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Building capacity through ethical understanding and practice

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Abstract

Fostering ethical understanding and practice in Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and other forms of experiential learning is integral to preparing students for engagement with society beyond university (Campbell, 2011; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b). Ethical practice is a fundamental aspect of Macquarie University's Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative, and our research and practice to date have examined how ethical understanding can be translated into ethical practice by students (Baker et al., 2013). This paper details further developments in our endeavour to prepare students for ethical complexities and build their capacity to respond to them. It also discusses how efforts to foster and share consistent ethical understanding and practice, through an Ethical Practice Framework, have resulted in the establishment of a community of ethical practice. This building of capacity involves pushing pedagogical and institutional boundaries and stems from the realisation that developing curriculum can extend beyond a quality learning and teaching experience for PACE students, as well as clear benefits for: staff involved in PACE, the University, community-based partners, and others beyond. Qualitative data illustrates outcomes, while ongoing reflection upon ethical complexities highlights challenges and avenues for future research and development.

Disciplines
Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Building capacity through ethical understanding and practice

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Fostering ethical understanding and practice in Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and other forms of experiential learning is integral to preparing students for engagement with society beyond university (Campbell, 2011; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b). Ethical practice is a fundamental aspect of Macquarie University's Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative, and our research and practice to date have examined how ethical understanding can be translated into ethical practice by students (Baker *et al.*, 2013). This paper details further developments in our endeavour to prepare students for ethical complexities and build their capacity to respond to them. It also discusses how efforts to foster and share consistent ethical understanding and practice, through an Ethical Practice Framework, have resulted in the establishment of a community of ethical practice. This building of capacity involves pushing pedagogical and institutional boundaries and stems from the realisation that developing curriculum can extend beyond a quality learning and teaching experience for PACE students, as well as clear benefits for: staff involved in PACE, the University, community-based partners, and others beyond. Qualitative data illustrates outcomes, while ongoing reflection upon ethical complexities highlights challenges and avenues for future research and development.

Keywords: Ethical practice, building capacity, professional and community engagement, curriculum development, institutional frameworks

CONTEXT

In the early stages of implementing the Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative at Macquarie University, a number of challenges and opportunities associated with ethical understanding and practice became evident. These arose partly due to the fundamental role played by ethical practice in PACE, including: working with partners who align with the University's ethical standards and values; PACE activities involving learning through participation (LTP)[1], aimed at promoting the well-being of people and the planet; select activities involving low risk research; students who act as ethical ambassadors; and ethical approaches to documenting and communicating the PACE story.

Ethical understanding and practice in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and other forms of LTP is integral to preparing students for engagement with society beyond university (Campbell, 2011; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b). There is also increased advocacy for undergraduate students to engage with purposeful research experience (Brew, 2010; Healey & Jenkins, 2009; Boyd & Wesemann, 2009), as this could prepare students for higher degree study as well as help develop capacities needed for the workforce and civil society (Hunter et al., 2007; Lang & Buzwell, 2010; Freudenberg *et al.*, 2011). Teaching ethical practice in LTP, however, is complex and not well understood yet (Crabtree, 2008; Tryon et al., 2008, Baker *et al.*, 2013). Further, while research-based activities should require management of ethical considerations, there are inconsistencies in approaches to undergraduate research (Kallgren & Tauber, 1996, Robinson *et al.*, 2007; White *et al.*, 2013).

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[1] Following Winchester-Seeto and Mackaway's (2011) terminology, this paper uses the term 'learning through participation' (LTP) to cover all models of participation, including, but not limited to, work-integrate learning (WIL), work-based learning, co-operative education, service-learning, etc.

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This context necessitated the enhancement of institutional capacity[2] and it continues to challenge existing ethics and PACE frameworks. Importantly, PACE is itself about institutional capacity and represents an interesting case study that touches upon all areas of the University. Using data collected from stakeholders, both internal and external to the University, this paper details the work of the PACE Ethics Protocol Working Party[3] in responding to this context.

BUILDING CAPACITIES THROUGH ETHICS

In December 2010 an Ethics Working Party was formed with the task of discussing broader aspects of PACE and ethics. Evolving out of this and as part of developing learning and teaching resources, the 'PACE Ethics Protocol Working Party' was established in October 2011. The endeavour of the latter was to prepare and build the capacity of students and unit convenors to respond to PACE-related ethical complexities and resulted in the development of the following core resources: 1) the PACE Ethical Practice Module – a flexible learning and teaching resource, used in a number of PACE units and; 2) the PACE Ethics Protocol – a streamlined, centrally administered ethics framework approved by Macquarie's Human Research Ethics Committee for low-risk human research in select PACE units.

Student reflections point to the positive impact these resources have in developing ethically-minded citizens:

> I went home that day, and reflected upon the work that we do and how positive it is. On the Monday, I called [my supervisor]…and asked how the [animal] was doing after…surgery, and I was told that [the animal] had died due to an allergic reaction to one of the drugs that was administered during the surgery (my heart sunk a little bit).

> We did not ask for the [animal]'s permission to perform the surgery, we just went ahead and did it, not knowing about allergies. If we had left the [animal] to heal on its own, it may have lived. I also questioned the ethics of the boat that [the animal], who did not even stop. They definitely would have known that they hit something, but continued on their path anyway, and it was lucky that there were bystanders who witnessed the event (Undergraduate student, 2013).

While students and convenors were the initial priority, it became clear that a wide range of PACE stakeholders, including the institution itself, could benefit from an approach to ethical practice that extended beyond learning and teaching. As proposed by Domakin (2013) there is value in engaging with communities more broadly and several Australian institutions have expanded their community engagement to form successful collaborative educational networks (Pharo *et al.*, 2014). Notwithstanding the success of collaborative projects it remains clear that a topic or matter, which draws the communities into a common area of understanding, is required to consolidate and make the most of community engagements.

Ethics thus became a channel through which capacity in communities could be built by creating commonality and consolidation, especially where disciplines or frameworks might not otherwise cohere (Pharo *et al.*, 2014) - whether that is within the university or branching out to extra-institutional communities. For the purposes of this

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[2] Institutional capacity in this paper represents the ability for the institution to provide sufficient support to its students, staff, and partners as it relates to ethical practice and the PACE initiative. This may include an examination of, for example, institutional ethics frameworks, governance, and ethics committee workloads.

[3] The PACE Ethics Protocol Working Party consists of: Dr Anne-Louise Semple (Academic Director of PACE, Science and Chief Investigator of the PACE Ethics Protocol), Dr Michaela Baker (Academic Director of PACE, Arts and PACE representative on Macquarie's Human Research Ethics Committee (Humanities and Social Sciences)), Dr Karolyn White (Director, Research Ethics and Integrity), Dr Kate Lloyd (Senior Lecturer, Academic Development, PACE); Dr Kath McLachlan (Academic Director of PACE, Human Sciences), Laura Hammersley (PhD candidate) and Erin Corderoy (MRes candidate).We also acknowledge the contributions of two former members, Sian Paine and Alison Beale.

paper we have identified three main areas in which capacity has been built through our work: individual (student, staff), institutional (university), and community (partner-based and scholarly). The following details each of these.

Individual capacity

Building individual capacity in this context refers to the ongoing development of Macquarie University students, as well as academic and professional staff who learn about, engage with, and reflect upon the ethical complexities associated with LTP. This capacity building acknowledges the specific needs of PACE activities and the individuals involved in their delivery, which form the basis for a community of ethical practice, as illustrated by one student's reflection:

> I had always just thought of ethics as something we just do in situations, never as a guide to our actions ... going through all the resources … about ethics really prepare[d] me as now I know … I should be mindful regarding how my presence may affect others, what is an unethical situation and how I can respond to it. I believe that in our PACE activities … the most important lesson we will get out at the end of the activity is learning more deeply about ourselves (Undergraduate student, 2013).

Staff have also gained from the resources, evidenced by a PACE unit convenor:

> I like the [ethical theory] video … I watched it again and I actually enjoyed it ... I made my own notes and I started relating the themes…and I presented to the students in the classroom ... it was good, if we could get the theory into an actual situation and see that ethics lecture in an actual case ... if we could relate specifically to our placements, the students actually can relate. I was proud of my own little try because it was my own learning process and students really enjoyed it (PACE Unit Convenor, 2013).

Institutional capacity

In order to foster consistent ethical understanding and practice across the university an Ethical Practice Framework (Figure 1) was established. This Framework enables the university to work towards its aim of developing graduates who are 'engaged and ethical local and global citizens' (Macquarie University, 2014).

For each stakeholder Figure 1 documents examples of developed resources or procedural mechanisms. It also indicates complexities including the range of stakeholders involved, the importance of collaboration, and the necessity of ensuring institutional credibility by engaging with and reporting to high-level stakeholders, such as the Human Research Ethics Committee and the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee. This engagement embeds a knowledge base and leadership, as well as resources that, as the former head of the Faculty of Science Ethics committee commented:

> … mark Macquarie's PACE program as distinctive. It adds value to an already distinctive program and brings coherence across faculties, units and programs in a way that is impressively consistent with the university's aim of integrating ethical maturity and responsibility to the characteristics of our graduates … (Richie Howitt, 2013).
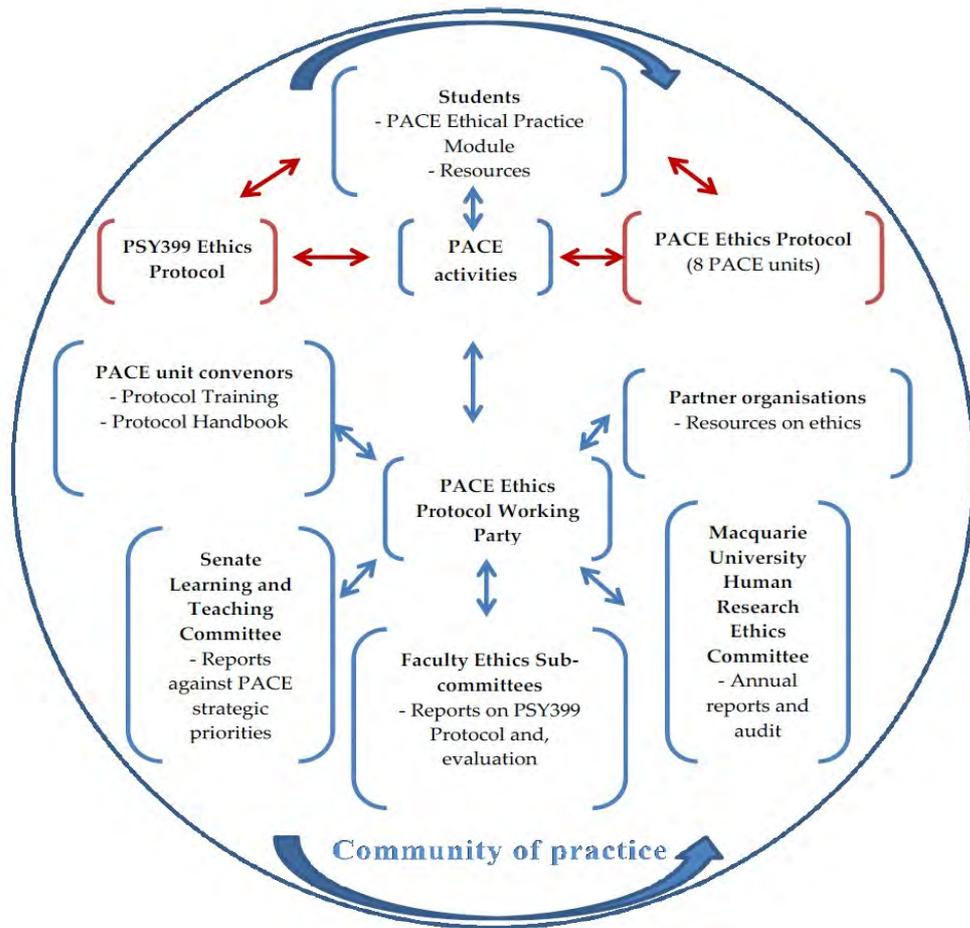
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FIGURE 1. Ethical Practice Framework

Community capacity

The vision of PACE is to foster mutually beneficial learning and engagement. Attempts to foster ethical understanding and practice within PACE have impacts that extend beyond the university to the partner organisations involved in PACE, and the scholarly and practitioner-based community more broadly. Providing students with a conceptual framework through which to understand mutuality, as well as empirical examples upon which to draw in practice, helps to ensure the engagement experience is more likely to be positive for them, the partner organisation, its staff, and all those who interact as part of the PACE activity. As one partner commented:

> … the provision of ethics training help[s] raise students' awareness to the complexity of ethical issues they will face when they begin to work in their chosen profession (PACE partner, 2013).

Similarly, partner organisations and their staff can benefit from tailored PACE-related resources. Certain partner organisations, such as Australian Volunteers International, have requested training, which has enhanced their capacity to identify projects that constitute research, and therefore require ethics approval. Documenting and communicating this work, in a bid to foster a culture of ethical practice within LTP and WIL, has also fostered awareness and interest within the higher education community. As expressed by the former editor of ACEN conference proceedings:

> Ethics education contextualised within workplace and participatory experiences is incredibly valuable in enhancing the future ethical and professional practices of graduates. However, it has largely been an ignored

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area of interest and investment. The work undertaken by the PACE Ethics Protocol Working Party is leading the national and international agenda in this area (Matthew Campbell, 2013).

Furthermore, enquiries from other institutions have been aimed at understanding how best to prepare their own students for ethical practice and how to make existing ethics frameworks more efficient:

> I was at the [Australian Ethics Network] AEN Conference in Fremantle and saw a presentation on the PACE Ethics Protocol ... I found our conversation of great value and being given permission to access your proprietary material is a real privilege ... I look forward to ongoing conversations with you so you can be informed about the outworking of the assistance you have provided the ACT (Graeme Chatfield, Associate Dean, Australian College of Theology, 2014)

By bringing together the often-separate discussions of ethics education and LTP we have begun the important steps of formulating an integrated curriculum and evaluation of stakeholder experiences with a view of shared understanding and practice across individuals, the institution, and communities.

REFLECTION

Building institutional capacity through a Framework of Ethical Practice at Macquarie University has resulted in the development of a diverse and collaborative community of practice – one that makes possible the translation of ethical understanding into ethical practice. The consistent approach to identifying and meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders has been a key factor to success. The complexity and sensitivity of ethical practice has also demanded a commitment to critical authenticity based on the integrity of process, the collaboration of researchers and practitioners, as well as institutional support and leadership.

While ethical practice at Macquarie University is well on its way to being thoroughly embedded in pedagogical and institutional structures, it is acknowledged that pushing the boundaries raises new concerns, challenges, and complexities and these will require ongoing research and development (e.g. avoiding ethics fatigue, adequate time and resources, and the unpredictability of ethical dilemmas), by the PACE Ethics Protocol Working Party.

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