then provided with targeted early intervention, including interviews with FYAs or referral to appropriate personal or academic support services across the university. This strategy is informed by the literature regarding the value of academic advising (McArthur, 2005) and its links to student engagement (Tinto, 1987). A 2012 survey of university staff identified this ability to act as intermediaries between academic, professional staff and students to support those students deemed "at-risk" as a key strength of the FYA network (Wojcieszek et al., 2014).

In Semester 1, 2014, a total of 301 "at-risk" reports were submitted across the four core units, identifying 144 individual students as potentially "at-risk". Not only were these students provided with targeted intervention from FYAs, but information received from students about the unit content and assessments was fed back to unit coordinators where appropriate. It is important to note the role that informal communication had on collegiality and continual development and improvement both within the core units and in the student support space. Throughout semester, staff regularly engaged in informal discussions about unit content and student progress and FYAs provided unit coordinators and tutors with anecdotal feedback regarding students' engagement with unit material, classes and assessments. Unit coordinators were able to enquire about student contacts and flag points in semester when students may need extra support from FYAs. This casual dialogue informed both student support and teaching

practice without greatly impacting on the workloads of academic or professional staff.

As demonstrated elsewhere, research suggests that the sharing of knowledge is an important component of partnership between academic and professional staff and enhances the overall level of support that a student receives throughout the first year experience (Wojcieszek et al., 2014). Ensuring FYAs are familiar with the content of first year units has allowed them to more effectively assist with student enquiries. FYAs have been granted access to spaces such as online student forums, enabling a more thorough insight into the student experience. This collaboration has in turn opened a channel for academic staff to guide potentially "at-risk" students to support with the confidence of knowing it will be comprehensive and specific to their field of study. Being granted access to the content and assessment details of a unit has allowed the FYAs to accurately understand the unit objectives and unify their vision with that of the unit coordinators to better assist students in their journey towards academic success.

Early Outcomes

Already the benefits of this approach are clear from outstanding student satisfaction results well above other foundational units at Murdoch University. This achievement has been recognised by the university with all four unit coordinators awarded prizes for outstanding contributions to student learning. Both BBS150 and BBS100 have also received school awards for superior student satisfaction. While a more complete account of all satisfaction and retention outcomes for these units in their first two years is being developed, this is encouraging evidence of the benefits of a more collaborative development approach.

Conclusion

The academic and professional staff in the School of Management and Governance were able to successfully implement MUCC changes to first year curriculum not only through the hard work of key individuals, but also through the support of a community which shared the same goals. Change and innovation in higher education institutions is an essential part of adapting to the changing needs of university students and ensuring excellence in university curriculum. Fostering learning communities that are able to respond to these challenges, such as the one in the School of Management and Governance, is key to the successful implementation of innovation.

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