Community Engagement through a model of Virtual Work-integrated Learning

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Abstract:
Vibrant, relevant and enduring community engagement is a common goal for Australian universities and Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has held a long-term commitment to the wider community, building a reputation as a university for the ‘real world’. However, there is awareness within the university sector that in order to be relevant community engagement needs to be continuously renewed. Also, there is a growing willingness within the business community to build social responsibility. Increasing pro-bono work within the legal profession is an example of this movement.

To satisfy changing community and student learning needs, the QUT Faculty of Law is developing a virtual model of work-integrated learning to renew and strengthen partnerships with the wider community. The virtual work-integrated learning model will enable students to assist the legal and business community with these endeavours while enhancing their learning experience. The model will thereby balance the needs of community partners and also engage student learners. The virtual platform proposed will enable students to engage meaningfully with local, national and international community partners. This model should successfully embed QUT’s core business of teaching and learning within a community engagement framework. The model is to be introduced into the curriculum in Semester 2, 2008 and will be evaluated and reviewed from both the university and the community perspectives from Semester 1, 2009.

The theory and literature of the fields of ‘work-integrated learning’ and ‘community engagement’ and the interaction between the fields of ‘work-integrated learning’ and ‘community engagement’ are analysed. The university context will be examined along with the need to balance student learning objectives and community needs. The paper proposes a ‘virtual’ model of WIL that is being designed to meet the rapidly changing nature of the modern workplace and twenty-first century student learning preferences.

Introduction

In the Australian university context, the emphasis upon community activities has recently evolved from one-way ‘community service’ to two-way ‘community
engagement’. The current focus is now directed towards outcomes that are mutually beneficial for both the university and the wider community, a trend given national impetus through the work of the conference organisers, the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance.

It has recently been suggested that one measure of community engagement should include an assessment of the percentage of students undertaking a domestic or international workplace learning experience (Harding, 2006). Considerable university time and attention over the past twenty years has been devoted to the incremental development of graduate attributes to complement the acquisition of professional knowledge in every field. There is growing recognition that authentic student learning involves students learning via their own ‘active behaviour’ and not just through ‘what the teacher does’ (Biggs, 2003). This emphasis centres on building students’ skills and self awareness for future employment and has highlighted the desirability of work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences.

**WIL as a form of Community Engagement**

The current emphasis on community engagement in the university sector focuses on developing enduring partnerships and collaborations with external organisations. It is taking a variety of forms, for example, knowledge transfer, the development of communities of interest and high impact community based programs. It has been asserted that these ‘interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity’ (Holland, 2001). From the university perspective the engagement may be characterised as part of university core business of either teaching and learning or research. WIL programs clearly fall within such community engagement.

WIL provides a context for skills development and an opportunity for students to prepare for the transition from university to professional practice. Such experiences range from highly structured university controlled placements for academic credit, to informal situations where students volunteer to be part of a workplace outside of the formal university semester. The United States National Commission for Cooperative Learning defines cooperative education as:

> …a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student’s academic or career goals…It is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party (Groenewald, 2005, pp. 17-26).

Research into WIL programs has been summarised through literature reviews, attempted definitions and conceptual models in educational literature for many years (Dewey, 1938, Kolb, 1984, Boud, 2001, Dressler et al, 2005, Groenewald, 2005). However in this field, where educational practice is so affected by the pragmatic factors of the workplace, even theoretical models appear to be designed to be context specific. Overarching theory gives educators comfort in designing learning experiences as it ensures our practices are informed by research. However in this field, where theories of learning are only one of the many factors that impact on the success of the learning experience, they are arguably not as helpful (Van Gyn et al, 2005). This is particularly so where the proposed task requires the creation of a new type of work-integrated experience that is intended to operate in the digital environment and not in the physical workplace.
Student Learning Preferences and Current Workplace Technology

The preference of the majority of today’s students for communicating and learning via digital technology has been widely reported (Jonas-Dwyer et al, 2004 and Raines, 2002). Such an approach to communication also is closely aligned with many current workplace environments. The internet, and mobile technologies have transformed traditional methods of communication. At the same time these media have contributed to a surge of global initiatives in online learning and eLearning. Whilst many universities are now using digital technologies for the flexible delivery of content, there are fewer examples of the effective use of technology to enable student centred and flexible learning (Radcliffe, 2002).

Given the transforming nature of workplaces and the radical changes in work practices in organisations, it is submitted that authentic WIL experiences can now be recreated in the virtual paradigm.

Similarly, given the wealth of current research documenting the changing nature of the way today’s students learn and the competing demands on their time, it is submitted that work placement opportunities that enable flexible delivery and flexible learning also are a desirable addition to the traditional physical placement programs.

The virtual work placement model will provide flexibility in the learning experience, more effectively engaging today’s students who are used to the constant connectivity provided by digital media (Oblinger, 2003). In taking into account what today’s students value it is hoped that we can more effectively engage them with a view to positively influencing their learning experience, understanding and learning outcomes.

However, as more technology is not necessarily better, the model developed will endeavour to focus on the activity enabled by the technology (Oblinger et al, 2003) – rather than simply focusing on content delivery of knowledge through online packaged lectures and readings (McCombs et al, 2005).

The University Context

The higher education sector in Australia has undergone a period of rapid change during the last decade through an altered funding model, new levels of competition between providers, an increasing emphasis on research quantity and quality and a larger, more diverse and demanding student population. In these changing times the strategies aimed at improving the quality of the educational experience for the new student body currently employed by Australian universities are both proactive and reactive in nature. A 2005 Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) survey noted general agreement that universities faced a dilemma involving

‘how best to balance mission (achieving the key purposes of the university) with market (giving students what they want in order to gain and retain them—even if this is specific, skills-focused job training)’ (Scott, 2005).

QUT is conversant with the need to balance mission and market and has utilised its strategic planning process to emphasise the importance of improving the student
experience while strengthening ‘real world’ engagement. One of the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategies is to ‘Strengthen the real-world focus of learning experiences through developing and strengthening active partnerships and collaborations within and beyond the University’ (QUT Learning and Teaching Plan 2005-2009). The beneficial learning experiences created through WIL have proven to be a positive factor in improving the student experience with research showing that ‘engagement in activities contrib[es] to enhanced academic outcomes’ (Furco, 2005).

The field of ‘legal education’ in Australia has also been affected by the wider university sector changes. A number of significant developments have occurred in the areas of ‘legal’ and ‘generic’ skills. For example, the Australian Law Reform Commission, in its major review of the Federal Civil Justice System (ALRC, 1999) recommended that legal education should be more concerned with “what lawyers need to be able to do ” as distinct from the traditional approach, which has been centred around “what lawyers need to know”.

The Proposed Virtual Model of Work-integrated Learning

The aim of the Model is to provide an authentic and sustainable virtual workplace experience for undergraduate law students at QUT as an elective subject. It will be sufficiently flexible to be offered through either the standard semester or the summer program in students’ final year of study.

The virtual workplace will operate from the Blackboard Learning Management System supplemented by the QUT ePortfolio program.

The following 8 step Model is being developed in collaboration with our community partners:

1. Students will apply for their work placement position by answering an advertisement in the virtual workplace newspaper.
2. Specific criteria will apply and students will need to prepare an eResumé outlining their experiences and demonstrated strengths and interests.
3. In response to their applications students will receive virtual letters of acceptance, which will allocate them to work teams and community partners on the basis of their expressed preferences. It is anticipated that the range of partners will extend across the spectrum of law firms, government, industry and community organisations. It is envisaged that at this point students also will be invited to participate in the community partner’s virtual workplace, being granted a level of access to the organisation’s intranet, online research tools, group emails, continuing education and professional development services. Throughout this period students also will be encouraged to develop team familiarity through an assessed interactive online exercise conducted on the QUT learning management system (LMS) platform.
4. After teams have been allocated to community partners, tasks will be set by workplace mentors in each organisation. Students will be asked to collaborate to prepare a plan of action to scope their approach to completing the task including a scoping, action plan, allocation of workloads and a timeline for completion.
5. Following submission of the group’s plan of action, workplace mentors will provide feedback to the group highlighting practical considerations that may have been overlooked.
6. The major assessment item will then involve completion of the assigned task in groups. It is envisaged that given the range of employers, the nature of these tasks may include diverse activities for example research into legal problems, preparation of client briefings, memoranda of advice.
7. The workplace mentors will assess the project and give detailed feedback to the group on the strengths, weaknesses and practical utility of the work produced.
8. The final stage of the project will involve students being asked to revisit their original eResumés through the ePortfolio service to record and reflect upon their workplace experience.

Conclusion

It has been asserted that the ‘engaged university is seriously committed to interacting with its communities in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way’ (Temple et al, 2005). QUT connections with the community historically have been strong: the current QUT Mission is ‘to bring to the community the benefits of teaching, research, technology and service’ (QUT Mission, 2005). This proposed model of virtual WIL is a practical example of this mission.

It already is clear that the only way model of virtual work integrated learning will prosper is through sustained and productive relationships between the university and the community partners (Reeve et al, 2007). New information and communication technologies are transforming the practices of both universities and workplaces and QUT law students, already comfortable with operating in ‘virtual contexts’, should easily adapt to rapidly changing digital work environments (Poole et al, 2005). The proposed model of online interactive communication is being designed to meet the needs of students and community partners. It will engage student learners in an authentic and rewarding learning experience with the “real world” of professional practice and contribute positively both to students and the community.

References:


