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Developing a vision of a sustainable community

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Christine A. and Albury, Rebecca M., Developing a vision of a sustainable community 2008, 1-10.
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Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

Brown, C. & Albury, R. (2008) Developing a vision of sustainable community, in *Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua, 1-4 July 2008: pp 96-105.*

Published 2008 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

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Developing a vision of sustainable community

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University Strategic Plans provide the institutional context for situating learning and teaching goals alongside research, community engagement, staff, students, an international outlook, and business and enterprise. This paper describes a developing vision and three key implementation strategies to focus on innovation in learning and teaching. The trigger for its development was provided by the Carrick Institute's Excellence Initiative funding. Formulation of the grant application crystallised an analysis of current gaps in support for staff wishing to engage with Award, Grant and Fellowship opportunities at the institutional and national level.

The aim of the Promoting Excellence Initiative (PEI) at the University of Wollongong is to develop a sustainable community with a passion for learning and teaching innovation, and the means to achieve their goals. The three key strategies identified as a starting point for engaging a larger community of practice in progressing the vision are a distributed network of learning and teaching mentors, enhanced systems for recording and sharing practice, and an evolving program of practice celebrations.

The authors have analysed and reflected on the seemingly rapid process of gap analysis and strategy formulation that has, in reality, taken three years; numerous opportunities for collaboration with a large number of university staff; and a significant intellectual and time commitment by a core team in the Excellence, Diversity and Innovation in Teaching Subcommittee (EDITS) of the University Education Committee. The critical tensions between formal and informal opportunities for collaboration are highlighted.

Keywords: innovation, community of practice, leadership

Introduction

The University of Wollongong's strategic plan for the next triennium is shaped by a vision of excellence and innovation. To realise such a vision of learning and teaching in a period of financial uncertainty and a focus on research excellence, measured by a revised RQF, demands enhanced organisational expertise that spreads responsibility beyond the current relatively small number of people presently designated as leaders in learning and teaching. A sharing community of innovative teaching academics will be built on the foundation of current practice to include a team of innovation mentors, systems for recording and sharing practice, and regular celebrations of learning and

teaching by engaging a larger team that is physically distributed and functionally varied. It will provide opportunity for collaboration, and overlap of roles and responsibilities to ensure systems are continually refined, rather than periodically re-invented.

The activities of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and Teaching and Learning Fund have provided a focus on teaching for Australian universities. In particular, the grants and awards programmes of the Carrick Institute have contributed to the development of a common language of excellence in contributions to learning and the student experience. In addition, the programmes reward outstanding practitioners. Simultaneously, many universities have struggled to provide the support for staff applying for grants or making submissions for awards since there are few equivalents of the research offices that have been developed over the past decade or two. At the University of Wollongong, the Promoting Excellence Initiative (PEI), funded by the Carrick Institute, now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), provides the opportunity to develop an integrated approach and move from ad hoc to more formal and widely shared processes of support for engagement with activities that support ALTC objectives and the university objective of high quality teaching.

This paper will provide an analytic description of this vision for a sustainable community of practice that supports high quality learning and teaching by explaining the gaps in the existing institutional practices and describing the integration of the three elements of a team of mentors, improved recording and sharing systems, and celebrations that promote sharing good practice as part of developing communities of practice. Other institutions may benefit from a comparative analysis of their key strategies with these three elements, and enhanced awareness of the benefits of detailed process documentation to support reflection and iterative rather than ad hoc refinement of university wide processes for staff engagement with teaching awards and grants.

Existing institutional practices

The Excellence, Diversity and Innovation in Teaching Subcommittee (EDITS) of the University Education Committee is charged with the dual responsibilities of managing learning and teaching awards and grants, and providing strategic advice on ways to foster, enhance and share innovations in learning and teaching. Although a new committee chair was appointed in 2005, continuity and corporate memory of core processes were retained by continued presence of several past committee members including the past committee chair, now a Faculty Dean, and the Dean of Students. Given that at any time there may be one or two committee members on study leave, the core group size averages five plus a committee executive officer.

The new chair instigated an informal approach to many of the committee meetings, to contrast the very formal and lengthy meetings when the committee members constitute the assessment panel for awards or grants. The latter meetings require substantial preparation in the preceding week(s), and panel members arrive with detailed notes or evaluative feedback on applications, the apparent impact of the support process on application quality, and suggestions for process or support improvements. Assessment of awards and grants follow annual cycles that are constantly adjusted to complement the

timing of national learning and teaching award and grant deadlines; to avoid staff overload with peak teaching activities; to acknowledge traditional holiday periods; and to allow staff to meet key research grant timelines. The available funds for grant distribution are tied to national Learning and Teaching Performance funds and institutional strategic priorities. Hence, given all these competing priorities, there is an ongoing tension to fit all formal committee activities within both the annual timeline and schedule of busy academics on and off the committee.

The strategic discussions in informal meetings allow committee members to reflect on the array of achievements presented formally on paper through award and grant assessment processes, identify and cluster forthcoming issues, share their individual practice concerns across a range of disciplines (arts, health and behavioural science, informatics, commerce, science, engineering and education) and suggest further opportunities for sharing of learning and teaching practice. They also provide an opportunity for staff responsible for supporting awards and grants applicants to update the committee on key support strategies, patterns of staff engagement with awards and grants, and potential limits to existing support processes.

In a report presented to EDITS in March 2007, the Teaching Innovation Coordinator, responsible for oversight of applicant support, presented the statistics on staff engagement with awards (2006-7), the key strategies shared with applicants for the structural aspects of document development, and the intensive interview process required to maintain applicant motivation and develop a deeper conceptual framework for an application. The report also analysed the relationship between internal and national teaching award structures to inform discussion of further refinement of institutional teaching award categories and the associated criteria. Not all applicants who won institutional teaching awards would set their targets on future national awards. Some were keen to gain learning and teaching funds to explore a discipline specific innovation, while others were exploring more generic graduate qualities and could be linked in cross-disciplinary teams. There was a need to balance support and provide diverse pathways for staff pursuing institutional, national and international learning and teaching agendas.

EDITS identified a lack of synergy between predominantly individual teaching awards and team applications for teaching grant funds, high risk of maintaining intensive individual support for applicants, and lost opportunities to foster development and share practice. Mentoring of grant applicants occurred in a fractured, ad hoc, one-to-one and just-in-time manner that made workload planning difficult and the workload itself unsustainable as the demand increased. There was no mirroring of the well-developed Research Services Office monitoring systems. The intensive individual support for reflection, analysis and conceptual development offered by the Teaching Innovation Coordinator was unsustainable and limited to the insights of an individual. Lists of applicants for awards and grants were associated with particular application rounds, and the lists that were publicly available on the institution's web site were only the successful applicants in a competitive pool. Thus, future champions fell repeatedly under the radar as there was no formal process for collective recording of their potential interest, nor any systematic support for development of ideas and collaborators. Sharing of Good Practice relied on the willingness of recent award winners, grant recipients, and recognised

innovators to present workshops and to informally advise future applicants. Resources to share and record processes and practices were not systematically collected in a centrally accessible repository.

A snapshot of community member interaction

The Teaching Innovation Coordinator and the current chair of EDITS (authors), both recent or new recruits to EDITS in 2005, maintained regular contact throughout the period January 2005 to December 2007, with 102 ‘meetings’ registered in the electronic corporate diary. An analysis of these meetings reveals two key patterns. Firstly, their duration (illustrated in figure 1) ranged from half an hour to nine hours, with seventy-three meetings (roughly 70%) of less than three hours’ duration.

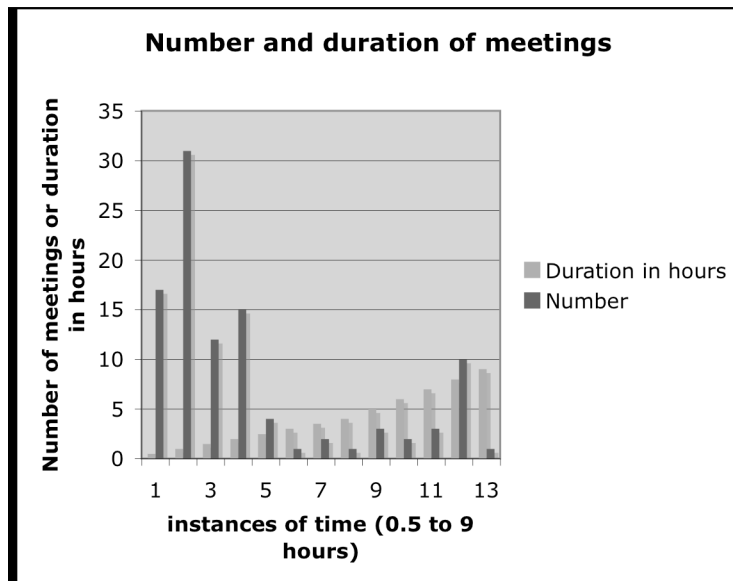


Figure 1: Meetings of two community members supporting teaching innovation 2005-2007

Secondly, the purposes for the meetings varied widely. They ranged across an administrative or personnel focus (awards and grants processes and marketing, policy development, EDITS agendas, Carrick protocols, staff changeovers), an EDITS committee focus (informal EDITS committee meetings and EDITS assessment panel meetings), collaborative facilitation of workshops and information sessions on awards and grants, attendance at national forums and celebration events for teaching awards, International conferences on e-Portfolios and the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching, meetings for collaborative publishing, strategic meetings with the DVC (A&I) around project initiatives such as the PEI, and last but not least, social discussions about life and the universe over a meal or cup of coffee. There was constant variation in group size, composition, the formal or informal nature of the meeting and the scope and sharing of current learning and teaching practice.

Such sustained and varied opportunities for discussion, coupled with regular exposure to institutional awards and grants applications, strategic input from EDITS members, international perspectives at conferences, shared travel and reflection time, and the

constant timeline of formal internal and national award and grant processes permitted the authors to conduct a seemingly ‘rapid’ analysis of the gaps in current practice when provided with the opportunity to apply for PEI grant funding. Gap analysis revealed a significant risk of pressure of workloads on those mentoring award and grant applicants, inadequate information collection regarding staff innovation, participation and engagement in awards and grants processes, and many missed opportunities to share practice both at the institutional level and the individual academic level. There was no systematic formal collection of information regarding learning and teaching to mirror the detailed collection of research practice data.

Three key strategies were conceptualised by the authors, in close consultation with the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic & International), the Director of the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR) and the Manager of Educational Systems Development in CEDIR. These strategies were: individual support by a network of mentors; enhanced systems to record practice and share resources; and, a targeted program of celebrating learning and teaching.

Unpacking the vision

The vision of sustainable support for a community of practice of learning and teaching across the campuses includes opportunities for formal and informal linkages and processes. The tension between the richness of informal, personal and context dependent interactions, and the need for formal articulation of practice and reporting of innovation, resonates with Wenger’s (1998) analysis of the relationship between participation and reification in communities of practice. Organisations need formal artefacts (i.e. forms, reports, minuted meetings, transparent award processes) in order to conduct business inclusively and to induct new members.

The context within which that business is done changes rapidly in higher education and the inclusion of new members brings new insights and ideas for reform of processes. The more informal processes of participation in discussion, feedback and daily practice provide the opportunity for continuous refinement of the formal practices and lead to revision of those practices and artefacts. The University of Wollongong Strategic Plan (UOW 2008-2010 Strategic Plan, p13) articulates five key strategies for teaching innovation, career development and recognition of achievement to achieve the objective of “high quality teaching”. The elements of the PEI contribute to the implementation of those strategies in formal and informal ways.

Sustaining advice and support - a system of mentors

The pattern of sustained advice and support will contribute to both a developing community of practice and the type of mentoring leadership that Ramsden (1998) suggests that academics prefer. The proposed system of mentors addresses two challenges in meeting institutional objectives: it provides a sustainable model of support for grant, award and fellowship applicants or early career innovators, and it provides career development in academic leadership for the mentors. Both of these are important as the University better articulates the career paths that value contributions to learning and teaching more highly. The mentor network has the potential to expand beyond the

current framework as followers become formal or informal leaders, and mentors adopt positional leadership roles.

Any practice of mentoring that moves beyond a formal introduction to the “folk ways” of a community of practice is necessarily responsive to the effects of participation. The demands for both members of a mentoring relationship change, and the relationship itself provides opportunities for reflection on the process as well as the topic of discussion. Table 1 captures the sense of a widening process of engagement that the mentoring system will develop further. The column “Past Ways” describes practices that began to change at the end of 2004; by early 2007 it was clear that the successful improvements recorded in “Current Practice” were unsustainable. The demand for support by an increasing group of innovators indicated that a structured process should be expanded for award support, and developed to replace the largely informal support mechanisms for grant applicants.

The mentors will be people with recognised achievements in some aspect of learning and teaching ranging from grant and award winners to curriculum innovators and successful team leaders. The other two elements of the PEI will include and support the mentors who will be offered opportunities to reflect on their practice and to extend their portfolio in ways that will contribute to their own career goals within the extended community of practice.

Table 1: Characteristics of evolving engagement with awards, grants and fellowship applicants

Characteristic	A: Past ways	B: Current Practice	C: Future vision
Number of contacts with applicants	None or one	Up to 7	Number determined by needs of current and future applicants
Nature of contact	Web site information leads to phone inquiry	Information session Workshop Multiple individual consultations timetabled around award/grant cycles	Ongoing access to a mentor network and online resources
Scope of contact	Specific award or grant process	Possible progression of awards or relationship with grants	All awards, grants, research collaborations driven by staff needs
Relationship to career development	None or serendipitous (person also going through promotion)	Seen as opportunity to reflect on teaching in relation to whole career	Process supports career discussions as a backdrop to future teaching related activities
Support team	One academic developer (varied) and/or a discipline colleague	Dedicated small team lead by academic developer	Team of central and disciplinary mentors

Characteristic	A: Past ways	B: Current Practice	C: Future vision
Institutional buy-in	Minimal – no dedicated support role and inconsistent data collection	Dedicated role for academic developer and consistent data collection by small team	Mentors recognised for support role and formal institutional data collection systems

Using technology to link people and support innovation

Drawing information together is a vital pre-requisite to reflection, analysis, peer review and refinement of existing practices at the individual and institutional level. Three developments will assist with recording, organising and improving access to learning and teaching information for all UOW staff. Firstly, a formal set of learning and teaching data will be specified and collected to assist the institution to make more informed decisions and increase accountability. Secondly, staff will be supported to collect more informal, developmental and personal data in an academic portfolio. Thirdly, the web interface to access the formal data set, learning and teaching case studies and support resources will be re-designed and rationalised around a *Focus on Teaching*.

Database to collect key learning and teaching data for the institution

The specifications are under development for a ‘database’ to record a range of learning and teaching activities that illustrate staff interest and achievements. This learning and teaching data will complement an existing system for monitoring staff engagement with research grants and research publications. Data to be collected includes participation in formal mentoring roles (with the PEI Project, HERSDA, ASCILITE or Head Tutor positions); fellowship opportunities such as the Faculty Scholars Program; contributions to professional development of colleagues in colloquia, workshops or symposia; good practice cases captured and shared electronically; award applicants who are nominated, those who submit applications and those who are successful; peer reviewers who have been formally trained for peer observation of teaching (POT) or peer review of curriculum development (PRCD); key roles in University Education Committees at faculty and institutional level; and teaching grant applicants who submit an application as well as those who are successful.

Detailed specifications will be progressively refined with broad faculty consultation, and the data mapped to existing gold standard data in a central ‘data warehouse’. What data we are not currently collecting will form the basis of the design of a new database. Those responsible for recording and validating this data will do the data entry as an integral part of their roles and responsibilities.

ePortfolios for individuals and teams to gather and keep evidence

A common issue for teaching/research academics is lack of awareness of what evidence they need to keep of teaching, and a language for expressing what they do. Staff are currently advised to collect a broad range of evidence of learning and teaching related activities, listed by the source of evidence (peers, personal reflection, student reaction and student learning outcomes), what the evidence indicates (experience, interest or quality based on student and staff review), and how a ‘mix of evidence’ may relate to level of

appointment (Associate Lecturer to Associate Professor). The source list has been widely disseminated by Denise Chalmers through her past role within the Carrick Institute. The Director of CEDIR has led the development of the latter two lists. Together, the three lists inform staff of what evidence they can target to support applications for teaching awards and probation or promotion, particularly when teaching is ranked highly.

Knowing what they should keep and maintaining a focus on why and where it belongs in support of a case is a substantial workload that is often sidelined by busy academics in favour of more immediate and pressing teaching and research activities. A number of e-Portfolio tools with optional templates are being used to determine whether they assist evidence collection or cloud the development of a coherent case for an award or probation/promotion application. Although the emphasis is on the whole academic career, most template development for individual use has been in the teaching rather than governance, research or community engagement aspects of a career.

Early use of one e-Portfolio tool (*iWebFolio*) has identified its value as a collaborative support tool for courses, projects and learning and teaching research. This may be the most appropriate way to gather evidence of development work, staff reflection, student feedback and subsequent re-development or refinement of teaching activities and resources. Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn and Savory (2006) detail the benefits of course portfolios to make teaching and learning visible, and “offer a model that shows how you can draw upon a process of peer review to document, assess, reflect on, and improve your teaching and your students’ learning through the use of a course portfolio” (p4). This may well be a long-term goal. In the short-term, such collaborative course, project and research data collection sites can support information sharing, document process and potentially enhance staff engagement in *team* applications for awards and grants.

A web portal to information, people and good practice

A *Focus on Teaching* site will be developed to celebrate teaching, streamline access to existing resources and support for awards, grants and fellowships, and inform staff of professional development opportunities related to learning and teaching. It will draw on information collected through the ‘new’ learning and teaching database (as described above) as well as other relevant existing data identified in the central data warehouse. It will also access resources from a central content management repository (*Equella*).

Focus on Teaching will forecast events, provide regular features on teaching related activities and provide a venue for feedback and requests for advice. One aim is to help staff to identify internal experts with whom they may network informally. Another is to provide the resources they need to engage with award, grant and fellowship processes in a manner that is ongoing and timely for them.

Celebrations and practice sharing

Online access to information, resources and good practice examples of what others are doing in learning and teaching is only one way to celebrate and share learning and teaching practice. Whether the *Focus on Teaching* site is public or located on the intranet, it represents a formal collection of information and artefacts, with limited asynchronous opportunities for staff interaction.

Less formal, face-to-face opportunities for staff interaction are vital. Tschannen-Moran and Nestor-Baker (2004) uncovered a rich reservoir of tacit knowledge in their interviews with prolific educational scholars. They identified the following tacit knowledge categories, sequenced in diminishing 'text units': collaboration and social support; coping with competing demands; navigating institutional context; political skills to gain access to resources and power; setting a research agenda; research to practice connections; connecting with your passions; persevering in overcoming obstacles; the writing process; publishing and coping with peer review; setting goals or maintaining focus; and lastly, standards of rigor. As these authors can attest, this personal tacit knowledge was uncovered and shared through our numerous opportunities for face-to-face interaction, many of which were informal, highly collegial and in social settings.

To complement an existing programme of learning and teaching workshops run through CEDIR, another series of practice sharing events will focus on celebrating highlights (including achievement of awards and grants recipients), and supporting identified learning and teaching needs as a basis for further innovation. This programme will emerge in a grounded fashion, facilitated by the Teaching Innovation Mentor network, who will assist with their planning, identify key resources for development and sharing, and encourage staff use of the *Focus on Teaching* site as a point of access to information. Artefacts from these celebration and practice sharing events, such as posters, case snapshots, interviews, and resulting print publications will be stored and accessed via *Focus on Teaching*.

The increased public profile of learning and teaching through celebrations, and access to a growing collection of practice artefacts will support a culture of valuing and sharing learning and teaching practice that provides peer-reviewed evidence for awards, grants and promotion.

Conclusion

This paper has described the need for, and visioning of, a complex initiative to support and promote innovative teaching and learning within a regional university. The PEI will achieve this by extending existing skills, information systems and patterns of resource sharing. The integration of the diverse elements in the practice by participating academics, general, and academic support staff, will contribute to a range of innovation and an improved student experience. The varied levels of engagement will also contribute informal feedback to the formal award, grant and fellowship processes, the many institutional changes foreshadowed by current discussions of the mix of evidence needed to support promotion applications, and the externally driven changes to higher education.

Most academics contribute to the core activity of teaching as a part of their practice. Success will be gauged by staff ownership of practice sharing, adoption of positional and informal leadership roles and contributions to the development of the teaching awards and grants programme. Framed by the PEI project a vast array of data will be collected through enhancement of existing systems, detailed notes of PEI participants and project evaluation. Analysis of the emerging data set will lead to further sector-wide sharing of practice (a project requirement), and provide a detailed case to advance our

understanding of communities of practice as a theoretical concept in relation to a whole-of-institution perspective. The Promoting Excellence Initiative will be most successful if it maintains a shifting balance between the formal and informal elements of the vision.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the considerable input of Professor Rob Castle, DVC (Academic and International), Professor Sandra Wills, Director of CEDIR, Mr Ray Stace, currently Acting Director of CEDIR, and all members of EDITS.

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