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Building academic capability to facilitate and support the transition of first year social inclusion business students

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Abstract

The first year in higher education has been of growing interest particularly in light of the Australian Federal Government's mandate to target students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper reports on one faculty's Social Inclusion Project designed to help teachers support first year student transition into tertiary studies. This paper outlines an action learning project directed at building knowledge and skills around transition pedagogy for subject coordinators of core first year business subjects. The project was deliberately designed to develop academics' ability to confidently monitor students' progress through the use of both formative and summative assessment practices and to modify their teaching according to students' needs. This paper describes an approach to creating a community of practice around sharing, reflecting and collaboration among coordinators of first year subjects, to embed inclusive teaching strategies into first year subjects.

Keywords

students, capability, business, academic, inclusion, social, year, first, transition, building, support, facilitate

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Building academic capability to facilitate and support the transition of first year social inclusion business students

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Abstract

The first year in higher education has been of growing interest particularly in light of the Australian Federal Government's mandate to target students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper reports on one faculty's Social Inclusion Project designed to help teachers support first year student transition into tertiary studies. This paper outlines an action learning project directed at building knowledge and skills around transition pedagogy for subject coordinators of core first year business subjects. The project was deliberately designed to develop academics' ability to confidently monitor students' progress through the use of both formative and summative assessment practices and to modify their teaching according to students' needs. This paper describes an approach to creating a community of practice around sharing, reflecting and collaboration among coordinators of first year subjects, to embed inclusive teaching strategies into first year subjects.

Background

Student transition into first year at university is receiving increasing attention from researchers and practitioners (James, 2011; Nelson, Clarke, Kift and Creagh, 2011). As it matures as a field of scholarly enquiry, literature on first year transition is now 'on the cusp' of significant future developments (Nelson et al., 2011). Another field of enquiry, burgeoning in higher education and inter-relating with first year transition, is the broad domain of social inclusion and diversity. This domain is significantly growing in response to the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) and the Australian Federal Government's proposal for higher education to increase the quantity of students attending higher education from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds.

The national agenda to widen participation has significant implications for teaching in first year subjects. Not only are academics teaching and designing for a more diverse cohort of students, but their role has transformed to include greater focus on supporting student learning. For example, forms of classroom intervention to assist student learning are becoming recognised as increasingly important tools to identify and ideally retain LSES students at-risk of failing (Pearson and Naug, 2013). Therefore, supporting first year transition is not only important for teachers but an *obligation* of teachers (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to outline the processes and preliminary outcomes of a project focused on embedding support of first year transition into curriculum and teaching practices.

Through action learning (Turbill, 2002), we specifically addressed how academics might design, deliver and assess through curriculum to confidently engage students from diverse backgrounds in first year business subjects. While casual teaching staff also participated in the project, the aim of this paper is to present the steps taken and outcomes of our collaboration with first year subject coordinators who, as curriculum designers, are the pedagogical change-agents within their subjects.

The Social Inclusion Project

The Social Inclusion Project Scheme (SIPS) forms part of the Faculty of Business' research into teaching and learning at the University of Wollongong. Initiated in 2011, the project aimed to: build knowledge and skills of transition pedagogy in teaching staff; help academics to identify students at-risk of failure in their first year of higher education; engage academics in formative and summative strategies as an evaluation of student learning; and, support all first year undergraduate business students specifically those from socially disadvantaged groups.

In designing the SIPS project, we were motivated by the understanding that effective teaching requires a capacity not only to inquire into the learning needs of students, but also to build teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills. Therefore to underpin and inform the project, we adopted Kift's (2009) transition pedagogy as a set of guidelines for curriculum design and teaching. Her work offers a way of supporting LSES students through a "coherent, integrated, intentional, supportive, and inclusive curriculum design" (Kift, 2009, p.15). Kift's transition pedagogy comprises six interrelated first year principles: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment and evaluation, and monitoring, and were a useful framework to focus conversations on how to engage a heterogeneous cohort of undergraduates.

Methodologically, we felt this philosophy was best represented through Turbill's action learning model (Turbill, 1994; 2002). Action learning integrates teachers' existing knowledge with new knowledge to better adapt teaching practices to meet students' needs. The model comprises four essential domains for effective teaching: our own cognitive knowledge; the cognitive knowledge of others; our own practice knowledge; and, the practice knowledge of others. When teachers have a sense of their own needs and the opportunities to access information ('inside-out learning'), they are placed in a position to interact with and engage in 'new knowledge' ('outside-in learning'). This process of transforming new with old knowledge through reflection, sharing and collaboration, allows teachers to make it their own. It is the synergy created through the interplay of these conditions that underpins sustained teacher professional learning (Turbill, 2002).

Action Learning Teams

The SIPS project began in January 2011 using an existing core curriculum sub-committee made up of all first year subject coordinators in the Faculty of Business as the vehicle for dissemination. The sub-committee met formally six times a year, and provided a useful platform to discuss issues around inclusive assessment and design and share current teaching practices. Using an existing formal meeting framework was critical to establishing and embedding the project into academics' ongoing professional practice. Eight subject coordinators of first year business subjects in disciplines across accounting, finance, marketing, management and economics volunteered to take part in the project through this sub-committee.

The SIPS team supporting these academics comprised two teaching and learning academics from the faculty, an external learning and teaching academic partner and a research assistant. The role of the academic partner was critical to the success of these action learning teams. As a facilitator of learning, the academic partner supported and enhanced learning opportunities by contributing to the creation of positive learning environments (Department of Education and Training, 2009). In this case, the academic partner was an experienced academic from the Faculty of Education with particular expertise in curriculum and pedagogy. In between meetings the academic partner organised get togethers, recorded notes and disseminated ideas.

The first sub-committee meeting to introduce the SIPS project served as an opportunity to discuss aims and expectations and place academics into smaller, action learning teams of about three people. The purpose of the teams was to share understandings, ideas and reflections on readings provided over the course of the project and teaching strategies. In these teams, subject coordinators were involved in making explicit their own personal theory of how students in their respective disciplines best learn as well as current effective teaching practices. Each action learning team would be allocated specific tasks around formative or summative assessment or feedback to explore before the next meeting. During subsequent meetings, ideas were shared and short workshops focusing on a particular teaching or assessment idea were run by the academic partner.

Sharing Teaching Practices

The meetings held in June and November that took place as one semester finished and other began, were used as a time for practice sharing. We asked these academics to reflect on the following questions: What do I know about summative and formative assessment? What new strategies for teaching that support learning did I learn, tried or would like to try? What ideas have I learned for supporting my tutor? These sessions were particularly rich with feedback and were analysed to discern project success. These meetings occurred as one university semester finished and preparations for next began. As each shared, the information was compiled into a matrix online so all could see the ideas and indeed the progress that was occurring.

To share our inclusive teaching strategies with a wider audience, we captured strategies as case studies. Academics were asked to think of a current teaching practice that they felt confident with, either constructed themselves or borrowed from others. Initially academics were provided with a template with the following categories: Name of activity; purpose of activity; procedure; and, preview (illustration or resources). However, busy teaching staff found this onerous, so it was decided that a research assistant would interview each member at a negotiated time. The gathered notes and teaching examples were then written up for approval by the academic before being released for all to read. These were then compiled into a handbook of practical teaching strategies that was disseminated to the Faculty of Business education committee.

One example of an activity in the handbook was the educational tool ‘cloze’ (Taylor, 1953) – a short passage with several key words, phrases or concepts missing from the sentences. Students are required to read the passage and fill in the blank with the most appropriate word. This, together with other activities in the handbook are useful, practical examples from the SIPS collaboration.

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Outcomes

There have been many positive outcomes thus far in the SIPS project in addition to the handbook of inclusive teaching strategies. There has been evidence of positive change among academic staff: change in teaching practices and assessment tasks. It is important to note that this project focussed only on the teaching staff, thus measureable evidence was not amassed to indicate change in student learning. However, many academics indicated that these changes were resulting in improved learning outcomes for their students. They also commented that there was evidence that 'at risk' students were being identified earlier and therefore helped at the point of need in the subject. This, they indicated, led to the overall attrition and failure rates over the two semesters lower than previous years.

Analysis of the meeting discussions and notes collected throughout the year indicated that all academics involved in the project believed they: clearly understood the difference between formative and summative assessment; had introduced new activities into their subject tutorials that could be used as formative assessment, as well as culminate in some form of summative assessment, for instance the 'cloze' exercise and buzz groups; agreed that working with an academic partner had been very informative; found working in interdisciplinary teams interesting, highlighting differences and similarities in teaching across the Business disciplines; and, enjoyed 'looking into' others' teaching styles as well as finding new ways to include teaching techniques into their own subjects' curriculum.

However, there were also concerns and issues that emerged through the project. One major issue focused on the increasing casualisation of teaching staff. Members highlighted concerns working with large numbers of tutors, in particular maintaining quality control with respect to their teaching, assessment marking and encouraging students to attend lectures. These have the potential of inhibiting quality teaching and learning and further changes in practice occurring. We continue to work with and find ways to address these challenges including our directing significant attention to up-skilling and engaging our casual academic teaching staff.

These preliminary outcomes have set a strong foundation for the SIPS project. As the project continues to unfold, we have extended into other areas to pedagogically supporting LSES students. This has included a literature review and annotated bibliography; further development of the handbook into an online resource; collaboration with other university departments; and, the development of action learning casual academic teaching teams.

Points for Discussion

At this point, our project continues to be driven by several pertinent questions relating to embedding social inclusion practices into first year curriculum: What might be considered best practice for engaging LSES students? How might we engage academics beyond the scope of this project? Are there other avenues (technology, peer teamwork) that might facilitate sustainable social inclusion practices? How can we best manage the casualisation of the academe and improve teaching and learning? This paper represents the first step in a continuous process to address the learning needs of LSES students and offers a platform for dissemination with readers considering similar projects.

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