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in curriculum, teaching and learning: a case study of  
initiatives at La Trobe University*

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## Special Edition: Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice Editorial 9.3

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# Special Edition: Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice

## Editorial 9.3

### Abstract

This Special Edition of JUTLP is unique in that it examines a single university's approach to curriculum reform, providing insights from many of the people who were engaged in the process.

At La Trobe University in Australia the mechanism for engaging in discussions at a university level has been encapsulated in an institutional strategy known as *Design for Learning* (DfL) (La Trobe University 2009). From 2007, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) Belinda Probert and former Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Academic Planning) Tom Angelo, led an exciting and edgy curriculum change initiative intended to build on La Trobe's learning and teaching strengths, while simultaneously building a systems focus for ensuring curriculum quality and renewal. The blueprint for the DfL described its principles thus:

“ ... highlight[ing] breadth of choice, equity, flexibility (options), learning centred-ness, research and evidence based decision making, a systems focus (rather than making individuals responsible for things they do not control), and support (resources)” (La Trobe University 2009, p. 7).

With goodwill, energy and a profound sense that ‘something needed to be done’, in the early years of the DfL, the university was alive with fresh talk of curriculum, teaching and student learning galvanised by new leadership, a commitment to evidence-based change, resources to fund curriculum innovation, together with the promise of reward and recognition. Imagine the scene: committees and communities spring up to think together about complex pedagogical issues, spirited discussion takes place, departments and faculties share resources and good practices, new staff are brought on board with responsibility to make things happen.

The 7 papers represented here describe both large and small curriculum change initiatives – some funded by the university and others done out of love, curiosity and interest.

### Keywords

editorial, special edition

### Cover Page Footnote

As this is the final issue for 2012 we would like to acknowledge the contribution of the many international authors involved in reviewing our papers. The depth of feedback and time taken ensure our journal continues to thrive. With 32000 downloads of individual papers this year we know that readership has grown significantly as has the quality of the papers. Thank you. Jason Adsit, SUNY-Buffalo; Roz Albon, Sharjah Women's College, Dubai; Tom Angelo, La Trobe University; Bruce Armstrong, Southern Cross University; Roger Atkinson, AJET; Jennieffer Barr, Southern cross University; Sue Bennett, University of Wollongong; Wendy Boyd, Southern Cross University ; William Boyd, Southern Cross University; Chris Brewer, University of Wollongong; Lyn Brodie, University of Southern Queensland; Christine Brown, University of Wollongong; Natalie Brown, University of Tasmania; Tom Carey, University of Waterloo; Jude Carroll, Oxford Brookes University; Denise Chalmers, University of Western Australia; Juliana Chau, Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Malcolm Clark, Southern Cross University; Rosanne Coutts, Southern Cross University; Patrick Crookes, University of Wollongong; Kim DeBacco, University of California, Santa Barbara; Robyn Donovan, Central Queensland University; Rob Farrow, Open University, UK; Suzanne Fegan, La Trobe University;

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## Editorial

### ***Promoting transformative and academic change in curriculum, teaching and learning: a case study of initiatives at La Trobe University***

Universities and higher education providers the world over are in a time of curriculum change and renewal. It was only 8 years ago that UK higher education scholars Ronald Barnett and Kelly Coate (2005, p. 1) lamented that the “very idea of curriculum is pretty well missing” from higher education discourse yet if we open up any higher education newspaper, peruse any standard learning and teaching journal, or talk long enough with colleagues about teaching practice or student learning, we are likely to puzzle over themes as diverse as course degree flexibility, flipped curricula, graduate attributes, students’ learning dispositions, threshold concepts, leadership, qualification frameworks, and more recently, MOOCs. These ideas are now matters for serious policy debate and scholarly discussion, and the notion of *curriculum* has offered a productive set of possibilities for bringing these themes together in a coherent way. While a great deal of our attention has been taken up by the *intended* curriculum, we now know this to be insufficient and that our efforts must also be on the *enacted* and *experienced* curriculum (Marsh & Willis 2007) because these are where we can best glean insights about student learning - how to care for, and improve it.

At La Trobe University, the mechanism for engaging in these discussions at a university level has been encapsulated in our institutional strategy known as *Design for Learning* (DfL) (La Trobe University 2009). From 2007, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) Belinda Probert and former Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Academic Planning) Tom Angelo led an exciting and edgy curriculum change initiative intended to build on La Trobe’s learning and teaching strengths, while simultaneously building a systems focus for ensuring curriculum quality and renewal. The blueprint for the DfL described its principles thus:

“ ... highlight[ing] breadth of choice, equity, flexibility (options), learning centredness, research and evidence based decision making, a systems focus (rather than making individuals responsible for things they do not control), and support (resources)” (La Trobe University 2009, p. 7).

With goodwill, energy and a profound sense that ‘something needed to be done’, in the early years of the DfL, the university was alive with fresh talk of curriculum, teaching and student learning galvanised by new leadership, a commitment to evidence-based change, resources to fund curriculum innovation, together with the promise of reward and recognition. Imagine the scene: committees and communities spring up to think together about complex pedagogical issues, spirited discussion takes place, departments and faculties share resources and good practices, new staff are brought on board with responsibility to make things happen. These are good times.

Out of all this, the university began to work in earnest on improving first year students’ orientation and transition (academic and social) to university study; it incorporated *backwards design* and *constructive alignment* as guides to evaluating course quality and subject design; it developed a set of six university-wide graduating capabilities (writing, speaking, teamwork, critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and inquiry/research) each one to be mapped and assessed (with feedback provided to students according to faculty-defined standards) at three time points across all undergraduate degree programs; and it focused on providing coherent professional development leadership opportunities to support staff in doing so.

This Special Issue is a testament to the many La Trobe staff that participated in and saw merit in the *Design for Learning* project. In particular, these papers speak to a commitment that is about transforming academic cultures and quality outcomes for students. The 7 papers

represented here describe both large and small curriculum change initiatives – some funded by the university and others done out of love, curiosity and interest.

Opening the issue is a piece by Julianne East and Lisa Donnelly inviting us to ask questions about how an institution can begin to take a collaborative whole-of-university approach to the thorny issue of academic integrity. A rationale is offered; a suite of comprehensive resources described; processes for institutional embedding suggested (often the most neglected step!); and finally, student data are reported which demonstrate how they engaged with the resources and their revised perceptions of academic integrity. Both authors acknowledge that there is still some way to go at La Trobe; however, the paper will be of interest for those in universities looking to couple a risk management strategy with a scholarly and educative rationale.

The second piece (led ably by Kate Chanock with colleagues) describes two initiatives in La Trobe's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences: first, a project for embedding graduate capabilities within a first year subjects and second, a Lead Tutors Scheme. The first initiative deals squarely with the issue of how first year students learn the required knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in the academic discourse of the disciplines they are studying. The second scheme explores how a group of staff (Lead Tutors) work to engage and retain first year students. Importantly, the paper also offers an insight about how staff sometimes experience top-down change initiatives.

A central hub of any university is its Library, and La Trobe is no different in this regard. The piece by Fiona Salisbury (with colleagues) showcases how the library is supporting the university to develop resources to meet its ambitions for one of the graduate capabilities – inquiry/research (and specifically, information literacy). Drawing on Biggs and Tang's (2007) notion of constructive alignment, they argue that librarians' knowledge and skills are put to better use when they are able to collaborate effectively with academics to achieve the learning outcomes of courses and subjects. The resulting Inquiry/Research Toolkit (which is at the heart of the paper) is just the tool to aid such an endeavour.

The paper by Gillian Fletcher, Gary Dowsett and Lilian Austin provides an account of the development and implementation of a new online subject *Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality* in the Faculty of Health Sciences. The narrative will resonate with many readers as it tells of colleagues searching for ways to keep 'active learning' as the pedagogical centrepiece despite the challenges afforded by asynchronicity and different kinds of interaction.

Designing capstone subjects and experiences for students is another element which has emerged as part of *Design for Learning*. Brianna Julien and colleagues in the Department of Human Biosciences (Faculty of Health Sciences) have taken on the task of refreshing the final years of the Advanced Human Physiology course by introducing two related capstone subjects that better embed graduate capabilities, leading students to either postgraduate research or work-readiness. The piece foregrounds changes to learning outcomes and an increase skills-based assessment. The data presented about students' perceptions of changes and their corresponding performance, show these curriculum changes to be worthwhile.

The penultimate paper on leading curriculum change in Science led by Elizabeth Johnson (with colleagues) looks seriously at the sort of leadership needed to carry off curriculum renewal of the scale suggested by the *Design for Learning* strategy. In their piece, authority is coupled with distributed leadership, and with informal and focused leadership in teams. The study they report on canvasses the perceptions of School Directors of Teaching and Learning, and Curriculum Fellows in the Faculty of Science, Technology and Engineering to highlight effective working relationships, the importance of the disciplinary context, and how they

negotiate and manoeuvre their way through changing conversations and practices about learning, teaching and curriculum.

The Special Issue closes with a Commentary on *Design for Learning* by historian Adrian Jones. Adrian is a long-time La Trobe academic and an award-winning university teacher. During his time at the university, he has seen change (and Vice-Chancellors) come and go. His paper offers a robust analysis about why *Design for Learning* was a welcome initiative; he provides a view about where it stumbled, and where it should go next: more involvement by students. His is a view I am inclined to agree with.

It has now been 4-5 years since *Design for Learning* made a big splash at La Trobe University. The two senior managers who led and championed it – Belinda Probert and Tom Angelo – are no longer at the university. Their legacy remains, however. The university is taking forward aspects of *Design for Learning* as part of its new Strategic Plan. The years of curriculum, teaching and learning conversations made possible as a result of *Design for Learning* now permeate the fabric and processes of the university. The papers included in this Special Issue are just a tiny part of a much larger commitment the university has made to strengthening teaching, learning and curriculum.

My thanks to all the contributing authors; and special thanks to Tom Angelo.

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