

“Riders on the storm”: A co-teaching mentor model to increase student satisfaction and retention. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This paper reports on a co-teaching mentor model focused on improving first year undergraduate retention rates through enhanced teaching practise. A lecturer responsible for first year units was partnered with a co-teaching mentor to offer guidance on how the content (urban and regional planning) could be delivered more effectively with an emphasis on student satisfaction and retention. We present a case study example where the findings demonstrate the effective transfer of teaching awareness and skills through this process. Five educational theories underpin the substantive changes made to the way classes were delivered. The applied relevance of these ideas can be demonstrated in the reflections from the participating lecturer of their teaching practices, and in the improved student evaluation and retention results.

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Introduction

Watts & Robertson (2011) have noted an international trend toward burnout in university teaching staff and the effect that has on reducing educational outcomes. Light and Cox (2001, p. 1) liken the situation to “a storm” (p. 1). In this paper, a co-teaching mentor model is presented as an approach to enable staff to become “riders on the storm” and improve student satisfaction and retention in a busy and complex working environment. The model was developed in response to chronic staff shortages, average class sizes rising from thirty to more than eighty students, and poor timetabling. Attendance rates for some units fell to around a third of the class. First-year retention rates for the Urban and Regional Planning (URP) course at Curtin University were traditionally marginally higher than the University’s average (80-83%), however, the introduction of two new accredited planning courses at competing universities in 2008, meant that professional accreditation could no longer be relied upon to either attract or retain students. Research also suggests that the first-year is the most vital year in terms of completing a course (Grayson, 1998). Together these factors defined an urgent need to focus on first-year student retention, and to teach more effectively in larger class formats. In response, a lecturer coordinating a first-year unit was partnered with a co-teaching mentor to advise on how the unit could be delivered more effectively with an emphasis on student retention and satisfaction. The co-teaching mentor also provided student support, and had the role of the first-year coordinator as a key element of the broader student retention initiative. Here we report on the model’s capacity to improve student satisfaction, to transfer teaching skills to others, and to

improve learning outcomes for students and staff. Evidence is drawn from the experiences of a lecturer who worked closely with the co-teaching mentor on a specific unit over several years. His teaching evaluation results over four years and student retention rates, recorded over a five-year period, support this experiential evidence. Given that the model was trialled with the same co-teaching mentor and another lecturer for two years previously, this case study is also indicative of the model’s transferability. This approach to co-teaching mentoring and its results were peer reviewed at a teaching and learning conference (Turklich, Greive and Cozens, 2012), which helped to clarify its broader significance. It is located at the core of the debate on how academics acquire teaching skills/qualifications, and whether discipline-based academics (from the Built Environment) can learn to teach more effectively in class, through co-teaching.

Research on the role of the teaching mentor in higher learning environments has established that it has a rich potential for training research-focused academics with respect to applied teaching skills and pedagogical awareness (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002; Huston & Weaver, 2008). Although, the teaching mentor role is among a common suite of teaching support services offered by universities (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007), it remains controversial among the academy and their affiliated professions. Some are concerned at the prospect of diluting the academic and professional content by having non-discipline qualified teachers delivering the courses (Huston & Weaver, 2008). The counter argument is that all teaching academics ought to have a teaching qualification. Education-based research supports this case (Postareff et al.), but it is also resisted by academics (Daloz, 1999). With many academics

holding multiple degrees and professional accreditations, a tendency is to resent the layers of qualifications required to access and maintain their positions (Daloz).

If the broader aim is to assist with the transition from high-school to university, then a background in education and student support is more relevant than an advanced discipline-based qualification (Grayson, 1998). In this case, however, a discipline-based academic was co-teaching in the class and they remain the unit coordinator and largely define the content. The lecturer and the co-teaching mentor form a partnership to deliver the unit, and are jointly responsible for the learning outcomes and the evaluation results. The role of the co-teaching mentor accords in many ways with that of the principal tutor outlined by Lodge (2012). Five key educational theories underpinned the development of this co-teaching model and the process of changing the teaching practices related to large classes. These include constructivism (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003), multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), collaborative learning (Goodsell, Maher, & Tinto, 1992), experiential learning (Dewey, 1940) and humanism (Rogers, 1969). Our model of co-teaching serves the lecturer by placing him/her in a co-teaching in-class situation with a co-teaching mentor who is more knowledgeable in teaching and learning. In allowing the knowledge to be formed by the academic by constructivism, experiential learning and other teaching and learning principles, the model was also flavoured by the discipline being taught; urban and regional planning.

Directly, we suggest that the discipline of URP may provide an appropriate language and starting point for the discussion and progress of pedagogy in a discipline-based university setting. In so doing, our model of

academic learning develops upon the ideas with which the academic is already most familiar (that is, by constructivism). Considering URP, there are many synergies between the concepts of city growth and those of learning. To demonstrate, the planning ideal of accounting for diverse citizens in cities is counterpart to organising a classroom around the principle of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983). A democratic urban planning system based on community participation (Forester, 1989) is equivalent to a student-centred classroom. A city, like learning, builds on top of itself.

A case study of a co-teaching mentor model for first-years

The co-teaching mentor was appointed as the first-year coordinator with a focus on improving first-year student retention. He was an educational-focused researcher at Masters /PhD level, with a complementary knowledge base that included human geography, environmental management, and some planning. His high-school teaching experience and the strength of the feedback from first-year URP students he tutored, registered well against the selection criteria. The responsibilities involved organising the orientation day activities, the first-year coordination role, tutoring and mentoring (student support); together with unit design, lesson planning, marking, and coaching lecturers how to teach and assess (teaching support). These responsibilities were in line with the research interests of the co-teaching mentor, whose thesis focused on the question of university academics' conceptions of teaching and learning. How these theories play out in practice is revealed in the reflective narrative from the participating lecturer, as a case study example.

The case study involved an academic who had recently transitioned from a Research Fellowship into a teaching/research role. He had 12 years of university teaching experience with class sizes of 15-20 students, but he had no prior exposure to teacher training. He was confronted with large classes (80+) of first-year students, and wondered how to manage them. Extensive collaboration with the co-teaching mentor occurred and alternative methods to transferring information and knowledge were discussed. Changes to the first-year undergraduate unit, *Suburban Analysis*, began by reviewing the teaching patterns. The original teaching pattern serviced 30-40 students over five hours. This involved a one-hour lecture and two, two-hour tutorials, each delivered by one member of staff. Centrally allocated, the lectures were often scheduled in lecture theatres ten minutes away from where the tutorials were located. Commonly, tutorials were scheduled before the lecture and across different days of the week. The interim pattern for larger class sizes extended the time to a laborious nine hours teaching, repeating a two-hour tutorial four times, with one member of staff. This pattern was universally disliked by staff and students and was very ineffective, particularly in terms of poor levels of attendance.

The restructured studio pattern serviced 80-100 students in three hours. This involved a one-hour lecture and a two-hour studio with both staff members present in a three hour block. Although the student numbers tripled, the new studio pattern only required six hours of staff time rather than nine. With the restructured studio teaching patterns, timetabling and two staff, class attendance improved significantly. We used larger and more interactive physical spaces to combine lectures and tutorials. The studio set-up

enhances teaching and learning outcomes with more creative and collaborative space (Zehner & Graham, 2009). The content of the unit was reviewed and the unit outline was rewritten with the co-teaching mentor. Each session was co-planned, and through this process, the same material was covered with less direct input from the lecturer and more participation by the students. It was in the discussions around lesson planning that there was an explicit transfer of educational theory into teaching practice. Through this experiential process, the traditional teacher role was transformed into that of a teaching facilitator. As with the collaborative perspective in planning theory, rather than *the expert*, the redefined role is more akin to a *knowledge vessel* to be dipped into by communities as required, as a facilitator (Forester, 1989).

The initial theory underpinning the restructuring of the unit was Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences. We introduced a diversity of methods and media to these sessions. We redesigned the unit around an experiential field trip, for students to explore a range of suburban contexts. This also involved ways of measuring and analyzing suburbs, which went beyond the traditional use of the census and literature. Students were encouraged to make observations and to think about their suburb, before using the census. The census training sessions were moved later in the semester to facilitate this reflection of their experiences and their suburb. The students were more equipped and eager to engage with the census once they had observed and reflected on their own experiences within their own environments. Lectures focused on key pieces of literature which students discussed and peer-reviewed in small groups. A workbook was designed for students to record their weekly reviews of

literature and films and observations of their own suburbs and those visited on the field trip. This was a component of their assessment and promoted higher levels of attendance. The one-day field trip provided valuable experiential and observational data for the students, but also a chance to socialise and bond. The day ended with a barbeque near the beach. Our approach was humanistic in that social bonds were actively fostered by common and shared experiences. In class, we tried to be more animated and moved tables and chairs to improve the effectiveness of tutorial activities. We also moved from behind the lectern to meander among the students. We used several means of communication at the same time, including PowerPoint presentations, overhead projectors, white boards and butcher's paper. We played songs from *You Tube* to highlight streetscapes and perspectives on suburbia. Excerpts from films about suburban issues were also linked to the literature to encourage thinking.

Students of URP were encouraged to start their own first-year student *Facebook* page. This media immediately became a more effective and well-used learning and social community than the one available through the University. Laird & Kuh (in Lodge, 2012) depict social networking as a powerful tool in engaging students through collaboration. In using one of the most popular forms of technology by which students interact, it is student-centred. McLaughlin & Faulkner (2012) examined the expectations of students in terms of university facilities, finding that flexible spaces for interaction, social learning and technology were paramount. The 2011 first-year group continue to use *Facebook* to assist one another as second years in 2012. The 2012 and 2013 groups have also embraced this approach.

Another important change involved students reviewing and assessing the work of their colleagues. The frameworks and forums now used by the students to assess their own work and that of their colleagues fostered wider critical discussion and added motivation towards producing better work, for all to engage with. This was collaborative teaching and learning, underpinned by the same constructionist and humanist foundations in current planning theory and practise that recognises, values, and builds upon collective knowledge.

Evaluating the co-teaching model

In the four years since this co-teaching model began, the *Suburban Analysis* unit scored an average of 94.9%, 96.6%, 95.8% and 98.7% student satisfaction in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 respectively. Overall, students' satisfaction for *Suburban Analysis* was between 15% and 20% higher than the University's benchmark of 80%. When this level of satisfaction is achieved with response rates of 35% or more, a commendation of achievement is awarded.

There is also data on retention rates, which to some extent, supports the collaborative approach discussed in this paper. The retention rates among first-years for URP (90-93%) exceeded the average rate for first year students for Curtin University (80-83%) by around 10% since the co-teaching mentor model began in 2009. The results indicate that this collaborative co-teaching mentor program for first-year students has helped to improve retention.

In respect to the debate over the need for a teaching qualification from discipline-based academics, our results suggest there is another way to effectively insert

education theory and practise into discipline-appropriate academic course design and teaching delivery. The lecturer enlisted in this study had no prior teacher training, the changes to his teaching practice were immediate, the pedagogical links were readily identifiable with the framework enlisted, and the improved teaching evaluation results and student retention rates, all add weight to corroborating the model’s impact.

For the teaching academic, engaging with this model was preferable to attending a training session to learn from an expert how to teach. Instead, here was someone who could help to respond to the immediate teaching challenges, by suggesting new approaches as they were needed, and these were specifically adapted for the impending lesson. Experiential learning is a key element of urban planning-focused teaching, and regular site-visits and field trips are common. It is also in keeping with the philosophy underpinning the role of the co-teaching mentor, whereby learning how to teach unfolds in context as needed, in designing the unit outlines, in co-planning the lesson, in thinking through the assessments, and with teaching in the classroom. In this model, the transfer of education theory into teaching practise is at the very centre of the zone of proximal learning (Wells, 1999), exactly when and where it is needed, it is experiential learning, and in keeping with Gardener’s principles (1983).

Furthermore, given that this research paper is collaborative, it is clear that the model we have described also has the capacity to stimulate, inform and enable education-focused reflection from hitherto untrained educators. This co-teaching model’s success in significantly improving teaching evaluation results and student retention among first years suggests that it

is arguably worthy of replication. For staff with similar time, resource and management constraints, this approach offers potential in these stormy times.

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