

# synergy

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Supporting the scholarship of teaching & learning at the University of Sydney

Institute for Teaching and Learning



**SPECIAL JOINT ISSUE: ECONOMICS & BUSINESS and ITL**

SUPPORTING STUDENTS PEER STUDY ONLINE WRITING TUTORS LEADERSHIP ETHICS ACROSS  
THE DISCIPLINES WORKING GROUPS RESEARCHING TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGAGEMENT

# about synergy

*Synergy* is a scholarly forum for the discussion and debate of higher education teaching and learning at The University of Sydney. Produced by the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), *Synergy* is published twice per year – usually May and October – and is circulated to staff through academic and research departments. This issue of *SYNERGY* was edited by Dr Kim McShane and Dr Amani Bell in consultation with the Director and staff of the ITL.

## Contributions to *Synergy*

*Synergy*'s purpose is threefold. Firstly, it is intended to showcase the variation in learning and teaching initiatives taking place across the university. Secondly, it is a forum where staff (particularly those new to researching and writing about teaching and student learning) can publish their innovations in a scholarly manner. Thirdly, it acts as a vehicle for critical and public discussion of key learning and teaching issues.

The Editor welcomes contributions from the university community all year round. *Synergy* particularly welcomes contributions written collaboratively by staff and students that:

- report on, or are critical reflections of, an aspect of teaching or students' learning;
- report on a teaching, learning or curriculum initiative designed to engage students in active learning or inquiry;
- use disciplinary research/concepts to develop ideas about teaching and student learning;
- report on curriculum initiatives designed to bring teaching and research together to improve student learning;
- draw on research and scholarship to comment critically and thoughtfully on an aspect of teaching and learning in the university;
- theorise or problematise the contribution of teaching, learning and pedagogy to the nature of higher education.

Scholarly and research-based contributions to *Synergy* attract points on the University's Scholarship Index. Further information about the Index is available at <http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/quality/si.shtml>. On occasion, the Editor will invite contributions to *Synergy* in accordance with the focus of the Issue.

*Synergy* publishes contributions of varying word lengths – anywhere up to 5000 words. We strongly encourage contributors to read through previous issues at: <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/back-issues.cfm>. The Editor encourages all potential contributors to make contact before the submission of an article. We welcome the addition of graphics and visual images to enhance your contribution.

## Referencing standards

Contributions to *Synergy* should be formatted using the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines. Further information can be found at <http://www.apastyle.org/>.

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# editorial



Kim McShane and Amani Bell

This issue of *Synergy* is unusual in that while Tai Peseta is on study leave, we have edited it together. Amani brings a Faculty-based perspective to the issue, while Kim has maintained a broader editorial view. The collaboration has been enjoyable and rewarding and is a good example of synergy, we think!

One thematic thread that runs through this 25th issue of *Synergy* is learning and supporting student learning. With this in mind, firstly we created space for a set of papers written by colleagues in the Faculty of Economics and Business. These articles have applicability and interest across all disciplines.

Secondly, we have expanded our definition of learning to go beyond mere descriptions of innovations in pedagogical strategies in lectures and online discussions, to recognise research and teaching development as learning opportunities and processes. If we work, research and teach in what Martin (1999) calls the “learning university”, then perhaps we might acknowledge research and teaching as modes of learning? In her piece on the constructive power of research, Kath Aufflick invites us to contemplate spaces of overlap between research, learning and teaching. She offers some examples of research-enhanced learning from her own experiences of teaching applied statistics. Indeed, Kath challenges us to consider how our students might be “embraced into a community of researchers” (Brew, 2006). (Why) can’t undergraduate students conduct “proper” research, for example, by attending and giving research seminars and conferences, and writing journal papers?

In the learning university, learners can become teachers, and teachers learners. In a raw and thoughtful piece that exemplifies some of the tensions inherent in this slippage of pedagogical identities, Mark West explores student learning, and feelings of belonging and rebellion, through the lens of his own experiences last year as a learner in the Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education). Mark’s reflective piece demonstrates perfectly how this identity development work is both a personal and professional project (Rowland 2000). As a novice lecturer, he views pedagogical relations with new eyes, and questions whether some students and teachers actually see the moral-ethical issues that bind all teaching and learning interactions. What are the rules of pedagogical engagement between students and their teacher? When we pay attention to one vocal student, how do we account for the remaining silent 48? As a colleague from the Sydney College of the Arts recently asked Kim, “Aren’t undergraduate students and teachers often playing a silent pedagogical game?” Mark invites

us to consider more carefully the impact of our decisions – our “teaching footprint” – on student learning.

Leaving behind the messy ethical matters of teacher-learner relationships raised by Mark, we shift our attention to a conversation about ethics as a multi-faceted object and process of learning and teaching across the disciplines. “Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding” is enshrined in learning and teaching policy at The University of Sydney as a key Generic Graduate Attribute, and our “Talking” piece in this issue brings together four colleagues who teach students ethics in Speech Pathology, Philosophy, Pharmacy, and Economics and Business. They are leaders and participants in a local community of practice, the University of Sydney Ethics Teaching Network, a loose coalition of teaching staff who have recognised a common interest - the teaching of ethics - and who have begun to discuss their teaching values and practices with a view to researching common concerns and developing their ethics teaching.

In our Profile piece we meet Dr Manjula Sharma, an expert, dedicated teacher of Physics, and winner of a 2006 Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Teaching. Manju has revived the teaching of undergraduate Physics not only at the University but nationally through the Physics workshop tutorials projects. Since 1993, she has led successive stages of improvements to the tutorials, improvements that came about initially through trial-and-error and latterly through scholarly, research-based efforts. Over time, the workshop tutorials have resulted in increased student attendance, and enhanced student interest and learning outcomes. Clearly, Manju enjoys seeing her students learn, and she readily acknowledges that she continues to learn through teaching too.

As we’ve all observed at some time or another, change is a constant in universities, and The University of Sydney is neither immune nor immutable. Indeed the outcomes and rankings of the national Learning and Teaching Performance Fund will drive renewed efforts, projects and activities focussed on improving undergraduate learning and teaching. In the ITL Focus section of this issue, Professor Keith Trigwell, Director of the Institute for Teaching and Learning, signals new challenges and some change ahead for the ITL, in terms of how it will work with faculties, to support and enhance Faculty-led internal quality assurance processes. It is expected that a new climate of accountability will engender new patterns of collaboration between all who are committed to improving learning and teaching at The University of Sydney.

Some faculties are well under way in addressing their performance on the student learning-focussed indicators on which the Learning and Teaching Performance fund is based. Three of the papers from Economics and Business in this issue of Synergy relate to student engagement. Kellie Morrison took on the challenge of enhancing student engagement in their studies by piloting and then rolling out Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Students often feel overwhelmed and isolated, and grapple with the various demands of study, work, social activities and family commitments. First year students in particular can find the transition to university difficult. The PASS program provides a weekly opportunity for students to study together in small groups, facilitated by a highly capable senior student. Research shows that students perform significantly better when actively engaged in learning (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991) and that collaborative peer learning is particularly effective (eg Hake 1998). The PASS approach has been successful in helping students keep up with their studies, understand difficult concepts and attain better grades.

The piece about the LUCY corporate mentoring program illustrates another way in which students can be further engaged with, and get more out of, their studies. Jill Kelton and Patty Kamvounias describe how the program is run and the benefits for both the students and their mentors. During the program students write a reflective learning journal and are asked to link their experiences to the university's five Graduate Attributes. The LUCY program is a particularly inspiring example of how universities can work with both government and businesses to provide the "real world" experiences for which students are clamouring.

Diana Montgomery, Amani Bell and Mark Freeman write about a situation where students did not engage fully in a learning activity and they discuss the reasons for this. Their article about an online writing instructional system for international students is a useful caution about how we can do things with the best of intentions, yet not achieve our expected outcomes – sometimes for unexpected reasons! Their findings are consistent with Bell and Bell's (2005) report that 70% of educational innovations fail. It is important to recognise that innovation is an interactive and complex organisational process (Slappendel, 1996) and the value of trialling such schemes before full scale implementation is clear.

The final paper from Economics and Business relates to staff engagement, that of casual tutors. For students, the tutorial learning environment is a place where they can apply theory, practise skills, interact with and learn from other students, develop relationships with peers that support learning beyond tutorials and receive individual attention in relation to their progress. Tutors play a vital teaching role yet are often marginalised and work in isolation. Sharni Chan, Penny Crossley, Luke Deer, Diarmuid Maguire, Anna Samson and Anwar Anaid discuss a very different approach, where tutors and unit coordinator worked together to design the tutorials and to provide a supportive space where all could share the ups-and-downs of teaching. In this article we are privileged to be able to read some of their reflective diary entries. Their approach provides a model that we hope will be taken up by others.

Our regular ITL focus including Keith Trigwell's piece, highlights some of the Institute's news and you may want to cast an eye over our selection of learning and teaching conferences on page 35 that will be held over the next six months.

We would like to thank the authors of the papers in this issue. We have appreciated your tireless editorial efforts that have made putting this issue together easier! Our cartoonist Tamara Asmar has read and responded to particular pieces with typical flair and critical creativity. Above all, we want to acknowledge and thank Rachel Williams for her hard work and care with the layout and design of Synergy.

Feedback on Synergy is always welcome; we would like to hear what you think about this issue or any of the pieces in it. Please ring us or catch up with us over coffee on campus some time soon! Finally, best wishes to all Synergy readers for the up-coming conference season and the mid-year break.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the national Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, go to: [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/policy\\_issues\\_reviews/key\\_issues/learning\\_teaching/ltpf/#Discussion\\_Paper\\_-\\_Future\\_Directions](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/learning_teaching/ltpf/#Discussion_Paper_-_Future_Directions)

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# Peer Assisted Study Sessions

## supporting quality learning & student engagement in Economics & Business

**Kellie Morrison**  
Economics and Business



*PASS helped me feel less isolated within the Faculty ... It is definitely worthwhile for bringing people together (S2 2006).*

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*PASS is the best learning environment I've experienced so far being back at uni (S1 2006).*

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*I had never studied Business or Economics before—going to PASS made me feel that the difficulties I was experiencing were normal and that other people were going through the same thing; that there were people to help me out (S2 2006).*

\*\*\*

*It is often hard to gain assistance in University, and sometimes I feel like there's nowhere to go for help. PASS makes it known that the Faculty is doing something to change that as well as to provide assistance, especially to first year students, when the transition to University can be overwhelming (S2 2006).*

The article showcases a learning and teaching initiative known as PASS which stands for Peer Assisted Study Sessions. The overall aim of the program is to enhance the quality of the student experience across core units in the Faculty of Economics and Business. PASS is implemented in every core unit in the Bachelor of Commerce and in three of the Faculty's largest postgraduate core units. In Semester 1, 2007, it will provide approximately 83 one-hour sessions each week of semester, with a capacity to support over 1500 students, having grown from a small pilot where we offered just 21 sessions per week in three units of study.

As a relatively new coordinator of this type of program, first piloting it in 2005, I was interested in understanding more about participants' experiences, not only as part of a commitment to ongoing improvement, but also to develop a more nuanced understanding of students' perspectives about how and why it works. This piece draws upon that endeavour using qualitative data sourced from students' anonymous surveys and from focus groups.

### How does PASS work?

PASS is built upon the underlying premise that well-constructed peer learning opportunities will support effective learning, given that student-to-student interactions enrich learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003; Topping, 1996). The program delivers large scale, discipline-specific, academic support via voluntary study sessions in difficult units. Senior students, known as PASS facilitators, lead the weekly, time-tabled, one hour study sessions for their junior peers. Sessions are smaller than tutorials and usually have approximately 6-12 students.

One of the outstanding characteristics of PASS is the calibre of the students who work in the program. The facilitators are carefully recruited, trained, and paid to guide study sessions that run from week 2 to week 13 of semester. They are students who recently achieved at a least a Distinction grade in the unit they facilitate in, although many have a distinction (or higher) average for all units. The selection of a peer to lead sessions plays a unique role in the learning environment where the collective group knowledge and wisdom becomes the source for students to engage with course content (Wilcox & Koehler, 1996). Participants benefit not

only from active group learning but also from the recent learning experiences of facilitators. Facilitators' primary roles are to build an effective peer learning community, focus on students' needs in planning the session, and foster a sense of belonging. As a team member puts it "Facilitators aren't teachers, rather they are there to lubricate peer discussion and learning". The extra contact and discussion, and the more relaxed environment between peers, is particularly important in higher education programs that provide little personal contact between students and teachers (Glesner-Fines, 2000).

The facilitators are very creative and constantly develop imaginative solutions to engage students. Pedagogical strategies used in PASS include (but are not limited to) encouraging an active learning environment by effectively structuring varied group activities, facilitating discussion, re-directing questions, probing issues carefully, building on students' prior knowledge, helping students to see the relevant links between concepts, avoiding re-teaching, supporting self- and peer-assessment practices and implementation of learning games. PASS is also supported by a dedicated Blackboard course and also incorporates creative and innovative use of Tablet PCs to further enhance interaction. Constructivist learning theory and peer learning research underpin the program's strong pedagogical principles (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989; Topping & Ehly, 2001) in recognition that quality learning and teaching environments are essential to quality learning outcomes, and indeed, for their overall satisfaction (McInnes, James & Hartley, 1995).

#### **Why establish PASS?**

As a Faculty, we were facing some curly questions such as: How do we support units with consistently high failure rates (e.g., 15%-25%), without "dumbing down" the curriculum and without imposing additional workload for academics? How do we effectively respond to the large expansion in student numbers and the steep rise in international student enrolments? Can student support programs foster deep approaches to learning? And, given that enrolments in first year undergraduate units may exceed 1400+, how do we foster a sense of belonging? This issue is also important for postgraduates who have limited opportunities for small group learning because of large class sizes, and the three-hour seminar format of many core postgraduate units. We also recognise that for many students,

transition to university can be complex and difficult, as can the transition to a new country for study. Was there a strategic program, or portfolio of programs, that might assist the Faculty to respond effectively to these complex issues?

In response, programs were designed to support students' transition to university (e.g., Peer Mentoring, Orientation and Transition workshops), but PASS is unique among these both for its embedded and sustained academic focus. Successfully implementing PASS does require considerable commitment, both in financial and human resource terms. Of course, programs requiring such resources are expected to return substantial outcomes. PASS was also implemented because of its demonstrated ability to produce statistically significant improvements in participants' academic performance and reduce attrition after controlling for both prior academic achievement and student motivation (Bidgood, 1994; Coe, McDougall & McKeown, 1999; Kochenour et al., 1997). PASS has been effective in challenging units regardless of whether the difficulty stems from a high technical content or because the units are compulsory/core units where motivation may be low. The majority of our respondents to evaluations agree that PASS improved their understanding (S2 2005 [n=130]: 85%; 2006 [n=225]: 92%). Moreover, preliminary econometric analysis using a switching model suggests that PASS significantly and positively affects students' academic grades, after controlling for a range of factors (e.g. UAI, international status) (Dancer, Morrison & Smith, 2007). Analysis also indicates that participants experienced reduced Fail and Pass grades and increased Credits, Distinctions and High Distinction grades, compared to non-participants.

#### **Why does PASS work?**

There are many evidence-based explanations for why peer learning works (e.g.: Topping, 1996; Topping & Ehly, 2001) and why PASS in particular is successful (Bidgood, 1994; Congos & Schoeps, 1993). However, in this section I focus on how students from our institution have explained that PASS has enhanced their learning and engagement.

#### **Active learning**

PASS encourages students to take an active approach to their learning and to participate in the construction of knowledge



Accounting PASS session: Caroline (middle) facilitating

with other peers: “I like that PASS is not a lecture...you are involved in the learning. PASS is really helping me understand more” (student comment). Alice Yan, a facilitator in Economics, comments “Students own and operate PASS. They are not the spectators. They are the stars in their own show”. Students need to interact in PASS if they want solutions to the questions they bring to the sessions because the model requires that facilitators refrain from simply giving answers. Rather, facilitators elicit group knowledge, using probing questions, to help students learn and find resolutions to their queries. While some students find this frustrating, others value it: “I liked my facilitator’s approach... she never gave us answers and encouraged intellectual autonomy and interaction to work out the answers”.

This active learning extends to assisting students acquire discipline-specific, critical thinking skills and “learning-to-learn” skills in embedded contexts, which is more effective than generic skills programs (Biggs, 1984; Clanchy & Ballard, 1995): “PASS helped by showing me how to study—not just how to memorise” and “I am able to think more critically and deeply”.

PASS also provides well-structured study sessions where material is revised collaboratively and where ideas circulate in productive ways. Throughout students’ comments, it is clear that many deeply value the collaborative learning opportunities: “[I liked] that PASS was interactive...Having things explained and the challenge of explaining concepts to others forces you to cement your own knowledge”.

#### ***Builds motivation***

Motivating students is important given that a lack of motivation contributes to poor performance or discourages persistence (Bennett, 2003). Students commented that “Being with other interested students aiming to gain a greater understanding was very helpful making me want to improve my capabilities” and “I go to PASS because it is good to see everyone working really hard and that motivates you”. Another student explained “I’m not very self motivated, for example, I don’t like going to the library and doing practice questions alone, but I attend PASS

because I am helped by my own peers—this is more motivating and fun”. Importantly, PASS motivated students even when content was challenging: “PASS really increased my confidence when I was having trouble. After being at PASS I felt I could do the work and figure stuff out”.

#### ***Enhancing connections***

The content in many Economics and Business units is technical and complex. It is sometimes difficult for students to see the connections between concepts, particularly when they come to the units with little prior knowledge. However, PASS helps develop students’ understanding of the relationships between different areas of their content. One student noted: “The interaction with others was useful because different ideas were thrown around, helping me build on what I already knew”. Building such connections is important because students who can distinguish relationships between elements of their understanding and apply that understanding tend to have higher quality learning outcomes (Prosser & Trigwell, 1998). The majority of respondents (86%, S2 2006, n=118) agree that “PASS helped me apply theory to practice”. Students explain: “PASS helped me understand the bigger picture” and “I am...able to relate previous knowledge and apply it in a new context”.

#### ***Increasing access to feedback***

PASS also substantially increases the quantity and immediacy of peer feedback for students (Topping & Ehly, 2001). Such feedback is important and beneficial for future learning (Rust, O’Donovan, & Price, 2005). A significant benefit of this type of feedback for the Faculty is that it occurs without additional workload for academics, an important consideration in a research-intensive university. Students comment that “[PASS] provides regular feedback and review of topic material before tutorials and greatly improved the value of tutorials themselves”. Other students noted that PASS helped identify weaknesses: “It showed me areas that I didn’t understand”.

#### ***Extra, regular practice***

As educators, many of us are always encouraging students to avoid simply rote learning concepts. Instead, we urge them to





develop and test their understanding in various ways. PASS provides such opportunities: “As PASS exercises were different to tutorials, I learnt how to tackle different types of problems”. Peter Leong, a facilitator in Business Statistics, notes that “On a very basic level, PASS encourages students to prepare on a regular basis and to keep up to date with lecture content. This is a considerable advantage over leaving everything until the final exam”.

From the facilitators’ perspective, PASS cultivates a learning terrain with the added benefit of a more relaxed, informal atmosphere. Ben Lodewijks, a team member in both Economics and Business Statistics, argues that “PASS makes students work through answers in a sequential way to find the logic underlying it and through co-operative learning, the process becomes more enjoyable”.

Students also enjoy and value the relaxed and informal atmosphere. In Semester 2, 2006, for example, 99% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed PASS. Typical comments were: “PASS is more fun than tutorials—I actually feel more engaged”. PASS also stimulates students’ focus and engagement: “PASS was able to get me thinking and keep me focused—lectures don’t normally do that”. Students reported that the comfortable student-centred, social environment meant they were at ease to ask any type of question: “PASS is friendly and non-threatening... I felt I could ask any questions I wanted”. Some students implied they used the opportunity to ask questions that otherwise may have gone unanswered. “Sometimes you are unsure but it is too minor to ask lecturers... it was good to be able to ask other students” and “I find PASS useful because it provides a chance to clarify little details... In PASS I can ask for an additional example or have a five minute discussion and leave feeling I know it 100% rather than 80%”. Students also valued accessing a learning context focused directly on their needs: “PASS was student-based and focused exactly on where we were having trouble”. Learner-centredness improves retention in part because students feel they belong to an institutional culture, have support for their learning, and have their diverse learning preferences catered for (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006).

#### **Complements lectures and tutorials**

One of the objectives of PASS is to provide a learning environment that is complementary to formal lecture and tutorial environments to enhance the effectiveness of learning in the more formal contexts. Students agree that we have effectively created a complementary learning environment that directly enhances their learning: “Tutorials don’t allow students to clarify what they did not understand from lectures because tutorials tend to cover different or new material; tutorials can be quite large with students afraid to ask questions. In this case...PASS is incredibly helpful.”

In describing how PASS is different to lectures and tutorials, Opal Wu, a facilitator explains “In many aspects, PASS is vastly different. First, there is no authority figure such as a lecturer/tutor and this sets a very different tone to the class...PASS also doesn’t cover new material but rather is aimed at facilitating deep learning in a fun and relaxed way. Finally, PASS is also different in terms of the level of discussion

amongst students—the idea is for lines of communication to develop like a web amongst students, rather than as straight lines between them and the tutor. Again, this is a function of PASS being a peer learning context, where students help each other (and thereby also help themselves)”.

Peter Leong, an Econometrics facilitator believes that “PASS complements students’ other learning activities by allowing students time to think, question and discuss their course content in a supportive environment.

*an informal, but high quality and engaging, learning terrain that complements the more formal lecture and tutorial contexts*

Students do not often have time to really consider any uncertainties they may have during lectures, while there is frequently insufficient time in tutorials to discuss all the important conceptual difficulties—PASS fits in here”. Ben notes that “...A majority of students often have trouble keeping up with tricky or apparently illogical ideas in lectures... The value of PASS is that it goes over these tricky areas again and slowly so that students have another opportunity to understand key concepts”.

Alice Yan, brings a different perspective about how PASS complements lectures and tutorials, suggesting that “*Prima facie*, PASS adds onto them. It is that extra bit of nourishment and provides additional stimulation with activities that consolidate and push students to learn the material in a different way of learning. More significantly, it ties everything nicely together so the student doesn’t have a fragmented feel of the course”.

#### **Critical reflections**

I have painted a rosy picture thus far and so it is important to also be explicit about some of the prickly thorns that arrive with the blossoms. First, for all the benefits generated, leading the program and ensuring high quality outcomes is a time-consuming project. Therefore, any Faculty considering implementing a similar program would need to ensure that sufficient resources (both monetary and human) are in place to sustain the commitment. However, once resources are in place, the rewards are worthwhile. A commitment to a long term view is particularly important given that it takes time for the fruits of such a program to be realised in key teaching performance indicators such as student progression rates and Year 1 to Year 2 retention.

Another ongoing challenge (and opportunity) is working with colleagues who have profoundly different understandings of how students learn and who ques-

tion the effectiveness of peer learning. It takes time in such cases to develop a shared understanding about what PASS can offer, as well as using evidence as the basis of discussion.

Another key challenge I face is questions about the integrity of the PASS content, given the facilitators are students rather than “experts” in the field. The concern is: “What if the PASS team gives wrong advice?” Of course, very occasionally we do get it wrong, or at least not as “right” as the lecturer would want information to be. Additionally, sometimes the questions we develop in PASS are not ideal or our recommended approach to resolve a question is not the one preferred by the lecturer. In response to these valid concerns, I have implemented, among other measures, a system of peer review in PASS team meetings, where the team share and peer review each other’s questions to limit ambiguously written exercises or inaccurate recommendations. Our team are also trained to avoid “giving the answer”. Rather, they use probing questions to elicit the combined knowledge of the group so peers answer each other’s questions. The text book and lecture notes are also used heavily during “re-directs”. When giving answers to each other, we also encourage students to self-and peer-assess and to critically review answers. When these processes are used effectively, the chance of giving “wrong” advice is lessened and the pressure “to be an expert teacher” is reduced.

Of course, not all academics embrace the idea that students should be supported by dedicated learning support programs nor are all academics interested in learning and teaching initiatives. In such contexts, it is useful to have a model that does not require substantial time commitments from unit coordinators. PASS fits the bill in this respect, although the model is enhanced when supportive, collaborative relationships with participating unit coordinators can be developed.



Accounting 1B session: Facilitator (standing) using tablet PCs.

## Conclusion

The PASS innovation has been well received by students. The learning environment that characterises PASS is effective because we employ a range of mechanisms that provide extra motivation and stimulation, enhance connections between content, supply additional and immediate feedback, and encourage students to engage in consistent practice and revision. These strategies culminate in the creation of an informal, but high quality and engaging, learning terrain that complements the more formal lecture and tutorial contexts. Given that new university students face a range of serious challenges when adjusting to university life (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), peer learning programs such as PASS offer effective and viable avenues of large scale academic support.

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# The constructive power of research

*In student learning, and in our learning*

**Kathryn Bartimote-Aufflick**

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*For me, a spirit of generosity prompts persistence in learning which in turn gives rise to the motivation to teach (or share that learning). To teach is to learn. That is, as the expression of your learning collides with the thoughts of others, each arrives at an altered state of knowing, all the while recognising that the beauty of these “knowings” or meanings is different for each individual.*

**W**hy the separation between research and teaching? “Both are concerned with the act of learning” (Brew & Boud, 1995), and indeed learning may be thought of as the main business of a university and inclusive of both research and teaching (Zamorski, 2002). Both have identifiable outputs - it’s merely that the measurement of these has become separated, leading to an estrangement in focus. This is illustrated in Hattie and Marsh’s (1996) finding that for an individual academic there is no significant correlation between research output and teaching quality. However, Hattie and Marsh themselves hope that their study will lead to university policy that improves this relationship and “increases the circumstances in which teaching and research have occasion to meet, and to provide rewards... for demonstrations of the integration of teaching and research” (1996, p. 533).

The interaction of research and teaching is evident in three states: student exposure to relevant research (completed or being completed by someone else); student participation in current research; and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL - investigations by teachers into learning and teaching). These groupings have emerged in interviews of academic staff in the work of Brew (2006), Zamorski (2002), and others.

Having argued for an increasing intimacy of research and teaching, the remainder of this article is devoted to considering how research can enhance student learning, and some issues associated with research of teaching. The mood is intentionally reflective.

## **Research enhancing learning**

Brew (2006, p. 40) refers collectively to student exposure to and student participation in research as “research-enhanced teaching”, the base level of which is exposing students to research findings, perhaps in lecture content or in assignment reference lists. The next level consists of students being involved in what Brew calls “research tasters” (2006, p. 52), which are research activities (often conducted in collaboration with fellow students) that give exposure to one or more skills, processes or facets of the whole research process. And finally, research-enhanced teaching nirvana is reached where students and academic staff collaborate on whole research projects that matter (that is, are publishable or are supported by funding outside of the teaching budget). I give examples of all three levels from my undergraduate teaching of applied statistics below.

## **An example of exposure to research**

Year 1 students form their own groups to research a statistical

analysis technique of their (guided) choice to present to the whole class. The project is very structured in that progress is monitored via draft documents and meetings with each group. Elements of peer review and self reflection are also included. I now see that each group of students is mentored in the art of teaching (and learning).

By containing research activity within units of study we are trusting that students will put together the full picture of research themselves (and also collate and organise knowledge from a range of sub-disciplines). Perhaps some do, but perhaps some do not, as Zamorski (2002) reports: “the complete research process was often invisible to students and [they had a] partial picture...” (p. 426).

#### **A “research taster” example**

A joint assignment on the growth of market vegetables under a variety of sowing regimes in two Year 2 units (applied statistics and crop science) creates a space for students to make these linkages. The research elements of experimental design, field work, laboratory analysis of plant and soil samples, and data analysis, are each led by the most appropriate teacher from either unit. A single report encompassing the whole research project is produced by the students, and applicable elements assessed by the relevant teachers. Unfortunately the quality of this project is reduced by the limited literature review informing the work, practical constraints on the experimental layout, unreliable data resulting from measurements by a large number of students, and the limited scope. However it is a step closer to the optimal research-enhanced learning situation of students and staff working on a full length of research project worthy of dissemination.

*the scholarship of teaching and learning is the demonstration of lifelong learning by teachers*

#### **An example of collaborative research**

Perhaps closer to the ideal is the Agriculture Faculty’s Year 4 research project which constitutes half of the work of that year for all students. The student chooses a project in their area of interest and completes it with guidance from two supervisors. Depending on the research program in the sub-discipline and available funding, a student’s project may be contrived especially for them, or contribute to a larger existing research project (often funded externally). A common assessment regime consists of: an initial oral presentation outlining their planned project; a literature review in the style of a journal review paper; a poster of research findings; an oral presentation of research findings; and finally, a journal style research paper (along with the revised literature review).

According to some University of East Anglia lecturers in Zamorski’s (2002) study, academic staff members see these projects as the culmination of three and a half years of supporting coursework (an illustration of the “linear progression of maturation... from ‘acquisition of knowledge’ to ‘beginning the creation of knowledge’”. Regrettably some students have a poor research experience for reasons such as a lack

of resources to perform a meaningful investigation, limited access to busy supervisors, or through being incapable of independent work (particularly amongst the lower achieving students). Also, very few of the drafted journal papers are published (for various reasons, including: insufficient quality, lack of student motivation, lack of staff time) and so, in my mind, the research process remains somewhat incomplete for the majority of students.

#### **The question of admitting undergraduates to our research ranks**

In aiming to have undergraduate students research alongside academic staff, I believe we will need to address the issue of intellectual property rights, the quality of the research undertaken, and our own attitudes to inclusion. In tackling the first issue I use the definition that “undergraduate research is an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate that makes an original, intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline” (Council on Undergraduate Research, 2003, cited in Brew, 2006, p. 90). Considering two examples from Brew’s book – that of Hasok Chang (2005, cited in Brew, 2006, p. 90) at University College London who is collating several years of student research on the history of chlorine into a published book, and that of Amanda Warren-Smith and colleagues from the University of Sydney (cited in Brew, 2006, p. 87) publishing on horse behaviour and horse fitness research based data collected by students – I am prompted to wonder what level of contribution could result in a student being a co-author on these publications? Are their contributions not deemed sufficiently scholarly to warrant movement from the acknowledgements section to the list of authors? In the case of Zamorski’s (2002) paper, cited frequently in this article, she is the sole author reporting the results of a project which involved considerable input from a co-director of the project and 12 student researchers. The student researchers were paid to “collaborate on the research design, on construction of the interview schedule, on early analysis work, and in some of the dissemination and presentation activities” (p. 413), as well as conduct eight interviews each, transcribe these and summarise them, and self-interview. Even at this heightened level of involvement, are we still limited in our thinking of what students are capable of and how far students are trusted to engage in research (Brew, 2006) and its dissemination? Increased emphasis on formal undergraduate research schemes, such as the summer scholarships offered by the University of Sydney, may enable the setting of parameters for student engagement in research and recognition of outputs.

My second concern regarding the full integration of undergraduate students into research communities is in design of studies. I note particularly the limited reliability (and defensibility) of data collected by large numbers of students, such as in two University of Sydney cases reported by Brew (2006) of equine research (mentioned previously), and the collection of fungal spores throughout the Sydney region by 1000 first-year biology students. The associated error in the multiplicity of measurements by different people must be quite considerable and potentially unacceptable.

Finally in pursuing integration of undergraduate students into our research communities, we need to be mindful of our attitudes and actions. I offer my own reaction to the statement: “a number of students reported that they had been told by their tutors that they could not do ‘proper’ research until the PhD nor attend research seminars, which were only open to post graduate students” (Zamorski, 2002, p. 416). The scribbled note to self was “oh, that’s sad”. Later, however, I realized it had never occurred to me to invite

undergraduate students along to local research seminars, even though I had often thought it fantastic that my friend studying undergraduate linguistics regularly attends linguistics research seminars (albeit a little shyly). Is this a display of hypocrisy, or just ignorance?

Let us now (take a deep breath and) turn away from research-enhanced teaching to instead focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). Hutchings and define the scholarship of teaching as the investigation by teachers of “questions related to student learning... and [doing] so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but of advancing practice beyond it” (1999, p. 13).

### The scholarship of teaching and learning

Carolin Kreber challenges us to think beyond what has been achieved by the scholarship of teaching movement, that is, “having made teaching more visible, scholarly or professional”; and “increasing... knowledge about how students learn and how best to facilitate their learning” (2005, p. 402). She provides an argument for the scholarship of teaching to become a catalyst for change in curricula, university goals, and in society at large. Kreber’s new university goals result in students who are well versed in self-management, personal autonomy and social responsibility (from the broader mantra of lifelong learning) – elements of which have been embraced in the University of Sydney’s Generic Attributes of its Graduates policy (The University of Sydney, 2004).

Alongside these ambitions for student lifelong learning, I would propose that the scholarship of teaching and learning is the demonstration of lifelong learning by teachers, and that this lifelong learning is an agent for change – change in the individual academic; change in dissemination practices of the education research community; and change at the institutional level.

Facilitating my concentration on change in the individual teacher is a model developed by Kreber and Cranton (2000) which is a 3 x 3 matrix representing nine components of the scholarship of teaching with three overarching levels of knowledge – instructional, pedagogical, and curricula – with three levels of reflection as sub-elements of each. The authors give a table of example “indicators” or demonstrable outputs of the nine components. An inventory of my own outputs of SOTL highlighted a gap in the area of development of pedagogical (or theoretical) knowledge, the “most difficult knowledge to develop” (Kreber & Cranton, 2000), however I feel pleased with my progress. To date, I have spent 13 years developing a level of expertise in the discipline of applied statistics through various learning experiences as a student, consultant, teacher and researcher. Conversely, my involvement in SOTL pursuits has been much shorter (only 4 years).

In encouraging more teachers to investigate their teaching and students’ learning I recognize that entry into the arena of SOTL from a discipline outside education (or the social sciences generally) can be challenging. But in time, with learning opportunity, support, and by being included in the community of established education researchers (regardless of discipline), my belief is that those with education research as their second discipline will be able to make considerable theoretical contributions to knowledge.

The second change I notice being produced through the lifelong learning associated with SOTL is an alteration in dissemination practices of the education research community. Jo McKenzie (2006) argues that “dissemination of teaching and learning innovations should be about making it possible for

others to learn to adapt and implement innovations in their own contexts” (p. 1) and advocates an evangelism of SOTL outcomes and products rather than “passive dissemination focused on academic publications and websites” (p. 2). In this way a learner-oriented approach to dissemination is taken and she draws parallels between this approach and that of student-focused teaching.

The third change, that at the institutional level, is at work in our own university with research into the relationship between research and teaching contributing to the establishment of the Research-Enhanced Learning and Teaching policy (The University of Sydney, 2006).

In summary then, I have argued in support of the strengthening of the relationship between research and teaching and considered the part I have played (and can play) in this. The most promising aid to relational fortification is the principle of inclusiveness – by heeding Brew’s (2006) insistent focus on “inclusive scholarly knowledge-building communities” (particularly in the approaches to research-enhanced teaching), and my own observations about the value of embracing discipline-based academics into the education research community.

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# LUCY

## Linking Learning with Leadership

Patty Kamvounias and Jill Kelton



Jill Kelton and Patty Kamvounias

In the 2004 Academic Board report of the review of the Faculty of Economics and Business, the Faculty was commended “for its participation in the [LUCY] Program and using this program to provide female role models and access to women in leadership roles.” In both 2005 and 2006, LUCY was nominated for the New South Wales Premier’s award for achievement of excellence by the public sector in the category of workforce development. So what is the LUCY Program?

LUCY was established in 2004 by the Department for Women (now the Office for Women in the NSW Premier’s Department) and Women Chiefs of Enterprises International. The Faculty was invited to join this partnership and thus became a foundation member of LUCY.

LUCY’s inception and name was inspired by one of the Faculty’s undergraduate students (now an alumna and former LUCY participant). While still studying, “Lucy” made a casual remark to the mother of a friend about her aspirations to be CEO of a large organisation. The mother of “Lucy’s” friend happened to be the Honourable Sandra Nori, then Minister for Tourism and Sport and Recreation, Minister for Women, and Minister Assisting the Minister for State Development in the NSW government. Ms Nori seized upon “Lucy’s” remark and set in motion the plans for what is now an impressive and growing mentoring program.

The program recognises that women are under-represented in board directorship and executive management positions and is a proactive, albeit long-term, strategy to increase the number of women in leadership roles.

LUCY targets female undergraduate students studying business, finance, economics, accounting and law and aims to motivate inspire and educate them about employment opportunities after graduation and about leadership in private and public sector organisations. LUCY achieves this by establishing formal mentoring relationships between

individual students and leaders in participating organisations. The program exposes students to the experiences, networks, practices and expectations of females working in leadership roles and to the styles of communication and cultures of different work places.

Since semester 1, 2004 a total of 65 students have participated in the LUCY program. Applications have now been received for the 20 places available in 2007. Students submit written applications addressing the selection criteria which also require them to indicate their experience of educational disadvantage as outlined by the University’s educational access scheme, the Broadway Scheme. Eligible students are then interviewed by a panel of two or three staff members and if successful, are carefully matched with a mentor. The matching process takes into account the student’s area of study as well as industry sectors in which they wish to gain experience. Before the formal program commences, students attend a briefing session which outlines their roles and responsibilities in the program and the ongoing support that is provided by the Faculty.

Students and mentors meet on a one-to-one basis to discuss their mentoring relationship and their individual goals for the program. The goals may change during the course of the mentoring and the program is flexible enough to accommodate this. Although students may undertake a range of tasks including shadowing, networking, attending meetings and reporting on research, what is key to the success of the program is that they each will spend a minimum of 35 hours work based activity in their mentor’s workplace. These hours may be spread over a number of weeks or months or may take place in a one week block of time, at the convenience of the student and the mentor. Mentors volunteer their time and experience, and their involvement often continues beyond the formal requirements of the program. This commitment is much valued and recognised by the program and our students.

During the program, students are required to keep a reflective learning journal and are specifically asked, through their reflections, to link their experiences to the University’s five Graduate Attributes. In this way students not only improve their learning through reflection, they also become more aware of the skills they are acquiring while studying and can more easily appreciate their relevance and value in the workplace.

The mentors, who are principally female, are all in senior executive roles in a range of industries and in a number of public sector organisations. Participating public sector organisations include NSW Treasury, Department of Commerce, Department of Primary Industries and the Crown Solicitor’s Department. Law firms including Blake Dawson Waldren, Sparke Helmore and Clayton Utz have provided mentoring placements for students studying commerce/law while students studying finance /accounting have been placed with Westpac, ABN AMRO and the Commonwealth Bank.

An end of program evaluation is completed by all participants to provide feedback to organisers, future mentors and students. The evaluation reports are available on the Office for Women website. The program, although designed to benefit students, is also a rewarding experience for mentors who report benefits from their involvement including:

We also interviewed 2006 LUCY students to gather more detailed accounts of how their experiences in the program fitted with their current studies and their own personal ambitions. Sample responses appear below.

**I applied to participate in the LUCY program because**

"... I want to figure out what I want to do in my career..." (Accounting/Finance student)

"... this was a fantastic opportunity to be able to ... gain experience to see whether my career choice was the correct one ..." (Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations student)

"... I was coming to the end of my first degree... and I wasn't really sure what career path I wanted to take ..." (Economics/Social Sciences/Law student)

**The highlights of the LUCY program for me personally were:**

"... know[ing] how to write a resume and also all the tips and tricks in the interviews ..." (Accounting/Finance student)

"... actually going to the offices of [law firm] which is pretty stunning with the views and things ...helps to ... demystify the workplace a bit." (Economics/Social Sciences/Law student)

"... I could see the personal side to being a businesswoman, knowing the stresses and strains and being able to prioritise ... [and] how to balance work and life ..." (Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations student)

**The LUCY program helped me to link my studies with the real world by:**

"... see[ing] the practical application of [my degree] and how it's actually used"

"I undertook a subject that was specifically to do with organisational change and development... The opportunity to be able to participate in an organisation of the time of image change was a really fantastic way to test the waters so to speak."

**I think the program will help me in the future by:**

"[helping in the] short term ... for my graduate recruitment ... [and] long term some possible steps [of] how I actually get ... there..."

"... [providing] contacts ... I can call on ... and [helping] me feel less intimidated about going into the workforce ..."

"... seeing a woman who you can look up to and you see her being successful...it's an inspiration... if she's been able to get to this stage then I sure as hell can get there myself..."



Jane Lewis (Sparke Helmore Lawyers) and Susan Lovato (student)

knowledge of the next generations' goals, motivations and approaches; appreciation of the concerns of young women entering the workforce; understanding the challenges faced by women from non-English speaking backgrounds and the pleasure of working with a young enthusiastic person and listening to their views.



Lucinda Davis (student) and Bernadette Roymont (Sparke Helmore Lawyers)

An additional on-line survey was also sent to all 2006 University of Sydney participants to gather specific information about the effectiveness of LUCY for our students. Feedback from our students indicated that they had gained the following from LUCY:

- A range of industry contacts and networking opportunities;
- Guidance and direction;
- Knowledge of the workplace environment;
- An opportunity to work with a successful female;
- An improvement in professional skills including planning, applying strategy, and communicating.

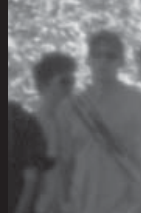
Some students have gained employment as a direct result of their LUCY participation, while others attribute their success in gaining a graduate position to their experiences in the LUCY program.

The program continues to improve based on feedback and our experiences. In 2006, the Faculty assumed increased responsibility for the operation of LUCY, in particular, in relation to the recruitment of mentors and the hosting of key events. As a foundation member of LUCY, the Faculty now finds itself in a role of assisting and advising other universities joining the program. A LUCY alumnae association is being established and the Faculty's new Careers Services Office will be assisting with building relationships with and providing future mentors for LUCY.

For further information about the LUCY program please go to <http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/lucy/>

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## **A shift in ITL focus**

The ITL is currently conducting discussions internally about the focus of its work. The discussions include the Acting Deputy Provost and Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching (Professor Derrick Armstrong). The purpose of the discussions is to enhance the contribution ITL makes to the development of teaching and learning in the University. It is anticipated that those involved in the discussions will widen in the second semester to include members of the university with connections with ITL work.

Changes are expected in the strategies adopted by the ITL, and some related structural changes may also be necessary. One of the main reasons for the change is that while some of the current practices are effective in generating ways of enhancing the student experience, the effective application of those ideas is not uniform across the university. Some of the changes have begun (see below) and it is hoped that most will be in place by the end of 2007.

Two things will not change before the end of the year. The first is the currently advertised courses (such as the Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education) and the 3-day Introduction to Teaching and Learning). If you are enrolled in these courses and your enrolment has been accepted, the course will be offered as advertised until you have completed. The second is the service provided to departments/faculties and academic staff on feedback from students on units of study and whole courses. Indeed the biennial Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) survey is due to be conducted, as planned, with a stratified sample of current degree students in September. The results will be available later in the year.

The major changes currently being discussed are the ways in which ITL academic staff work with the faculties. Currently, ITL faculty staff lead four strategic working groups (groups of academic staff, nominated by the Dean of each faculty) that focus on ways of addressing strategic teaching and learning issues. The issues currently being addressed are evaluation and quality assurance, research-led learning and teaching, generic graduate attributes and postgraduate coursework pedagogies. Reports from two of these groups are presented on pages 29 and 30 of this issue.

ITL support for these groups will be redirected towards a new umbrella group arising mainly out of, and continuing the work of the Evaluation and Quality Assurance (EQA) Working Group. The networks that have been the other strategic working groups will continue to be a part of the resources available to faculties to enhance learning and teaching, but that resource will be funneled through the new umbrella group, and will receive less formal support from ITL.

This approach aims to cast internal efforts to improve teaching in a new light. Such scrutiny highlights the need for effective faculty-led internal quality assurance strategies in relation to the integration of effective strategies for addressing any problems that are identified in courses and units of study. The university has well developed internal quality assurance processes that will support these needs. However, this new climate of accountability will bring with it new challenges in terms of how faculties might be supported in moving forward in this important aspect of teaching and learning.

**Keith Trigwell**

## **ITL Research seminars**

During Semester 1, the ITL ran a successful program of Higher Education Teaching and Learning Research seminars. The presentations this semester have addressed a range of topics, including: indigenous research, student autonomy, the student experience of the PhD, open-ended response data in evaluation surveys, technology and pedagogy, graduate entry interviews, and peer observation for tutors. The ITL research seminar program is attracting diverse audiences, with presenters and participants from across the faculties of the University. Subject to demand, the seminars can now be video-conferenced to colleagues at Westmead Hospital and the Faculty of Health Sciences, Cumberland. Thank you, again, to all our Semester 1 presenters! You can view this semester's ITL Research Seminars website at: [http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/community/researchsem\\_sem1\\_2007.htm](http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/community/researchsem_sem1_2007.htm)

**Kim McShane**

## **Listening to the Student Voice**

A series of seminars on "Listening to the Student Voice at the faculty of .... – the importance of closing the loop in the evaluation and feedback cycle" is being offered to faculties by the ITL. Rachel Symons, Special Projects Officer, is available to talk to faculties on the analysis, reporting and evaluation of the SCEQ and SREQ qualitative data. Each talk will be individually tailored for the host faculty.

The first of these seminars was presented to the Faculty of Veterinary Science on March 22nd and proved very successful.

If you would like your faculty to participate in this series, please contact Rachel Symons to arrange a time. Email: [r.symons@itl.usyd.edu.au](mailto:r.symons@itl.usyd.edu.au); or Phone: 9351 5464.





## **ITL Research Note: The use of student surveys on teaching and learning in Australian universities**

In 2007, Dr Simon Barrie from the ITL is leading a commissioned research study investigating the use of student feedback in Australian universities for the Carrick Institute. This research study is part of a major national three year project on *Teaching Quality Indicators: Rewarding and recognising quality teaching in higher education through systematic implementation of indicators and metrics on teaching and teacher effectiveness*. The project is working towards developing an agreed approach to recognising and rewarding quality teaching and teachers in universities. The study aims to analyse current institutional practice and the dimensions of teaching and learning that student feedback focuses on in Australia, in light of the findings of previous national and international meta-analytic studies.

The research recognises that student evaluation of teaching practices and student evaluation of teaching surveys are complex cultural activities and artefacts - embedded in institutional history and (often) implicit conceptual and theoretical assumptions about what constitutes quality teaching. The project will draw on data from most Australian universities and will engage respondents from these universities as key players in reflecting on current practice. Dr Paul Ginns and Ms Rachel Symons are working with Dr Barrie on the data collection and analysis.

More information on the Carrick Teaching Quality Indicators Project is available on the Carrick Website at <http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/go>

## **Learning and Teaching Alumni Chapter Event**

Alumni who attended the latest event held by our Chapter enjoyed a captivating presentation from Keith Trigwell, Director of the ITL, about his experience at Oxford University. Listening to Keith's research story and seeing the sun-drenched – unbelievable but true – lanes, quads and steeples fill the screen, one could almost feel the ambience of this hallowed and often outrageously traditional institution.

Oxford is something of an anachronism in that there is relatively little constructive alignment between the lectures (run by departments), the tutorial system (run by colleges) and the protracted examinations, yet students value highly the very high order learning outcomes they achieve in 11-14 hours per week of self study and intensive meetings with their college tutors. They also esteem Hunting the Mallard, a curious but noble custom practiced at All Souls College – and celebrated once every century (2001 was the last occasion) – that has academic staff pushing out their chests to sing the "Mallard Song" while avidly searching the college, breaking down the occasional door, to locate a large duck.

These and other intricacies of the Oxford system were wryly elucidated by Keith; it is a system which to date seems to have escaped the massification of higher education, and its strengths lead us to question whether some of what we call good teaching in modern universities is actually over teaching. Keith's cogent research, convincing tales and a delicious lunch ensured a pleasurable and edifying experience.

**Carole Cusack, Graham Hendry, Gary Oliver**

## **Encouraging Role-based Learning Environments @ USyd EnRoLE**

For many of us, finding educationally powerful ways of engaging our students is a constant challenge. Role play and simulation activities can provide an effective solution. They offer students an active learning experience and enable the exploration of real life issues and the development of skills in the safety of the classroom setting, whether face to face or virtually.

Project EnRoLE, which is a Carrick funded strategy, is aimed at supporting current and new role play designers, through the development of a community of interested teachers who can share experiences and expertise in a collegial manner. It is a collaborative venture between five universities, led by Professor Sandra Wills at the University of Wollongong. At the local level, a USyd cluster has been established for any individuals interested in the use of role play in teaching and learning. The USyd cluster was launched in June.

If you are interested in finding out more information about Project EnRoLE or would like to attend project workshops please contact the USyd Cluster Leader, Liz Devonshire via email [l.devonshire@med.usyd.edu.au](mailto:l.devonshire@med.usyd.edu.au) or phone 9926 7610.

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# profile



## Dr Manjula Sharma, School of Physics, Faculty of Science

*“I learn heaps of things when I’m teaching...”*

Manju Sharma arrives for our chat after a lively, interactive last lecture with an undergraduate group of students who haven’t studied Physics previously. “This is one particular class where it is possible to ask a lot of questions and they are able to give answers.... It’s lots of nods and lots of yes’s and you ask a question – they know the answer. And they’re confident and they give out the answer like, you know, everyone says the same thing together.”

Manju’s energy for teaching, and her pleasure in her students’ learning, are evident to anyone who knows her as well as her students. Indeed her enthusiasm and efforts in developing the Physics workshop tutorials, her recent studies in education and her on-going pedagogical research, culminated in her receiving a 2006 University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Teaching.

### Pathway into teaching

Manju came to university teaching via a non-traditional path. While undertaking graduate studies at the University of the South Pacific, she became involved in projects developing Physics modules for industry colleagues in the Fijian Ministries of Agriculture and Fisheries. In her early years at the University of Sydney, Manju found herself working full-time – teaching, developing laboratory materials, as well as completing her PhD on “Holmium-doped optical fibre filters for microscopic applications.”

Teaching is like eating and breathing, Manju maintains. It comes naturally. But improving teaching does not come without some effort! Becoming aware of student learning is the first step, and researching how students learn is critical for developing this awareness. Manju has also had supportive mentors in the sciences, in particular, her PhD supervisor, Colin Shepherd, who influenced not only her teaching, but who also modelled and encouraged her to research into student learning.

### Leadership in teaching and learning: the physics workshop tutorials

Manju’s citation for her 2006 Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Teaching stated that, “Manjula Sharma has had a significant impact on the way Physics is taught particularly at the junior Physics level, led by her development and promotion of the workshop tutorial concept, which emphasizes small group peer learning.” In fact, the workshop tutorials began as an experiment! A fellow tutor, with whom Manju was supposed to be teaching tutorials, was hospitalised.

*“I was supposed to do the tutorials on my own. And I couldn’t do them on my own because it just has so many hours and so on.*

*So I just ended up photocopying questions and sticking them up so the kids could do them together in groups. And that fell into place and student numbers attending the tutorials increased. It was working.”*

Nowadays the collaborative workshop tutorials are integrated into large first year courses, to support the learning of about 1000 students per week. The workshop tutorials align with Biggs’ (1999) 3P model for university learning, in that students’ prior experiences and knowledge, and their perceptions of, and experiences with, current teaching materials and environment are considered. The aim is to keep the atmosphere stress-free, she says, by having no formal marks assigned to the tutorials. The learning is student-driven, rather than assessment-driven. A greater share of the control and responsibility for learning is with students. This strategy caters as well to the different learning styles that emerge within a diverse student population.

### Teaching physics: pleasures, change & challenges

Manju says she learns through teaching, and she learns more about not simply the content and material. No two lectures are ever the same, not even those repeat lectures that cover the same content and processes. According to Manju the best thing about teaching is the Physics itself! “It’s so challenging in the sense that it’s got so many facets to it. You’ve got the language, the skills, the tools, the diagrams. You cannot explain it and you cannot understand it in one way.... There’s no one way of looking at things.”

Manju has observed lots of changes in the teaching of Physics. She is optimistic about the benefits of new technologies to help lighten the teaching-learning load. She points to the increasing availability of audio-visual facilities, and easy access to the Internet. It’s a matter of figuring out what’s best, and how best to optimise different technological options for her classes.

Physics students have changed a lot too.

*Once they make a commitment to Physics, like the students in the advanced classes, they do put in the effort. I don’t think that students on the whole know what our expectations are of them, although they do have expectations of what the university system is going to do for them. I think a fair few of them come in thinking that the HSC was the hardest thing they’ve done to date and it’s going to be easy for them from then on. If you consider the flyers and the advertisements and advising that goes on in Careers Days and things like that, how much do we actually inform them about what their commitment should be?*

Manju believes monitoring students’ expectations is as important as establishing them. However, with large classes,

it is not a trivial task to monitor student expectations. Manju's colleague, John O'Byrne, continues to survey Physics students on the amount of time they spend studying Physics per week. Manju notes, "It's usually much less than the way the course is actually designed. For every contact hour, they're supposed to have one hour of [private] study. Whether students invest that time is the big question".

Manju is also aware that the basic content areas of Physics have been shifting, and Physics is becoming more multi-disciplinary. The boundaries are shifting to include areas such as bio-physics, medical physics, radiology, scientific visualisation, nano-science and photonics (optical fibres, communication systems). According to Manju, these subjects were not even "on the Physics radar" that long ago.

Manju identifies current and new challenges in her university teaching. For her, a different type of personal challenge would be to teach Physics at higher levels, but then time is finite, she notes a little wistfully.

### Researching, teaching

Manju appreciates the fact that the School of Physics values its teaching and its commitment to its students. Once the Sydney University Physics Education Research Group (SUPER) group, that she leads, was given the recognition of being a research group, it was afforded all the luxuries that other research groups in the School were afforded.

Physics students continue to recognise and support SUPER by enrolling in PhDs and by undertaking research projects with Manju and her colleagues. Students are introduced to the methodologies of education research in their research projects and exposed to a range of new methodologies in hearing about the work of others in the group.

The SUPER group continues to receive recognition, too, from within the broader Physics community in the form of grants that the group has achieved. Indeed, Manju asserts that the work that SUPER does, helps bring the Physics teaching community together through mechanisms such as grants and collaborative research projects. In one Australian Universities' Teaching Committee project which was led by

Manju and her SUPER colleagues, the teaching of physics was investigated in all 34 Australian universities at the time. Good practice in Physics across Australian universities was collected, written up and published in a Physics teaching-learning booklet. The current Carrick Grant project, involving 17 higher education institutions, evolved out of the earlier project. This project has taken up three areas of focus for closer examination: service teaching, undergraduate lab-based teaching, and graduate employability.

### Recognition

Manju firmly believes that the best recognition for her teaching comes from the fact that she has enthused other students into doing research projects, Honours degrees and PhDs in Physics education. Her efforts are recognised when other people want to take up this research area which, as she points out, "is actually not a traditional research area within Physics". She is pleased too that her work has been recognised by her colleagues in the School of Physics who have supported her work as a research area. "Whatever is my work about – that's been recognised. Actually I don't think it's possible for me to separate my teaching from my research."

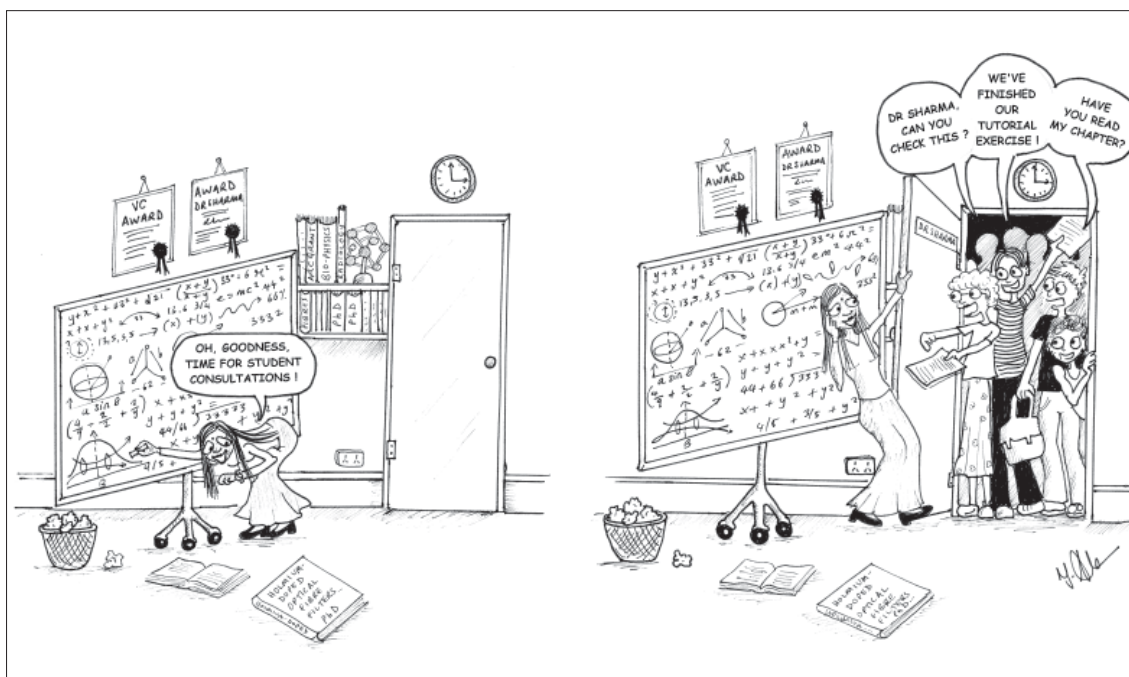
*Dr Sharma continues to lead the revival in teaching in the sciences in the tertiary level, which in turn continues to enhance the University's good name for research-led teaching.*

These words, from Manju's citation for the 2006 Vice-chancellor's Award for Outstanding Teaching perhaps best sums up her enthusiasm for learning and her commitment to excellence in teaching in Physics at the University of Sydney.

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Dr Manjula Sharma is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Physics, a recipient of a 2006 Vice-Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Teaching, and she is the head of the Sydney University Physics Education Research Group (SUPER).  
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# Power, democracy & engagement - exploring my teaching footprint

Mark West

Discipline of Medical Radiation Sciences



I am interested in what it is about the student experience that encourages rebellion against, and/or dependence upon, the power figure in the classroom. I've already seen both these instances in my teaching experience. Could rebellion be due

to a student's inability to see the morality in a particular teaching and learning experience? Does this go some way to explaining my own alienation, as a student and a teacher?

During 2006, I undertook (and completed!) the ITL's Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education). I was able to explore many of my experiences as student, teacher, and member of a mentoring relationship using the framework presented in the course. One prominent theme was the use of critical self-reflective processes in teaching practice. Engaging in these reflective processes helped me explore my own challenges in teaching and learning and uncovered a number of questions that I found interesting.

One major challenge I faced on my return to study was recognising that occasionally I'd become an assessment focussed, marking criteria satisfying student - completely or partially disengaging from the learning process. On reflection, I felt this seemed to be based on the assumptions I'd made (as a student) of my role and how I felt I belonged (or not) within my learning community and its learning events. This made me particularly interested in how we as teachers influence feelings of belonging. Are we really aware of how our "self" (personality, humanity, and commitment to democracy) can be expressed by virtue of the power we have in a classroom?

The implications of this became evident to me last semester when a guest lecturer from a hospital spoke to a third year class I coordinate. The guest was recommended by a colleague and I did not preview the content. In the lecture, case studies describing terminally ill cancer patients were discussed.

During the lecture one of the students walked out.

As course coordinator for my discipline I often meet individually with students and the student mentioned had met with me last year to discuss her ongoing depressive mental illness. Some time after the guest lecture the student came to see me again. The student explained that the guest had made offhand remarks about cancer patients using "happy-pills" (anti-depressants). The guest had personally offended my student, unintentionally mocking her mental illness. More alarming was that the guest also detailed the method a patient had used for suicide. As my student pointed out, this type of discussion risks causing triggers

in someone in a vulnerable psychological state (Lifeline, 2006). From my understanding, my student was in a very vulnerable state, meeting with a psychiatrist weekly to discuss issues, including suicide, associated with her depression.

The seriousness of this situation could not be overstated - I was worried for my student. Lines between professional duty and the emotiveness of the situation were very blurred. How could I resolve my personal concern for my student with my professional duty? What had the graduate certificate taught me about dealing with this? The negative emotional experience for my student which had disengaged her from learning (Boud, 1985, p.22) needed to be corrected, but how? With mental health now a popular social issue I felt under more pressure to be seen to "do the right thing" - obviously what Rowland (2000, p.108) means when he discusses how external (social) factors influence our values as teachers.

My student needed to be heard and valued and I felt it my responsibility to ensure this. There was no democracy within the classroom (Rowland, 2000, p.101). The guest's power had allowed her to force a personality and belief system on the class. My student did not feel able to directly challenge it and chose to walk out instead - an act of empowerment in itself but insufficient to provide a total "re-balance".

I was relieved when the student presented me with her own solution; emailing a PowerPoint presentation she had prepared outlining issues and common assumptions regarding mental health and depression (in a cancer therapy context). My student negotiated with me to present this to the class and in doing so was able to re-balance her feelings of democracy. The student admitted this was somewhat therapeutic for her also.

On reflection, the issue which concerned me was - what effect did this process have on the other 48 students in my class? The emotiveness of the situation influenced my personal decision-making - I focused on the individual student and less so on the silent majority. In trying to re-balance one "wrong", I used my own power to satisfy my personal motives. So what of the silent majority? How did they interpret me allowing one student the privilege of presenting to the whole class? Could I have accommodated the needs of more than one student in the same way if many had approached me about similar (or different) issues regarding lecture content?

I'm unsure how active (or passive) my students were in the process as, preoccupied with the individual, I didn't seek their feedback (apart from the individual student in question). One lone student gave me unsolicited positive feedback but a handful of others just asked "is this in the final exam?". Could I have sought feedback formally from my students? Would I have then run the risk of appearing opportunistic in the eyes of my original student? It appears to me, as Shulman (2002, p. vii) suggests, "every act is potentially permeated by ethical questions".

Perhaps the best course of action would be for me to engage in further inquiry into ideas associated with equality between the silent majority and vocal minority. Does the silent majority actually need representation? Why are they silent? It is because they have no power? Are they apathetic to the power they possess? Or do they see no motivation to use it? Are they only truly empowered when engaged with a teaching and learning process?

What might the rules for this engagement be? My student turned her negative experience into a positive learning outcome. Does this suggest that by making our students uncomfortable, even alienated, we can trap them - through cause and effect - in a learning process? Might it be merely our duty then to ensure our "trap" is morally sound according to Shulman's (2002, p.vii) "pedagogical imperative"?

As mentioned earlier, my engagement (and/or alienation) with my own study in 2006 led me to feel as if I was caught in an educational trap. Some of the assessments in the Graduate Certificate made me uncomfortable. I was forced into group-work assessment pieces and had to write a teaching philosophy statement after less than a year's teaching experience. I was unsure of my relationship with teaching and learning and didn't really know what was (is) my philosophy.

I found myself distracted and alienated but couldn't quite understand why. Discussing these ideas with my mentor (another avenue of the reflective process) helped uncover much of my difficulty was associated with my attempts to judge the morality of the learning activities. I was "rebellious" because of my reduced motivation and emotion-inspired disengagement (Boud, p.22, 1985) from the course. Reflecting on my own experience of "doing what my students do" (such as group work) in the Graduate Certificate gave me valuable insight and understanding of the student experience and I feel I can use it to inform my teaching. I found being a student can be political, un-democratic and uncertain.

What then might our role as a teacher be in this? How can we demonstrate an awareness of these potentials in the experiences we plan for our students? Surely the increasing massification of higher education that Macfarlane (2004, p.9) discusses will also increase the chances of us (as higher education professionals) failing to meet our own expectations as well as those of our "clients" (Gordon, 1997, cited in Macfarlane, p.8, 2004)? I feel my potential for failure is high and inevitable!

Perhaps then all we can do is ensure we are confident in our decisions as teachers. Trigwell et.al (2000, p.5) suggests we can achieve this by ensuring transparency in the methods we employ. We can ensure our confidence by justifying our decisions using literature and our own scholarly inquiry into the effect our decisions have on our students - exploring our own "teaching footprint".

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# The role of the casual tutor in design and delivery of courses:

## Experiences from teaching Geopolitics in 2006

Sharni Chan, Penny Crossley, Luke Deer,  
Diarmuid Maguire, Anna Samson, Anwar Anaid



Sharni Chan, Diarmuid Maguire, Anna Samson and Luke Deer

*“Why aren’t we on the Department’s list of teachers?” (Sharni)*

While some attention is now being focussed on the role of casual research assistants and their place in the research team (Hobson, Gar & Jones, 2005), and there is some literature which focuses specifically on tutors and professional development (Barrington, 1999) and a growing literature on casualisation in universities (see Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa, 2006; Junor, 2004), there is a gap when it comes to examining the relationship between lecturers and casual tutors and much less material which positions tutors as an important variable within the teaching process.

This article draws from the experiences of a unit coordinator and five tutors teaching a first year unit with over 500 students. We argue that addressing the “tutor variable” through a more collective and reflective approach to teaching has a positive impact on the coherence of the unit, the satisfaction of the teachers (unit coordinator and the tutors) and the educational experience of the students. In a time when academics are asked to deliver higher quality courses with fewer resources and limited contact with their students, we also argue that there are efficiencies to be gained from remunerating tutors fairly for their engagement in course design and delivery.

The fact that the literature overlooks the importance of the role of casual tutors is surprising, yet not altogether unpredictable when you consider the struggle for tutors to gain recognition more broadly within the academy. Like all teaching staff, tutors confront a long tradition that sees teaching as less important than research. As casual employees they battle the precarity of short term contracts, no paid leave, fluctuating work intensity and substantial periods of unemployment. In many university departments they are the front-line, human face representing the academy, yet they struggle against institutional invisibility and isolation from the academic “community”.

The institutional invisibility of casual tutors is reflected in the processes by which tutors become involved in the teaching process. Although a unit may be developed and refined over several years and take up much time and effort on the part of

the unit coordinator, the tutors, who will take up a large part of responsibility for its delivery, are brought onboard at the last minute. In some faculties including our own, contracts are typically only made available to tutors on the day they begin teaching for the semester and continue for only 14 weeks. This is partly due to students signing up late for courses but also occurs as a result of administrative practises. Inevitably, this means that tutors are not involved at any time during the planning of the unit and typically there is little paid time allocated for discussion or negotiation amongst the teaching team to develop a common understanding around how they will deliver the unit to students.

This raises a number of issues in terms of the potential for any teaching team to collaborate effectively and for the unit to be delivered in a coherent manner. In our experience, a distinct gap can develop between the lecture program and the tutorial programme because of this lack of fit between the unit coordinator’s expectations and the understandings of the tutors. This is further exacerbated by a number of factors, including discontinuity between lectures and tutorials that can develop when tutors are not paid to attend lectures; when the tutorial program is vague or underdeveloped; and when there is no established avenue for communication and reflection between the lecturer and tutors - or indeed amongst tutors themselves. This can create difficulty for tutors in dealing with a lecturer who demands total obedience to a pre-set tutorial program leaving no room for creativity, initiative, and experimentation. This not only limits the professional development opportunities of tutors, but also contributes to poor student experiences.

Equally, it can pose a problem when the unit coordinator provides no guidance for tutorials and leaves tutors to pick the pieces up from lecture slides and the reading kit by themselves. When tutors are teaching in the unit for the first time, they may be unfamiliar with the many unspoken expectations of the new unit coordinator. Many may also come with beliefs established by past experience – for example, “Professor So-and-So set our tutorials (or allowed us complete freedom); this is the way it must be done here”. Any of these factors provide ample opportunities for miscommunication between the lecturer and tutors, and between the tutors themselves, and can mean that a well planned, well thought out unit can easily falter because of a failure to factor in the tutor variable.

In our experience these problems do not arise because individual lecturers place little value on the contribution of their tutors. Rather, it is the nature of casualisation that has made the role of tutors more analogous to “seasonal fruit-pickers” than academic

staff. Yet tutors provide the “missing link” between the hopes and intentions of the unit coordinator and the unit outcomes. We felt this needed to be overcome through the further engagement of casual tutors, as Kift argues: “Casual staff should be made to feel part of the program into which they teach in both a philosophical and academic sense... but also in an institutional sense” (2003, p.15).

### The beginnings of a better way

Before the beginning of first semester at The University of Sydney (February 15, 2006) we had a meeting of a new teaching team in First Year Geopolitics (unit coordinator and five tutors). As we discussed the issues above, we came to the conclusion that there just had to be a better way!

Our first step was to bring together the teaching team before semester started so that we could all make some meaningful contribution to the unit. We were immediately discouraged from this initiative by a set of rules circulated in an email which confirmed our peripheral status. It said: “No-one is to claim for anything except conducting tutorials and marking. We are not paying for tutors to attend lectures. Tutors’ preparation time is included in their pay. Nor are we paying for anyone to attend meetings.” Other universities in Australia recognise that if attending lectures and meetings is put in the same category as preparing tutorials, doing readings, keeping up administrative requirements and hours of student consultation, then they would be clearly exploiting casual staff. In recognition of this, universities such as UWS pay their casual staff to attend meetings throughout the semester (including one crucial meeting prior to semester starting), as well as lecture attendance, as separate from their weekly “preparation time”. In the end our meeting to prepare Geopolitics was paid for out of the unit coordinator’s research budget – a less than ideal compromise.

At our first meeting, the unit coordinator presented a draft timetable for teaching with the idea that we could take a collective approach to teaching this unit and that each of us could contribute and take ownership of issues within the course. This involved: a discussion of our various teaching philosophies and our understanding of their effects on students; input into tutorial content and design; agreement to maintain separate diaries to facilitate a critical reflection on our methods; agreement to monitor student attitudes to tutorials and lectures through formal and informal evaluations and professional development opportunities. At that meeting in February 2006, we agreed to write this article collectively, utilising emails, personal reflections and meetings throughout the semester.

### Discussion of teaching philosophies

This discussion acknowledged our various approaches that arose from a mixture of experience and individual personality – “otherwise we would hire robots” (Diarmuid). This opened a dialogue around our expectations and an awareness of some of our collective weaknesses:

*Typically we come from the top layer of students at the undergraduate level. We have the expectation that everyone behaved the way we did when we were undergrads and are shocked to find that students do not behave as we did in first year. We are prone to a sense of nostalgia, a feeling that in our days standards were higher, and that the market of education has let in poorer students. These feelings are rarely true and merely reflect the fact that we were nerds, trendy nerds perhaps, but nerds nonetheless (Diarmuid).*

This also involved a discussion of our role in helping first year students navigate their first experiences of university:

*Most students will not understand the substantial pedagogical difference between a lecture and a tutorial, most will not have read the*

*unit outline in its entirety, a majority need to know basic things like where to submit assignments, and a significant section will leave the university after this first experience. We need, in particular, to guard against students at-risk dropping out altogether. (Diarmuid)*

That is, we needed to understand that some students simply want to pass the unit, others were highly motivated, the rest fell somewhere in between, but all students needed to overcome fear, particularly in a class of our size. We agreed to bear these factors in mind in applying our teaching philosophy and to reflect on our own starting point.

### Input into tutorial content and design

This discussion was prompted by our diverse experiences tutoring in a range of different units. Consistent with some of the literature that identifies casuals as reporting feeling “isolated, peripheral and unsupported” (Coaldrake, 1999; Sheard & Hagan, 1999, cited in Kift 2003, p.15), tutors recounted their experiences of feeling like they were making it up as they went along and of being:

*Out there on our own. We aren’t paid to go to the lectures – so we are always a step behind. This is especially the case because I am often teaching in units for the first time - the material is new, you don’t get a sense of what the overall unit is about until you are half way through, and so I can never be one hundred per cent confident that I’m on the right track. (Sharni)*

Other tutors expressed frustration with unit coordinators who exercise complete control over tutorial design: *The number of students has risen much faster than number of tenured teaching staff. With over 500 students now crammed into first year units and the lecturer spread over a bigger workload, by and large, lecturers no longer facilitate tutorials. How can you have reflective teaching in that environment? Instead you often get pre-set tutorial programs that look more like mini-lecturers than vehicles for student centred learning. (Luke)*

## The ups-and-downs of tutoring cannot be negotiated alone.

As another tutor pointed out: *Each class is different, and “a one size for all” tutorial design does not always work. What is really required is room for a creative approach and a style of teaching that reflects the ambiance of a particular class, the quality of the students and the requirements of the time. (Anwar)*

Lack of flexibility in tutorial design had an additional effect on job satisfaction. When unit coordinators dictated exactly how the tutorials were to be run, the potential for autonomy and creativity on the part of tutors was removed to the extent that made some tutors feel patronised: *You might think it would make your job easier, just delivering all these pre-laid tutorial plans every week, but it’s not. We work hard to be good teachers – this is what we do. (Sharni)*

Working in large units also poses particular challenges. There had to be a balance so that we were not all “doing it alone” and “wandering around in the dark” each week but we were not all straitjacketed into a set of pre-determined tutorial plans either. We felt that there were ways we could ensure consistency among the five tutors without sacrificing flexibility, autonomy or creativity. Our solution was to take turns in planning the tutorials among the five tutors. In practice this meant that each week a

## Here are two edited examples from tutors' diary entries:

### 29.03.06 Anna Samson

Hey everyone, even though I committed earlier to only discussing the assignment at the end of class, I decided to get it out of the way at the beginning, which in retrospect I think was a good idea. There were not many questions, thankfully, mostly because the big issues were resolved by the handout and by Diarmuid and Sharni's discussions/correspondence with students (thanks!). The main concerns related to:

- (a) being worried that the two articles didn't have completely divergent viewpoints;
- (b) determining how much time to spend analysing each of the articles;
- (c) using outside sources (I think this was mostly because of earlier inconsistent messages in different classes); and
- (d) word limit.

All in all, I think they were happy with my responses, but I guess we'll wait and see how their assignments turn out!

As for the substantive bit of the tute: the tutorial plan was really helpful, although there ended up being a bit of a diversion because of how my first activity seemed to take over and encompass all the other issues we had discussed covering in class.

So I began by breaking them up into pairs and getting each pair to volunteer to think about a particular country or group of countries. I made a conscious effort to distribute the history people around the pairs and encouraged them to share their knowledge with non-history people.

Students spent about 5 mins quickly brainstorming what the major concerns and issues confronting their country/ies were during the Cold War period. I emphasised that I was looking for really big picture, broad brushstrokes-type stuff, with the covert aim that they would highlight the major issues raised in our tutorial outline.

When we returned as a group we went over the points raised in pairs and got responses from other pairs as to how they viewed their relationships with other countries or their position on particular issues during that time. This was more of a collaborative exercise than simply each pair trying to "be" their country. In the course of that discussion, all the big issues of the main tute questions were covered.

It was particularly heartening that some of the better students drew links themselves between the work we had done in previous weeks and what we were talking about today.

Ok, that's about it. Hope the rest of your tutes go well!

Anna

### 22.3.06 Sharni Chan

My tuts yesterday turned out pretty well. I survived and managed to enjoy them despite a sleepless night and much trepidation on the way. I always tend to run out of time in the first one (poor things seem to end up being the test dummies) and have the routine pretty snappy by the time I get to the third and then after lunch the fourth one seems to be a bit all over the place again. They seemed to enjoy the material and some found it a fascinating change from the way they had previously thought about it and are starting to get their teeth into it (small victory no. 1). I think I have this idea of what I want them to come away from the class with but am not yet asking the right questions (or enough of the right questions) to get them to that point (challenge no. 1). Also, this may have allowed too much room for the history buffs who tended to dominate and want to display their extensive hold on the finer details of world history which was tedious and difficult to manage time-wise.

I think I almost offended one student - he asked a question that I wasn't sure of the answer, so I put it to the class. He responded to this by asking "isn't it a question worth asking?" I paid some extra attention to him throughout the remainder of the tutorial encouraging and affirming him and he seemed to respond positively (small victory no.2)...

tutor would email their tutorial plan to the rest of the group, including the unit coordinator. In addition, this often involved a face-to-face meeting of the teaching team, not only to discuss the tutorial plans for the week, but to talk about issues that were arising in the course, provide feedback to the unit coordinator about any student concerns about the unit or lecture material, and importantly to offer support to the teaching team. This allowed us to take ownership of the tutorials as a group in a supported context. It also provided a fantastic opportunity to experiment with different activities, receive feedback from the rest of the team, and to learn new ideas from one another. Also, in our teaching team we had individual expertise on China, nationalism, international law, political economy and overseas development, so we saw no point in wasting these valuable resources.

In the end, we managed to turn essentially individual and solitary work into a collegial endeavour and in the process we opened up channels of communication, understanding and feedback not just between tutor and student but between lecturer and tutor, and amongst tutors. One tutor wrote:

*During tonight's tutors meeting, the true value of getting our heads together and working collectively on these things was revealed!! Thanks so much for everyone's great feedback and ideas. As a result I have a revised tutorial plan for this week that hopefully incorporates some of the ideas that came out of the meeting tonight. I feel more confident about going into my tutorials tomorrow as a result. (Sharni)*

### Diary keeping

At our initial meeting we made an agreement to maintain separate diaries to facilitate critical reflection on our methods. Week to week these diary entries were shared with one another via email. This process of debriefing the week's successes and failures "out aloud" amongst colleagues helped us not only to better deal with our own frustrations or anxieties in a constructive manner but we found we could learn a lot from one another's candid entries about what worked and what did not. The diary entries were also an important way to channel feedback on the unit back to the unit coordinator and served to keep them "in the loop with what was happening on the ground" (Diarmuid) and adjust his lecture plans accordingly. Diarmuid also sent tutors his lecture notes in advance of key transitions throughout the course and asked if they met with students' understanding.

### Monitoring of student attitudes to tutorials and lectures

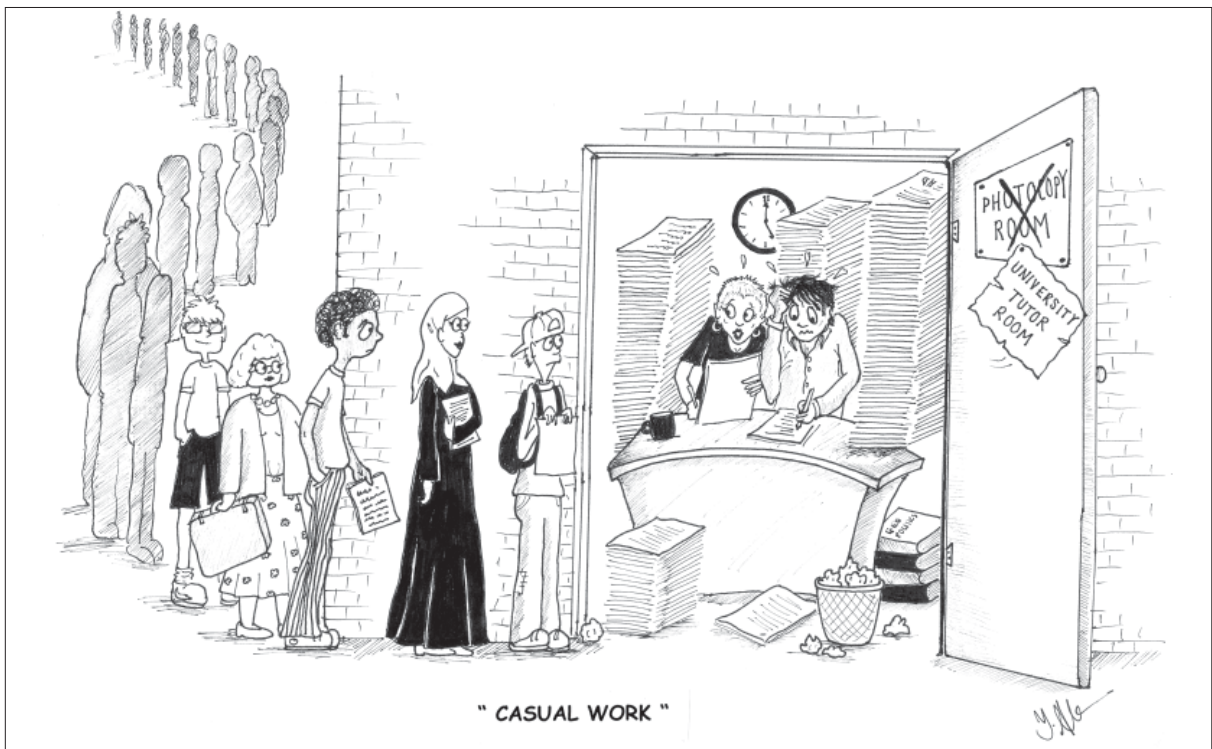
In terms of our commitment to reflective teaching we took up the opportunity to seek feedback from students at several points throughout the semester and to share our learning experiences with one another through the kind of diary entries above. This involved informal evaluation methods, for example asking the students to make posters of the ideas they had gained on butcher's paper or through the use of short, anonymous questionnaires.

These informal methods proved to invaluable in eliciting feedback from students and giving tutors some early warning signs of problems and an opportunity to salvage a tutorial turning bad.

### Professional development opportunities

One view of casual tutors is that they are like shelf stackers – there to deliver a pre-packaged product to the consumer. Another way of viewing casual tutors is to see them as apprentices to be trained for a future contribution to the academy. As Barrington argues: "catching these young university teachers when they are quite enthusiastic and can see the tangible benefits of such training may augur well for the next generation of academics" (1999, p.10). It was the latter approach that was adopted in this case and so, in our initial meeting, some opportunities for professional development were outlined, for example, each tutor would be given the opportunity to give a 15-20 minute guest lecture. Following on from this, the unit coordinator also offered to come into our tutorials to observe our teaching methods in action. Diarmuid learned a lot about new ways of teaching tutorials from observation and will incorporate these techniques into his own practises. Tutors who took up this opportunity found it was a great affirmation of their efforts and the skills they were developing. Not only did tutors benefit from the encouragement and constructive feedback of a colleague but, as a result of the tutorial observation, the unit coordinator was able to provide a detailed reference attesting to the quality of our work for our teaching portfolios. At the end of the course, every tutor received a personal letter of recommendation from the unit coordinator to help with our professional development.





### Conclusions

Tutoring can be both intellectually and emotionally challenging work, even when everything is going to plan. The ups-and-downs of tutoring cannot be negotiated alone. However we are frequently expected to do so with minimal structural support and fewer resources. This is how we decided there had to be a better way! We approached the issue of course design and tutorial content from the point of view of critical reflection on methods, open discussion of philosophical approaches, attempts to find a happy medium between strict instructions versus a lack of support and coordination. We argued that tutors should be involved at the level of design: courses are strengthened by different experiences and backgrounds of teaching staff (lecturer and tutor alike). The course is something which tutors should assist in designing, and this should be reflected through guest lectures, and career-oriented rewards to assist their professional development.

Casual tutors juggle many employers throughout the week: they travel between workplaces and in most cases have no “home base” from which to work from. While we gained much from this process, we must emphasise that resources need to be made available for this collaboration. At a time when there is increasing pressure on academic staff to deliver higher quality courses with fewer resources and reduced face-to-face contact with students, it is clear that tutors need to be paid for collaboration in course development. This is a sound investment that will have immediate and long-term benefits. Such an approach to course delivery not only maximises the efficiency of tutors’ time but promotes collegiality and ensures coherence and excellence in teaching.

### Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Amani Bell for help with the literature on teaching and learning.

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**Sharni Chan** won the Dean’s prize for Excellence in Tutoring in 2006 and is undertaking a PhD at the University of Sydney.

**Penny Crossley** won the same prize in 2005 and is now a practising lawyer in London.

**Anna Samson** was nominated for the prize in 2006 and now works in the Law School at the University of Sydney.

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# Talking ETHICS

*conceptions*

*values*

*and approaches*



The conversation reported here is part of on-going discussion and dialogue within the University's Ethics Network, a group comprising lecturers who teach ethics across the many of the disciplines of higher education. The group is undertaking a study to gather comparative information on the different approaches to the teaching of ethics in the faculties and departments of the University. Practices vary widely. The content issues which each lecturer has to resolve are many and might include: the role of philosophical theory, codes, ethics committees, the ethical roles of the professional society, the moral issues specific to the discipline, the questions of commonality between disciplines, "whistle-blowing", external complaint systems, bio-ethics in some professions, and disciplinary ethical theory versus other theories of ethics.



(Clockwise from left) Henriikka Clarkburn, Belinda Kenny, Betty Chaar, Peter Bowden, with Kim McShane

### **Common Conceptions and Cross-Disciplinary Approaches**

*Graduates of the University will hold personal values and beliefs consistent with their role as responsible members of local, national, international and professional communities. For example:*

- *strive for truth, honesty, integrity, open-mindedness, fairness and generosity*
- *acknowledge their personal responsibility for their own value judgments and behaviour*
- *understand and accept social, cultural, global and environmental responsibilities*
- *be committed to social justice and principles of sustainability*
- *have an appreciation of and respect for diversity*
- *hold a perspective that acknowledges local, national and international concerns*
- *work with, manage, and lead others in ways that value their diversity and equality and that facilitate their contribution to the organisation and the wider community*

Generic Graduate Attribute No. 4: Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding

**Kim:** Could we start with some of your reflections about why we are seeing a growing general awareness of ethics in the media, in social movements, in the corporate sector, in literature and literary theory, indeed in our research methods, as well as in university teaching and learning?



**Henriikka:** I think there's a general feeling that economic ways of thinking offer too narrow a look of life. And when I started teaching research ethics five years ago, I would have to spend half of my time trying to explain to scientists that ethics belongs in science. There was this general feeling that ethics had nothing to do with science. Of course it belongs there, and now I no longer have to do that.

**Peter:** I think there's two reasons. One is an apparent huge surge in unethical practices, or very questionable practices, in business, and also in politics, in government. We've had in Australia HIH, AWB, and the FAI scandals. In the US there was WorldCom and Enron. There's the whole issue of the moral position that we took in Iraq and in other areas of the world. We are worried that we are becoming unethical. That's one. The second is, I think, the drop in religious attendance. It's also a counter-reaction by a large number of people who say, "We are no longer going to church; we are no longer going to Sunday school; we're no longer getting religious education. We need something to replace it".

**Belinda:** In health there's probably been a number of different factors. I think of just the advances in technology! All of a sudden there are a lot of things that are now possible, that at one time were deemed never to be possible. I think stem-cell research is a big one. A lot of people welcomed the science but also questioned the science at the same time, in terms of what that might mean ethically. I think in health, too, our hospitals and practitioners are now being put under the microscope. There have been instances of unethical practice that have come up in the media, and people have an interest in that and an awareness that quality of health care is about ethical health care as well as providing the latest resources.

**Henriikka:** I personally don't think we have become any more unethical. It has just suddenly become a thing that we're interested in. I think companies have done unethical things all along and it is interesting that suddenly it's no longer acceptable. Like you said, companies have come under the microscope.

**Belinda:** To some extent, the questions are just closer to us now, because of technology. But the questions themselves are the age-old ethical dilemmas. The health issues are new

and the community's views on clients' rights and the roles and responsibilities of health professionals may change.

**Peter:** Yeah, they may be age-old dilemmas and you can always reduce the ethical question to a general example drawing on the theories of moral philosophy, but science and new technology create specific issues and moral choices in many different ways. For instance, should a Catholic pharmacist sell the morning-after pill, and what are his or her views on doing that? It's an ethical dilemma that's been with us for a hundred thousand years, but the morning-after pill hasn't.

**Kim:** I think it might be interesting for us to share a little bit more about what teaching and learning ethics means in the different disciplines: the health sciences, philosophy and engineering, economics and business and pharmacy?

**Henriikka:** For us in EcoBus, there is no professional code like you have in speech pathology, in pharmacy, or even in engineering. It is a lot more fluid, and a lot more challenging. It's about helping them to see that there is a different way to evaluate and justify actions in economics. I start from a very liberal, autonomy-focused approach, saying it is never my job to influence their values and views. But surely there are certain standards that we, as a society, uphold and share? I try to encourage students to see the possible positives of those standards. I've done a long personal journey from this totally individualistic "everybody's values are their business" to realise that I am actually teaching a loose collective set of values.

**Kim:** What kinds of values?

**Henriikka:** One of them is being critical. Another is to consider everybody. I'm very open to students about them, saying that, "These are the values that I share with you. These are the values that I believe are important." I say to them, "You've got to be aware of what I'm trying to do here. These are the reasons why I believe these are positive and these are the reasons why I believe this is worth teaching". And then we can have a debate about it if they so desire. Students are finding it really invigorating, really challenging. They say it allows them to bring a lot of their other subjects in, because it somehow seems generic.

**Peter:** I think you're going to find different answers to this question. This subject, ethics, is about the only thing that we teach at any faculty that has no common educational background for the teachers. Ethics teachers come from their various disciplines. Henriikka has a philosophy degree. I don't think any of the rest of us do. And that's the closest you'll get to a common background. Each of us teaches from our disciplinary point of view. I teach in different disciplines, as well as in a philosophical context. I put a considerable amount of emphasis on case problems within a discipline, on cases which are drawn from within the discipline itself. I put very little emphasis on ethical theory. One of the reasons for that, and one of the reasons that you'll find the differences across the faculties, is that there are many ethical theories, and ethics teachers have different commitments to the various ethical theories. In many cases they conflict. They give you different answers from different ethical positions.

**Belinda:** In speech pathology, we return to ethics in each year of the undergraduate degree program. There are a few reasons for that I guess, because it's part of a professional preparation program – and we have a professional code of ethics. And within our profession there's been a lot of work done in terms of trying to promote the discussion of ethics. I come with the approach that the students' understanding of ethics will be changing as they're experiencing a range of different clinical experiences and working with different families and people with different cultures and people with different attitudes to health and death and disability.

**Kim:** So teaching ethics is integrated across the undergraduate program?

**Belinda:** Yes, I start in the first year just from a base of asking students to reflect on their personal values – that we'll always have our own ideas about families and education and health. I find that sometimes students haven't thought about the fact that their ideas might be quite different from a lot of the people around them. So often it is a process of reflection and thinking about myself and my values and then looking at professional values. We use a case-based approach to teaching and learning within a whole curriculum. Some of those cases are drawn from my research. The students are also asked to observe ethics when they go out into their clinical practice. So I actually ask them to go out and, when they come back, to talk about what potentially could be an ethical issue for them. And that can be anything that they might have learnt in terms of working with families, teachers, health professionals, clients.

**Betty:** Over the six years that I've been teaching ethics, it's changed a lot. My window of opportunity for access to the students about this topic is very small – five lectures and two three-hour workshops in the fourth year. The students' feedback has been along the lines of: "Oh, we wish we'd actually been exposed to this earlier on!" And I really would like to start teaching ethics at year one or two perhaps, with an introduction to the principles. We base what we teach on the Code of Professional Practice in Pharmacy, although the code doesn't cover everything, as is the norm. And it's not very current. We begin by introducing the students to the principles of bio-ethics. We elaborate on examples in the lectures, and we invite speakers, if possible, to come along and present. I get people from the Pharmacy Board to connect the ethics to professional misconduct. It comes together in the workshops, where they're in groups of seven or eight.

**Henriikka:** That sounds like the team-based learning we do.

**Betty:** Yes, I give the groups cases to discuss amongst themselves. They're given a framework to follow: what to do, how to break down the decision-making, and what to lean on, what kind of principles to draw on and how to justify a decision. And each group presents to the class and they enjoy that thoroughly. And we end up with whatever I can conjure up from the sources – be that a debate, or throwing in something to get them all engaged in the one case and to defend a certain decision – even if they're not persuaded. It's important that they do that exercise because, as professionals with hands-on decision-making responsibilities, they sometimes have to make some really difficult decisions for themselves. They will

struggle. What if they're asked for a heavy dose of morphine that may be intended inadvertently for ...euthanasia – a practice which is very quiet, silent?

**Peter:** Or the morning after pill...

**Betty:** Yes, well you have to create the clinical awareness. And this window of opportunity for teaching and learning ethics is tucked inside a practice-based course. I do have a huge challenge with those who have fundamental and strong religious beliefs that challenge our professional ethics. And it's very difficult actually to help them understand that there is a difference between professional ethics and one's own morals. It's often very difficult for them to separate them, and cross that boundary, especially those that are very, very Christian or very, very Muslim or very, very whatever. Whether it's medicine or pharmacy or anything, these decisions have to be made. It's really quite dynamic in class, in the workshops. I know from their feedback that they're thoroughly engaged. Although there are only five lectures, I do need to provide them with variety and a little bit of reality. I can't take them too far back into theory, or they just lose interest.

**Belinda:** We have our code [in speech pathology]. And basically our code will guide us. And you can critique the code.

**Henriikka:** I have no code to work with.

**Betty:** Belinda and I have codes. Henriikka doesn't have code, and that's far more difficult. But yet, I can't base all my teaching on the code. It won't work that way. There are other issues that have come forward. I mean, RU486 was discussed in parliament for weeks literally and that has never been touched on in the code. Nobody would ever go anywhere near it.

**Peter:** Betty started to raise an important issue, I think. One of the things that is most important is the fact that our students will have to, at some stage, defend a position they must take. It may be an ethical position or, in the case of some students, an unethical position. But those who want to defend an ethical position usually have a large part of the organisation struggling against them. So one of our objectives, and I presume the others agree, is to give the students the capability to analyse a position and then to defend it or to argue it through. This brings us into the question of graduate attributes, in that we are broadening them beyond, or at least I would argue that we should broaden them beyond, the capability to understand an ethical problem and to act ethically.



**Henriikka:** But when you look at teaching, the basic question, it seems, is should there be a special unit for ethics, like in your case, Peter, or should it be like “salt and pepper”, integrated into the mainstream? And who should teach it? Do we bring in a philosopher from the outside to teach it, or should a practitioner teach it? Fortunately we’re going for the practitioner approach, which I personally believe is the better one. And what is the role of theory? We struggle because we feel that there is something in the theory that we need to give to them.

**Betty:** Yes, that’s very interesting. I’ve really looked into that in my research. I think it has to be a combination of the dedicated ethics, but spread out.

**Betty:** It has to be early on and it has to be developing. That’s my view. I also think that it has to be a mix of practitioner teaching and perhaps people who can give you some authority on the background of it. The people you choose as tutors would perhaps best be those who are versed in the professional application of the theory. Your choice of visiting lecturers is important, in terms of how they create rapport with students. I really think it’s a bit of a combination. The theory must be as general as possible, but enough to give them the skills to recognise, to understand and to justify a decision. I keep telling them, “If you can pass the ‘red face test’ for example, and confront the TV cameras or the media if they appear on your doorstep the next day, and articulate a justification, then we’ve achieved something”. I’ve helped them achieve an awareness, such that they can say, “I did this, because my own code of ethics says x, y and z” or some-such. And at least I know that they have some level of awareness that enables them to stand up for themselves ethically.

**Belinda:** I think it’s really helpful if students are able to understand and use the language of ethics. I think it’s a fantastic thing that there’s so many ethical issues coming up in the media now and, you know, the community’s talking about it and our students are talking about it. And they give us some wonderful opportunities for teaching to bring those issues in and we say, “You’ve probably been talking about this at home. Now, professionally, let’s look at our code of ethics and what might it say about this particular situation”.

**Peter:** I know Belinda teaches all the way through the program and we’ve just heard Betty argue that it should be started at the beginning and go through the whole degree instead of the whole of first year or fourth year or whatever it is. But there is a counter-argument and it’s one I subscribe to. Frankly, it’s that we should get the students in the very last year, before they walk out into the wide world. We’re going to ask them to face very, very difficult questions that I don’t think your first year students are ready to address.

**Kim:** But there’s also another interesting question here. Does ethics have to be learnt with others? We seem to be assuming that ethics has to be learnt with the teacher, with the students. And to what extent can you teach ethics online?

**Betty:** If that was the only tool I had, I’d be throwing out questions. Challenging them.

**Belinda:** Problem-based learning, I think - case-based learning.



**Peter:** I think it’d be taught very effectively online.

**Henriikka:** But you need to set up an online community. That reflective, sharing element seems to be essential in learning ethics.

**Betty:** I do have a little experience with this. Last year we had a rural cohort out in Broken Hill and Lismore. We taped all our five lectures, and relayed them to the students. Then I had separate workshops, but it took them two months to report back to me. So, in the interim, they were listening to the lectures and some of the workshop case scenarios and they were sending me emails. And that was the way we were working, using WebCT. So it did work and they loved it.

**Henriikka:** But there was still interaction. That was part of it. However, if you look at moral development literature, for example, just lecturing on theories seems to make almost a negative impact. To learn ethics, you have to interact, unless you’re particularly skilled at being reflective.

**Peter:** I want to ask my colleagues here... I don’t believe we can teach people to be ethical. Remember Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where the whole American army went through a course on ethics which was an utter waste of time? I don’t think we can teach people ethics. The best we can do is teach those who want to be ethical to defend their position against others.

**Henriikka:** The whole problem with teaching ethics is that in most professional situations there isn’t an obvious, right answer. There are the obvious wrongs we can steer them away from, or try to discourage them from doing - the personal motivations. If you look at moral action, you have to be aware, you have to make a decision, but you have to want to do the right thing and then you have to have the skills to do the right thing. We can teach them awareness, we can teach them skills, we can try to get the motivation going. I think we can make a difference...

**Betty:** .... and I speak from reality. I have people who have been sent to my classes from the Pharmacy board who have had trouble with ethical questions.

*It's very difficult actually to help the students understand that there is a difference between professional ethics and one's own morals. It's often very difficult for them to separate them, and cross that boundary. Betty Chaar*

**Henriikka:** I don't believe the world is full of those catastrophic simple rights and wrongs. I think most of the professional dilemmas are a lot more subtle – where there is a lot of family pressure or a lot of situational intricacies. It's not about whether I'll take money or not, it's about balancing a lot of different issues. And given those issues, I don't believe we can prescribe the right answer.

**Betty:** We can't. We can only give them the skills to make their decisions and justify.

**Henriikka:** Yes, and hope that they don't take bribes or offer bribes. Or do something blatantly wrong. But that's a minority.

**Kim:** I think this discussion has brought something very interesting to the fore that I see happening in teaching and learning too - that there's a generational shift here in terms of values. I think there are generational shifts in terms of who a teacher is, and their relationship with the student, that has shifted and changed in terms of moral responsibility for the other. And yes, there is a kind of a "passing of the ways". You're grappling with a younger generation - mostly twenty-somethings - Generation Y apparently – and you yourselves must find yourself challenged by your own students at times, by their views.

**Peter:** Yes but first of all the huge classes are a teaching problem. With ethics, there has to be interactive discussion.

**Henriikka:** I've got two tutors in the class with me. So that we make sure we visit them a few times in a session. We unpack together and the unpacking has been surprisingly successful. I was very concerned about how that would go, but they've been very focused, very interested. That's the biggest class I can do, in the biggest flat room this university seems to have! And I run a three-hour session once a week, and it's been really surprising.

**Belinda:** I just think that people are a little bit more spontaneous, a little bit more willing to share, within that small group environment.

**Kim:** Actually, we're going to have to draw the conversation to a close here – though we could go on! On behalf of the readers, I want to say thank you for sharing your diverse different perspectives on the teaching of ethics from different corners of this large university.

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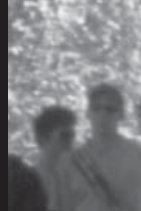
The University's policy on Generic Graduate Attributes is available for download at: <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/unipolicy.pdf>

To read more on how the Generic Graduate Attribute of "Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding" is being put into action, you can view case studies from across a range of faculties at The University of Sydney at: <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/casestudies.cfm>

*The Ethics in Teaching and Learning Network at the University of Sydney* All teachers of ethics throughout the University of Sydney are invited to talk and/or present to the network about their teaching approaches. The Ethics Network can put you in touch with colleagues with similar interests and approaches to the teaching and learning of ethics.

If you would like to join the Ethics in Teaching and Learning Network at the University of Sydney, or explore how you might teach ethics in your department, please contact one of the participants in this conversation.

A useful website addressing some of the matters raised in this conversation piece is at: <http://www.ethicsnetwork.net/>



## 2007 VCs Awards

The applications for the 2007 Vice-Chancellor's Awards for Outstanding Teaching and Support of the Student Experience were of a particularly high standard which reflects the quality of teaching and the innovative student support programs offered across the University.

### The Vice-Chancellor's Awards for Outstanding Teaching 2007 winners

Associate Professor David Easdown, School of Mathematics and Statistics, Faculty of Science. Associate Professor Easdown's is an outstanding teacher who is committed to enhancing teaching practice by sharing his pedagogical philosophy.

Professor Michael Jackson, Discipline of Government and International Relations, Faculty of Economics and Business. Professor Jackson demonstrates an ongoing commitment to learning and teaching with a clear approach to outstanding teaching.

### In the early career award category

Dr Susan Thomas, Department of English, Faculty of Arts. Dr Thomas possesses a clearly defined high level pedagogical philosophy which is evidenced by glowing comments from her students.

### The Vice-Chancellor's Awards for Support of the Student Experience 2007 winners

GRADFEST: Supporting the Postgraduate Research Student Experience. Dr Janet Jones, Dr Angela Ardington, Ms Helen Bonanno, Mr Peter O'Carroll and Ms Karen Scouller.

GRADFEST is a unique program developed by the Learning Centre which supports the whole postgraduate research student experience and provides students with the opportunity to engage in the wider postgraduate community across the University.

Advancing Chemistry by Enhancing Learning in Laboratory (ACELL), Associate Professor Scott Kable, Dr Simon Barrie, Dr Adrian George and Ms Justin Read.

The ACELL project has found an effective and innovative way to motivate student learning in a laboratory environment by bringing students and staff together to collaborate on designing laboratory activities.

Improving the postgraduate research student experience in the Faculty of Veterinary Science, Dr Imke Tammen, Professor Frank Nicholas, Dr Merran Govendir and Mrs Peta Phillips.

The Postgraduate Research Training Plan implemented by the Faculty of Veterinary Science has influenced a dramatic improvement of the postgraduate research experience in the Faculty where postgraduates no longer feel isolated and marginalised but consider themselves as 'being part of the Faculty Culture'.

*NB: At the time of publication the allocation of the Vice-Chancellor's Awards for Excellence in Research Supervision had not been finalised.*

## Research-enhanced learning and teaching project

At the beginning of 2007, a new Academic Board policy on Research-Enhanced Learning and Teaching came into effect. This policy covers three key areas of activity:

**Research-enhanced teaching:** Teaching is informed by staff research. This includes the integration of disciplinary research findings into courses and curricula at all levels such that students are both an audience for research and engaged in research activity.

**Research-based learning:** Opportunities are provided for students at all levels to experience and conduct research, learn about research throughout their courses, develop the skills of research and inquiry, and contribute to the University's research effort.

**Scholarship of learning and teaching:** Staff and students engage in scholarship and/or research in relation to understanding learning and teaching. Evidence-based approaches are used to establish the effects and effectiveness of student learning, teaching effectiveness and academic practice.

The policy was an initiative of the Research-Enhanced Learning and Teaching Strategic Working Group. This group has comprised representatives from the different faculties nominated by their Deans.

In meetings, members of the Working Group have shared their faculty's key achievements in research-enhanced learning and teaching and reported on particular events including, in 2006, the Teaching and Learning Showcase run jointly by the faculties of AFNR, Science and Veterinary Science, the Research-led Teaching Forum undertaken by the Faculty of Health Sciences, seminars held by the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Arts First Year Experience Forum. There have also been discussions in relation to the





inclusion of research on teaching and learning within the Research Quality Framework (RQF). The issue of ethics approval for research conducted by undergraduate and postgraduate students was also discussed by members, and a set of questions for researchers to ask at host institutions whilst on SSP was prepared.

Two exciting developments are the new Research-Enhanced Learning and Teaching web site (located at <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/RLT/> ) and the forthcoming Scholarship of Teaching and Learning book. The book, edited by Angela Brew and Judyth Sachs, includes contributions by many University of Sydney academics carrying out leading research on teaching and learning. It is currently in press and will be launched at the conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning on 2-5 July (see our Conferences section, p.35 ).

**Angela Brew (Institute for Teaching and Learning)**

## ***The Graduate Attributes Working Group: Where to next?***

The ITL Graduate Attributes Strategic Working Group started out in 2002 as a small group of five people who worked with the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) on developing the first stage of the University's policy on generic graduate attributes. Once the policy framework was developed, the Working Group was expanded in 2003 to include a Dean's nominee from each faculty as well as a representative from other key units such as the Library, Learning Centre and the Careers Centre. The expanded group has 24 members and, since July 2003, has worked on supporting the development and implementation of the university's policy on graduate attributes. The work of the group, at that early stage, was noted in the AUQA audit of the university and the panel remarked that it was looking forward to seeing the progress the University had made in this area when it returned.

Since 2003 the members of the Generic Attributes Working Group have made many significant contributions to the university by:

- supporting the development of the policy on Generic Graduate Attributes which was approved by Academic Board in 2004;
- supporting the development of an online resource of curricula examples which is now used by academics from around the world;

- leading curriculum development events across the university, focussing on practical issues such as supporting colleagues in writing learning outcomes and assessment criteria that incorporate Graduate Attributes;
- leading curriculum mapping and course re-development in their faculties with many making major contributions to their faculties' successful international accreditation outcomes;
- advising on new student orientation resources and a new student and staff graduate attributes teaching award which will be offered in 2007;
- Collaborating to apply for several successful TIES grants to support their work.

These sorts of efforts have begun to embed the development of generic attributes within the curriculum of the disciplines in ways that are already showing up in improvements on teaching quality indicators such as Unit of Study Evaluation data. Some faculty representatives have been part of the group for several years; some were only members for a short time before handing on the Dean's nominee role to somebody else in their faculty. Regardless, participants in the Group have developed into a valuable network of people across the university with considerable expertise in relation to graduate attributes.

In the present climate, and in light of the considerable expertise now developed in many faculties, the ITL needs to develop new ways of working to support the university community in this area (as outlined on p.13). So, after three years in its present format, it is time for the Graduate Attributes Working Group to once again evolve. In the next phase, this will probably mean refocussing the work of previous members on supporting Faculties' efforts to improve the teaching of generic attributes in response to external measures such as the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF). One of the seven indicators of the LTPF is graduates' report of the extent to which their course has developed graduate attributes. High ratings of their development of generic attributes also correlate highly with students' report of good teaching and overall satisfaction – another two of the seven indicators. Another of the LTPF indicators is the employment rates of graduates, and evidence of the quality of an applicant's generic skills is a key factor in recruitment decisions.

The previous achievements, resources and the network of expertise that the Graduate Attributes group has developed will no doubt prove invaluable to faculties in the present climate.

**Simon Barrie (Institute for Teaching and Learning)**

# An online writing instructional system for international students



Mark Freeman, Diana Montgomery and Amani Bell

Diana Montgomery, Amani Bell and Mark Freeman  
Faculty of Economics and Business

Economics and business faculties have been strong proponents of internationalisation of the student cohort. In recent years, the University of Sydney's Faculty of Economics and Business has had the highest number of international students of any faculty on campus, in addition to a high number of local non-English speaking background (NESB) students. The challenges that international and NESB students face in studying in English have been the subject of research, debated in the press, and highlighted by students (e.g. University of Sydney, 2003). Many international students face several challenges in the transition to studying in the Australian context, such as making new friends and understanding classroom dynamics. The earlier such students can successfully navigate Australian assessment genres and academic English, the less likely they are to be at risk of dropping out or failing their studies.

It is appropriate that the University and the Faculty offer academic English support to these students. Traditionally this has been through face-to-face workshops, and one-to-one consultations once the semester has commenced. Since developing academic English is time-consuming for support providers as well as students, the Faculty of Economics and Business sought to pilot an alternative and more sustainable way of diagnosing and supporting students with academic writing difficulties prior to arrival at the university. The tool for this approach was MY Access<sup>®</sup>, an online writing instructional system developed by Vantage Inc. which is used in schools and community colleges in the United States.

We report our experiences with and student feedback on our 2005 pilot using MY Access as a tool to help students build their academic writing skills.

## How MY Access works.

The software is "trained" to recognise good and poor features of writing by analysing hundreds of sample texts on particular topics. Vantage's Intellimetric<sup>®</sup> scoring system used in MY Access has been shown to be a highly accurate scorer of essays, i.e. there is a high correlation between its scoring and that of human raters, for example, of GMAT "analytical" essays. (Rudner, Garcia & Welch, 2005). MY Access also allows for more individualised feedback and comments from a qualified expert.

Students were given 5 essay topics to choose from. The essay questions were framed to ask for either an "informative" or a "persuasive" response, e.g.

1. Do you feel that recycling should be required of all citizens? Why?
2. Write an essay persuading your legislator to accept your recommendation on whether or not recycling should be mandatory.

The students wrote and submitted an essay online. Students then received instant automated feedback which consisted of:

- an overall comment and a score out of 6 (this score is on a MY Access scale of 1-6 and is not related to IELTS or TOEFL);
- detailed comments and a score on five features of writing (e.g. organisation, focus);
- feedback on grammar and spelling;
- tips on writing (general, rather than specific to the student's essay)

The corresponding overall comment for MY Access scores of 6 and 4 are respectively below.

*6: A response at this level typically shows very effective development of ideas, with effective use of examples, evidence and/or supporting details*

*4: A response at this level typically shows reasonable support of ideas with adequate use of examples, but may lack supporting detail or specificity.*

Below is an excerpt of detailed automated feedback (on the feature 'focus') provided to one of the student writers:

*[Student X], your response to this assignment was rated a 4 for focus. Focus relates to your ability to present a consistent, unified message and stay on topic. ... Typically, a response at this level gives a fairly clear statement of purpose and wanders only slightly from the topic. Your focus is adequate. That means that you wrote an introductory paragraph that gives your position on the topic. You have given reasons to support your opinion ...*

Specific feedback on grammar and spelling is provided via a "comment" beside the student's text.

In addition to the automated feedback described above, Vantage Inc. provided the support of a teacher who gave individual online feedback on students' writing. As can be seen from the examples of two virtual teacher comments below, this

feedback tended to discuss the student's text in a less generic way than the automated feedback, and to indicate exactly what the student needed to improve in their essay:

*I commend you for including opposing arguments, but you never refute them, or show how the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.*

*You make good points in the body of this essay, but have neglected to include essential parts that help achieve the main purpose of persuading the reader, namely a strong opening statement, and a recommendation for action based on the reasons you gave in the body of the essay.*

### The pilot

We promoted MY Access via: a flyer emailed to students overseas who had not yet left to come to Australia as well as overseas students already studying in Australia in a foundation program. We also placed posters around campus and placed an announcement on the Blackboard learning management system. Students who signed up then received: a welcome email and instructions, follow up emails and phone calls and follow up workshops. 210 students (mostly post-graduate international students) signed up for the program and were provided with a username and password, and offered technical support through Vantage's US office, should they encounter difficulties in using the program.

One group of students could answer five essay questions with opportunity for unlimited revision and the other group had the same five questions and also up to three hours of online support from a teacher. A third group received automated feedback and also a workshop to encourage writing.

The first essays were produced in January, 2005, and the last in May 2005. The team monitored the students' engagement on a weekly basis. Of the 210 who signed up for the program, only 19 students used it, writing a total of 32 essays between them. (Some of these essays were revised, producing a total of 40). Seventeen students started essays but did not submit them.

By February, 2005, the project team was perplexed by the low take-up rate in using MY Access, and contacted students to encourage them to use the program. Many of the students were still in their home countries, while some had recently arrived in Australia to settle in before commencing Semester 1 studies, or to undertake Summer School. The reasons given in their email responses for their lack of participation included: studying in Summer School; internet access problems in home country; busy searching for accommodation in Sydney; working;

laptop stolen/broken; "Forgot about it"; packing up to leave home country; and technical problems with the program. The post-trial evaluation respondents (see below), confirmed these reasons for their lack of participation.

### Post-pilot evaluation

The team conducted a post pilot evaluation of the 210 students who signed up for the program. Thirty students responded, of whom 19 had not used the program, and 11 had done so. The majority of the "user" group who responded had used the program with an online teacher, in addition to automated feedback.

The reasons for not using MY Access included "too busy with studies" (40%) or with "other things" (10%); technical difficulties (6%); and "topics not related to my studies" (3%).

Of the 9 respondents who had started an essay but not finished it, most said they had "run out of time" (4) or had "technical difficulties" (3).

In terms of its usefulness in improving their writing, the majority of respondents found MY Access helpful. As can be seen from the table, students in the group which received "virtual teacher" feedback in addition to automated, tended to rate MY Access more favourably, both in terms of its overall usefulness and in terms of automated feedback.



N=11	With teacher	Without teacher	Totals
How helpful was My Access?	very: 33% helpful: 50% somewhat: 17%	helpful: 20% somewhat: 80%	very: 18% helpful: 36% somewhat: 46%

Comments in the evaluation regarding the helpfulness of MY Access included:

*This program can help you to identify your problems in writing and teach you how to organise your structure and presentation style.*

*The spell check is very good and I realise that I have to improve my spelling.*

The results indicate that as a strategic initiative, MY Access has something to offer students, but some students still wanted teacher feedback as well, as these comments and suggestions from the evaluation indicate:

**Many international students face several challenges in the transition to studying in the Australian context.**

*If we can meet the teacher for one or two times, it will be better.*

*Some lectures about how to improve academic writing skills can be hold.*

*[There should be] Consultation time for English.*

Some students felt that more scaffolding of the writing program was required, e.g.

*I suggest that instead of starting by writing essays, it would be good if some grammar, verbs or vocabulary exercises were given for some few weeks, then some short writing stories, then essays for approximately 500-1000 words.*

*It would be better to have various formats of writing exercise, such as short sentence practice and business email format.*

The evaluation also provided some student feedback on the essay topics, with two students asking that they be more “relevant to our study... such as business”, and another saying that the topics should be expanded because they were too similar to the IELTS writing test.

The workshop to encourage writing had a similarly poor take up rate. Only eight students attended, of whom a couple stayed only a short while, promising to “finish my essay later”; and another brought along a for-credit assignment that she wanted help with.

The experience of the program mirrors that experienced in some other support programs in the Faculty - students who are offered free writing tuition or workshops frequently decline to take up the opportunity. A variety of factors contributed to

low take-up rate but there is no definitive explanation as to why so many signed up but did not use it. There was a greater take-up rate by students in the stream offering support from a teacher. Those in this group who took part in the evaluation tended to view MY Access more favourably, perhaps indicating a greater engagement with the system as a result of the “virtual teacher” feedback.

### Suitability of MY Access for tertiary students

As one of the students pointed out, the MY Access prompts are rather like Task 2 of the IELTS writing test, which is widely used for assessing whether students have reached the required English proficiency to enter the University of Sydney. While the writing tasks are not inappropriate for improving certain aspects of the students’ writing, the MY Access program may lack face validity for some of the students if it does not seem relevant to their current or prospective university studies.

Overall, we found MY Access was too generic in its approach to writing, too high school-oriented and perhaps too oriented towards the US context. However, it may be useful in contexts such as: pre-arrival writing programs (English for Academic Purposes) in which students are preparing for IELTS or the TOEFL Test of Written English, as a supplement to teacher feedback. It may also be suitable for Foundation Studies and for English for Academic Purposes for-credit programs.

### Recommendations

From the team’s experience, the following recommendations are made for future trialling or use of this kind of pre-arrival writing program:

- Technical difficulties need to be ironed out, as they affected the take-up rate and also the rate of completion by those who had started essays;
- Such programs should be used with the option for feedback from an actual teacher;
- The timing is important for success: it should be offered well before the time students are preparing to leave their home countries. Students are unlikely to produce much writing during the time they are settling into their new residence, nor during Summer School;
- Programs should be used with prompts customised to students’ needs/ contexts;
- Other incentives to participate, including testimonials of its effectiveness, could be explored.

### References:

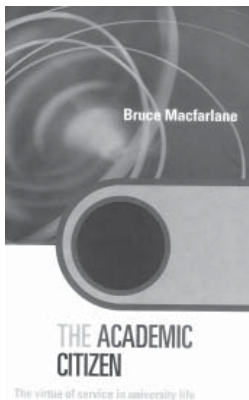
Rudner, L.M., Garcia, V. & Welch, C. (2005). An evaluation of IntelliMetric essay scoring system using responses to GMAT® AWA prompts. *GMAC Research Reports, RR-05-08*, October 26th, 2005.

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**Macfarlane, B. (2007)**  
**Academic Citizen: The virtue of service in university life.** Abingdon, Oxon. UK: Routledge

Recent graduates of the ITL's Graduate Certificate program will recognise the author and recall his 2004 companion book on *Teaching with Integrity: The ethics of higher education practice*. They are indeed companion books for, in his latest work, Bruce Macfarlane firstly presents a concise outline of different models of service in universities – the civic, Oxbridge, and

autonomous traditions - and he then goes on to analyse the moral basis for service in academic work. The book is based on empirical research, and Macfarlane builds his analysis on institutional case studies of universities in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and in South Africa.

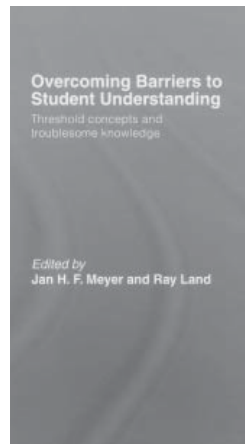
Macfarlane identifies a retreat from citizenship, a distancing of universities from their communities, and the reorientation of university service toward business and the economy. Indeed, while reading this work, I was challenged to reflect, from a new perspective, on how corporate, enterprise cultures continue to undermine academic values. The author points out that service is under-conceptualised and poorly rewarded in the performative culture that now pervades contemporary academic life. In fact, according to Macfarlane, Boyer's (1990) work on the four scholarships of academic life (discovery, teaching, integration and application) has also served to undermine academic service, by re-casting many previously familiar activities of citizenship as scholarship.

Macfarlane builds a case throughout his book for recovering academic citizenship, arguing that "this demands commitment on behalf of academics, especially those in positions of power and authority to re-value the service role. The conditions of modern higher education do not make this an easy task. Institutions need to be prepared to review the way they currently recognise and reward service work to insure [sic] that academics are provided with a rational, as well as a moral, motive for being good academic citizens" (Macfarlane, 2007, p. 74). He proposes and explores five virtues of a new, recovered academic citizenship: engagement, guardianship, loyalty, collegiality, and benevolence.

The book makes interesting reading for those who are interested in university cultures, university management, as well as academic identity and academic work. I continue to appreciate Macfarlane's writing for his thoughtfulness and critical insight, and if academic service and the relationship of universities with their communities and societies is your cup of tea, you will find this a stimulating read! **Kim McShane**

#### References

- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Macfarlane, B. (2004). *Teaching with integrity: the ethics of higher education practice*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.



**Meyer J.H.F. & Land, R. (2006). (Eds). Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge.** London & NY: Routledge.

"A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress (page 3)."

The foreword to this book asserts that just as the concept of deep and surface approaches to learning has been hugely beneficial in learning and teaching over the past 25 years, so too will threshold concepts be influential over the next 25 years. It is a bold claim for an emerging field of study and for this seminal text on the topic.

The first five chapters outline a conceptual framework; the remaining chapters provide research-based evidence and discuss threshold concepts within several disciplines including biology, economics, cultural studies, accounting, health and social care and philosophy.

Many examples of threshold concepts are discussed: complex numbers and limits (pure mathematics); signification (literary and cultural studies); opportunity cost, general equilibrium and elasticity (economics); cellular energy conversion processes (biology); variability (ecology); and Otherness (cultural studies). Some of the contributors have taken a higher order view of what might constitute a threshold concept within their discipline, for example by acknowledging the subjectivity of accounting processes. The discussion of these examples provides a useful entry point for beginning to think about threshold concepts.

This book got me thinking about what might be the threshold concepts in my area, how can we help students grasp such "troublesome knowledge" and how can threshold concepts best be assessed? I found the concluding chapter's considerations for course design and evaluation particularly useful. I also liked the specific and disciplinary focus of the book. Many academics feel aligned to their discipline rather than university learning and teaching in general, and so might find this book more useful than a more generic text.

Some of the research is drawn from the UK project "Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses" and the book's contributors are working largely in UK higher education institutions. However one author is from Greece, another from the USA, and three from Australia, including two from the University of Sydney: Drs Rosina Mladenovic and Charlotte Taylor.

The research on threshold concepts is one of on-going endeavour and discovery and we can look forward to refinements in the theory as well as new ways of putting threshold concepts into practice. **Amani Bell**

# conferences 2007

JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
<p><b>International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL)</b> <i>Locating Learning: Integrative Dimensions of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning</i> 2 - 5 July University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW <a href="http://www.indiana.edu/~issotl07/index.html">http://www.indiana.edu/~issotl07/index.html</a></p> <p><b>Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA)</b> <i>Enhancing Higher Education, Theory and Scholarship</i> 8 - 11 July Hilton International Hotel, Adelaide, SA <a href="http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2007">http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2007</a></p>	<p><b>15th Improving Student Learning (ISL)</b> <i>Improving Student Learning For What?</i> 3 - 5 September Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, UK <a href="http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsls/isl/isl2007/index.html">http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsls/isl/isl2007/index.html</a></p> <p><b>12th Biennial European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI)</b> <i>Developing potentials for learning</i> 1 September - 28 August Budapest, Hungary <a href="http://earli2007.hu/nq/home/">http://earli2007.hu/nq/home/</a></p>	<p><b>Association for Learning Technologies Conference (ALT-C)</b> <i>Beyond control - Learning technology for the social network generation</i> 4 - 6 September Nottingham, England, UK <a href="http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2007/">http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2007/</a></p> <p><b>4th International Conference: Education In A Changing Environment</b> <i>Education in a changing environment: Meeting the challenges</i> 12 - 14 September The University Of Salford, England, UK <a href="http://www.ece.salford.ac.uk">www.ece.salford.ac.uk</a></p>
OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
<p><b>EDUCAUSE 2007 Annual Conference</b> <i>Information Futures: Aligning Our Mission</i> 23 - 26 October Washington State Convention &amp; Trade Center, Seattle, WA, USA <a href="http://www.educause.edu/e07">http://www.educause.edu/e07</a></p> <p><b>ECGBL 2007: The European Conference on Games Based Learning</b> <i>Can Games-Based Learning Enhance Learning?</i> 25 - 26 October University of Paisley, Scotland, UK <a href="http://www.academic-conferences.org/ecgbl/ecgbl2007/ecgbl07-home.htm">http://www.academic-conferences.org/ecgbl/ecgbl2007/ecgbl07-home.htm</a></p>	<p><b>Effective Teaching and Learning Conference (ETL)</b> <i>Preparing Students for Work in the Real World</i> 1 - 2 November Queensland University of Technology (Kelvin Grove), Brisbane, QLD <a href="http://www.etl2007.qut.edu.au">www.etl2007.qut.edu.au</a></p> <p><b>Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)</b> <i>Research Impacts: Proving or improving?</i> 24 - 27 November University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle, WA <a href="http://www.aare.edu.au/conf2007/index.htm">http://www.aare.edu.au/conf2007/index.htm</a></p>	<p><b>Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ascilite)</b> <i>ICT: Providing Choices for Learners and Learning</i> 2 - 5 December Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 2007 <a href="http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/">http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/</a></p> <p><b>Asia-Pacific Conference on Educational Integrity</b> <i>Creating a culture of integrity</i> 6 - 7 December University of South Australia <a href="http://www.unisa.edu.au/educationalintegrity/conference/">http://www.unisa.edu.au/educationalintegrity/conference/</a></p>





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