"Third generation" conversations – A partnership approach to embedding research and learning skills development in the first year. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This Practice Report offers a strategic approach to making research and learning skills explicit within the curriculum of first year core units, by enabling a systematic process of pedagogical conversations between teaching faculty, learning skills advisers and librarians. It reports on a collaborative project between staff of Monash Library and academic staff of the faculties of Business and Economics and Information Technology. It offers tools and protocols for the review and renewal of curricula and co-curricula practice within a partnership model, informed by the Research Skills Development (RSD) Framework. It takes into account teaching and learning approaches, intervention and support strategies, assessment, and feedback mechanisms. It also responds to emerging trends in higher education delivery such as blended learning and the flipped classroom model (Baker, 2000).

Context

A common theme across the extensive first year experience (FYE) literature of the last decade has been the call for a systematic, coordinated, organisational approach to the first year experience that brings together the various academic and professional learning systems within universities, and moves beyond a triage, scattergun approach (Coates, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Kuh, 2007; Tinto, 2009).

Some of the strongest voices have come from the exponents of Transition Pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005). Described as "everybody's business," Transition Pedagogy is defined as the coming together of "first generation" co-curricular learning activities such as those traditionally delivered by non-faculty staff and "second generation" curricular initiatives such as those embedded within a curriculum context, to create a coherent "third generation" partnership FYE approach which is integrated, intentional and cross-institutional (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).

While Kift et al. (2010) report that "third generation" uptake has been slow and "piecemeal," the model has generated a range of recently reported FYE initiatives at Australian universities based upon academic and non-faculty partnerships. These include an assessment design and management project (Macleod & Wilson, 2012), the Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Study Solutions model outlined by Derrington, Hayes, Batchelor and Peacock (2011), a project to embed inquiry and research skills development at La Trobe University (Salisbury, Yager, & Kirkman, 2012) and a foundation year writing and research initiative at Monash University (Png & McKeown, 2011).

A recent case study by Kift et al. (2010) considers the lessons learned from the development of Transition Pedagogy initiatives at QUT over the last ten years, and argues for a top down-bottom up approach, that fosters ground-up initiatives in an environment of institutional endorsement and support, an approach that mitigates against the "piecemeal."

This Practice Report describes a professional and academic partnership project that reflects the QUT model and the recommendation of Kift and colleagues to adopt a stance of shared responsibility. It involves the collaboration of three sets of key players: faculty academics, Librarians and Learning Skills Advisers. The faculty components include the unit coordinators and teachers of the common core units from two first year degrees: the Bachelor of Business and Economics and the Bachelor or Information Technology. The Librarians and Learning Skills Advisers are part of a faculty-specific team, whose role is to provide co-curricula research and learning skills development as well as in-curricula support to both students and teachers. Like QUT, Librarians and Learning Skills Advisers are co-located within the Monash Library in the same student-facing space, under the banner of Research and Learning (R&L). Echoing the QUT experience reported by Derrington et al. (2011) in their 2011 Nuts and Bolts session paper, this integrated delivery model increases accessibility and visibility to students and provides research and learning support which is "normalised, open, positive and the responsibility of many" (p. 1).

An important contextual element of this project is the institutional commitment of Monash University to policy led, top-down support and encouragement for FYE approaches. An example is the adoption of

the Research Skills Development (RSD) Framework as a critical element of the Monash Education Strategic Plan 2011–2015. Alignment of all Monash courses against the RSD Framework is a current institutional goal. At an operational level, the Monash Library has been tasked with achieving this across the university. This commitment has fostered a wide variety of library and faculty partnerships and opened up professional/academic dialogue, paving the way for this project.

Now in use at five Australian universities, the RSD Framework is a conceptual framework intended to inform curriculum design and assessment, and to promote a community of practice committed to approaches and resources targeting explicit and incremental development of students' research and learning skills across a range of contexts (Willison & O'Regan, 2007).

An additional important factor to be acknowledged within the context of this project, is the openness of both faculties involved, to a process of curriculum renewal and to the adoption of new modes of delivery that address the changing pattern of student engagement. The project described in this session builds upon an earlier initiative in 2007 to radically review the core Bachelor of Business first year units in order to develop a common foundation curriculum that incorporates meta skills, including academic literacy and academic culture as well as research and learning skills. An internal discussion paper entitled *Foundation Year – A proposal for change* 2008 (Monash University, 2007), also made way for the way for the current consultative model.

Background

The purpose of the project, which commenced in Semester 2, 2012, is to map and align research and learning skills against the core curricula of the first year of two degrees, drawing upon the Research Skills Development (RSD) Framework. The intention was to review current delivery of research and learning skills and explore the potential for better integration with faculty programs as well as identify gaps and opportunities for further collaboration. This includes opportunities for learning activities to be delivered in co-curricula and in-curricula modes, as well as via blended learning contexts.

Our aim was to create a project informed by collaborative, action research principles and employ a cycle of action, review and systematic reflection (Dick, 2002) resulting in a consultative protocol which forms the basis for the ongoing conversations within Research & Learning (R&L) and between R&L and Faculty.

A number of useful and transferable tools have been created as a result of the consultative process enabling the charting of R&L in the core units. One of these is an adaptation of the RSD Framework that can be applied in a range of circumstances. Another is the creation of an inventory of the separate R&L skills being delivered across all six first year foundation units of each degree throughout the semester. We realised that taking this holistic approach, made it possible to first review our own R&L material for quality, consistency and balance; to consider how it might best fit with the unit content and assessment cycle; and to articulate our role more clearly in the overall scheme of student learning opportunities.

Another bi-product of the process was the creation of an overview matrix of all the overarching quality frameworks governing curriculum. The process of developing this matrix presented a first time opportunity for some of the R&L and academic staff to view in depth the details of these frameworks. A graphical representation of the key frameworks and learning outcomes was created. (See Figure 1) Student Outcomes were positioned at the centre, with Curriculum, Teaching Approach, Assessment and Research and Learning, equally placed around the inner circle. Creation of this artifact helped to change the perceptions of the partner members about our roles leading to further collaborative work such as the creation of assessment rubrics integrating research and learning skills.

The documenting process identified all R&L delivery and content to determine the breadth and efficiency of the current model, and informed us of development opportunities to target our delivery more strategically and with more relevance.

Session Overview

To maximise feedback and exchange of ideas, this session first included a presentation, focusing on the background to the project and the processes and tools under development. followed by an interactive segment, which included group tasks and opportunities for both small and large-group discussion.

The initial group task provided participants with an opportunity to trial the project's mapping protocol by cross-referencing a sample assessment task, taken from a core Marketing unit of the first year Bachelor of Business, with the RSD Framework. The aim of this activity was to encourage an exchange of views on the alignment of the Unit assessment task with the descriptors listed within the RSD Framework. By deconstructing a task and aligning it with an external framework, productive small-group discussions occurred around the level of student autonomy in the first year and the requirement to provide skills development opportunities prior to and within
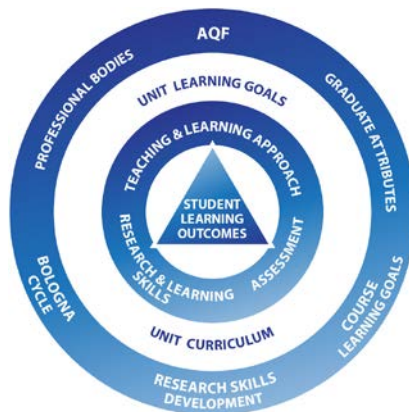
Figure 1: **Overarching frameworks**

assessment tasks.

The wider whole-group discussion underscored the need for scaffolding and staging within course delivery and assessment to recognise the developmental needs of first year students as apprentice scholars, writers and researchers. It also raised the value of collaborative and partnership curriculum design models for academics who are often working in isolation and who face increasing challenges to incorporate new online and blended learning delivery models.

Discussion also provided positive feedback on the applicability of the mapping process and conversation protocol to wider contexts. Participants were asked to consider the feasibility of adopting the project's professional/academic partnership model in their own settings. Comments pointed to the potential impact of frameworks such as the Australian Quality Framework and the RSD Framework to explicitly locate research and learning skills in the first year curriculum and to promote a more inclusive "one team" curriculum design and delivery approach. It was generally acknowledged that whole-of-institution, policy-led initiatives such as the Monash University Library partnership model provide a sound basis for sustainable change.

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