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Abstract

Graduate attributes are a key aspect of students' outcomes during their university career. Although universities acknowledge their importance, there is little support for academics to develop teaching strategies to help students achieve these attributes. This paper presents a web-based resource that links teaching strategies with graduate attributes in a university context. Whilst a number of universities provide support for graduate attributes through policy development, faculty strategic plans and subject outcomes, the actual implementation in the classroom requires an understanding of teaching strategies to develop the student outcomes. The paper also explains the conceptual framework of the website to show how teaching strategies used in different faculties can be identified and shared to help academics incorporate the attributes in their teaching. This website has the potential to provide a structure for an online teaching and learning community across a university context.

Keywords

graduate attributes, generic skills, transferable skills, key skills, teaching strategies

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SHARING TEACHING STRATEGIES ONLINE: ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

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Abstract: Graduate attributes are a key aspect of students' outcomes during their university career. Although universities acknowledge their importance, there is little support for academics to develop teaching strategies to help students achieve these attributes. This paper presents a web-based resource that links teaching strategies with graduate attributes in a university context. Whilst a number of universities provide support for graduate attributes through policy development, faculty strategic plans and subject outcomes, the actual implementation in the classroom requires an understanding of teaching strategies to develop the student outcomes. The paper also explains the conceptual framework of the website to show how teaching strategies used in different faculties can be identified and shared to help academics incorporate the attributes in their teaching. This website has the potential to provide a structure for an online teaching and learning community across a university context.

Introduction

There has been an increased emphasis on the influence a university education has on graduate outcomes in recent times in the UK, US and Australasia (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995; Crebert, 2002; Down, Martin, Hager, & Bricknell, 1999). In the UK accountability measures through quality assurance processes have seen an increased interest in developing generic skills throughout the higher education sector (Higher Education Council (HEQC): Quality Enhancement Group, 1998; University of Hertfordshire, 2002) with support provided through the Learning and Teaching Support Network (Learning and Teaching Support Network).

In Australia, graduate attributes have been embodied in policy documents and encapsulated in teaching and learning strategic plans of many universities. A number of universities have identified ways to support the development of graduate attributes, with some such as University of Sydney providing a plan for implementation (Barrie, 2003) and others providing web-based support for implementation strategies (Murdoch University, 2002; University of Queensland, 2003). Indeed one group of universities have received federal funding to support the development of generic capabilities of graduates through the identification of case studies of best practice (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2002). Whilst the embodiment of graduate attributes at the subject or course level is included in such case studies, it is often hard to distinguish the teaching activities used to support their development. In times of increased accountability and quality reviews there is strong advocacy from employer groups for measuring graduate outcomes to discern the level of student achievement (Hager, Holland, & Beckett, 2002). Whilst this may provide indicators of what is being achieved in the area, some tertiary educators, without a background in the field of education, find it difficult to make explicit what they do in the teaching situation to support the development of graduate attributes.

The focus of this paper is on an approach used by a cross-faculty and cross-unit team in a regional university in Australia for identifying and sharing teaching strategies to support the development of graduate attributes within the

curriculum. A website was designed to provide access to teaching strategies across the faculties for the graduate attributes identified in the University of Wollongong *Strategic Plan 2002 – 2005* as "a key measure of the University's achievement of its core functions." A feature of the site is that it has been designed for academics to contribute on a regular basis so that the site will be evolving.

Significance of the Project

At the University of Wollongong graduate attributes were identified in 1992 and various working parties developed policies and methods to support their implementation, including their development in strategic planning documents in the late 90s and in the most recent *Strategic Plan 2002-2005*. At the University graduate attributes are underpinned by tertiary literacies which include a range of generic skills as well as values, attitudes and professional capabilities intended to increase the employability of its graduates. A number of structures to support the acquisition of graduate attributes have been established through curriculum integration (Curtis, Lefoe, Merten, Milne, & Albury, 1999; Skillen, Trivett, Merten, & Percy, 1999) and generic graduate attribute programs, such as a compulsory zero-credit point subject for all first year students, Information Literacies Introductory Program (Collins & Hill, 2003).

However, in spite of the importance of teaching at university, priority has been given for research that traditionally has been a higher status activity for academics (Biggs, 1999). This raises two issues in regard to teaching at university.

First, how do academics learn about teaching and second, what is the relationship between teaching and learning? Conventionally, the pedagogy of university teaching is usually driven by the content in each subject (Brookfield, 1986). For example, academics usually think about the content or knowledge they want students to learn and then present the subject in sections accordingly. Ways of learning are considered, but these are usually a minor consideration in relation to the sequence of content presented in the subject. This is often the same when subjects are presented online—content is presented in sections in a digital form instead of a book form with little consideration for how students are going to learn it (Brabazon, 2002).

A more comprehensive view of pedagogy is to view it as a relationship between teaching and learning (Hoban, 2000). This is why the graduate attributes are important—they encapsulate quality learning and can be used as a link or focus on teaching. Furthermore, online technologies such as a web environment can be used to link teaching strategies with graduate attributes. The web environment not only represents a database of teaching-learning ideas, but is a medium to share these ideas with other academics. When academics gain a deeper understanding of how students learn, they may develop a new pedagogy meaning that learning drives teaching rather than vice versa. For this shift in relationship to occur, a framework is needed that treats teaching and learning as a dynamic relationship. The web site has been designed to facilitate this process.

Articulating Teaching Strategies—the Practical Knowledge of University Instruction

Teaching is one of the main roles of an academic and often takes up to half of the allocated time in their workload. This time includes not only the face-to-face tutorials and lectures, but also time spent in preparing classes, marking and student consultation. Importantly, every academic has favourite teaching strategies which they use to promote student learning in many different ways. But discussions between academics at university mainly focus on sharing ideas for research. Rarely is there dedicated time to sharing ideas about teaching except for the targeted workshops run on campus or in the occasional incidental conversation.

Importantly, many of these strategies to promote student learning in lectures, tutorials or assignments are not found in books. Instead, they have been developed from personal experience in teaching or are a feature of lecturer's intuitive skills and/or personality. A strategy, therefore, has a unit of analysis or focus as an idea or technique to present material or interact with students in a lecture or tutorial. For the purposes of developing the web site, a teaching strategy was defined in this way:

- is either a short-term strategy or the activities of a comprehensive learning environment that assist students in developing one or more features of a graduate attribute;

- can be used in a lecture, tutorial, assignment or a combination;
- is NOT the description of a whole subject design, a collection of assignments or an overall subject structure.

Theoretically, a teaching strategy is the *practical* or *tacit knowledge* of university teaching. A strategy is often personally developed and is usually refined over several teaching episodes or even semesters of teaching through experience and reflection upon experience. Sometimes a teaching strategy is not clearly defined, but rather is implicit in the 'art' of teaching. Elbaz (1983, 1991) was one of the first educational researchers to write about the notion of practical knowledge. In teaching, she described this as: "first hand experiences of students" learning styles, interests, needs, strengths and difficulties, and a repertoire of instructional techniques and classroom management skills" (Elbaz, 1983, p. 5). This practical knowledge can cover such areas as knowledge about the self, milieu, subject matter, curriculum and instruction. Others, such as Schön (1983, 1987) suggested that practical knowledge is not explicit in teaching, but rather is embedded in "the epistemology of practice" in terms of what works or does not work in the context of action or experience of teaching. Later, Shulman (1986) identified different types of knowledge in teaching such as content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends. In the collection of teaching strategies for the website, some academics were readily able to articulate their practical knowledge, whilst others were interviewed by team members to make the implicit more explicit.

Resource Design

The conceptual framework of the web site is based on the nine existing attributes of a Wollongong Graduate. The examples of teaching strategies from different faculties are hyperlinked from each attribute on the project homepage as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Homepage of the Attributes Site

Each attribute is hyperlinked to sample strategies. When one of the attributes is clicked, it opens a page that shows a teaching strategy from one of the nine faculties in the university. The website has been designed to share strategies across and within faculties through a navigation structure that allows the user to either view examples for a particular attribute or for a particular faculty by selecting navigation across the attributes or through the faculty contexts, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Navigation of the website

The purpose and relationship of each strategy to the graduate attributes are identified. The example teaching strategies then focus on the role of the teacher, identifying the steps the teacher takes to implement the strategy as demonstrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Example of teaching strategy

The website is linked to the University Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan to highlight its importance to the university but relies on the strategy of identifying and sharing current practice of the teaching staff. Whilst the website focuses on the sharing of information, the contributors are identified with contact information to encourage collaboration between staff about the strategies. Where strategies for specific faculties or attributes have not been identified staff members are invited to contribute additional strategies through a contribution page. Templates are provided for each attribute with a sample to be adapted by the contributor.

Dissemination of the Innovation

The use of this website for academics depends on how well academics, understand, value and contribute to the site. In order to engage academics to use the site a number of initiatives have been identified:

- The names and contact details are provided to encourage discussion with those who have proposed the strategies.
- A university launch will occur in February 2004 by academic leaders in the university to give the site status.
- The site will be demonstrated at faculty meetings to promote its use.
- Cross faculty workshops will be implemented to encourage exploration of the site and discussion of adapting the strategies to meet the needs of different disciplines. The face-to-face workshops will also be used to encourage staff to contribute their own ideas to the site, both during the workshops and afterwards.

Through the demonstration of teaching strategies, opportunity to discuss the implementation of strategies during the workshop program and the encouragement for staff to make contributions to the site the authors anticipate the site will grow to include a much wider range of strategies beyond the thirty already contributed. It is envisaged that the site will be used at Foundation teaching courses for beginning academics, and as a way to disseminate exemplary teaching strategies in applications for awards and promotion.

Future Directions

The challenge for any innovation is the effectiveness of the implementation. In this case the challenge is to both encourage academics to make use of the site and to contribute new strategies so the site evolves. Evaluation of the innovation will occur at the end of the first year of use and will include a review of website usage statistics, a survey of all academic staff and focus groups with self-nominated staff. It will focus on the following questions:

- How frequently has the site been accessed since the launch?
- How is the site being used by academics?
- What changes have been made to the curriculum as a result of the innovation?
- How has it assisted academics to introduce new strategies for the development of graduate attributes?

Following the evaluation of the use of the site in 2004 the University anticipates developing a further site to support the development of postgraduate research attributes.

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