

## **Collaborative Communities: embedding academic and information literacy skills into the first year of a refreshed BA program.**

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### **Abstract**

*In recent times, momentum has gathered around the desirability of embedding information literacy (IL) and academic literacy (AL) within discipline specific higher education courses. International interest has surfaced around possible improvements such approaches have on student learning and curriculum development. As part of an institution-wide curriculum refresh project, faculty librarians and learning advisers (critical friends) worked alongside academic teaching staff to explicitly teach and embed generic skills into two new core subjects for the Bachelor of Arts at James Cook University. The collaboration involved all stages of the curriculum refresh – from initial planning to participation in core lectures, tutorials and assessment processes, and the creation of two subject specific libguides. These tools allowed key stakeholders to track student engagement, offer practical and timely support for staff and students while fostering a strong sense of belonging (Kift 2004) to students making the successful transition to higher education.*

This session reports on the process of embedding academic and information literacy skills into two new First Year core subjects in the Bachelor of Arts program, developed as a part of an institutional curriculum refresh at James Cook University. The specific project, funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and James Cook University, in which we participated, was called “Building Core Strengths for the Refreshed BA at James Cook University”, and we document our participation through two strands:

- the process of collaboration between a Learning Adviser, a Faculty Librarian, academics coordinating and teaching the subjects and the Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning for the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences.
- the ‘products’ – the resources, pedagogy and assessment practices used to embed academic and information literacy skills.

The redevelopment of the BA degree was grounded in the literature on enhancing First Year students’ experience and retention. In particular, the work of Kraus and colleagues (2005) in Australia and Yorke and Longden (2008) in England had heightened our awareness of the diversity of transitional challenges faced by increasingly diverse student populations. Our experiences of working with JCU BA students alerted us to the exciting possibilities of helping all students make successful transitions as university learners: mature-aged part-time students returning to education after long absences; first-in-family students finding a place in unknown territory; students from low income families juggling heavy outside work commitments; and country school leavers dealing with home-sickness and the complexities of city life. We were also persuaded by the argument of Kift (2009), Yorke and Longden (2008), Trotter and Roberts (2006) and others that the first weeks of the first semester are critical for successful transition and persistence, and so we ‘front-end loaded’ our activities into early lectures and tutorials. We considered that our modelling involving staff from all area of the university were working together within the subject to support and scaffold students’ learning would send out a strong sense of “a culture of service”, as recommended by Cuseo (2003) as a key approach to preventing attrition. This seamless integration of academic, learning support and library support (frequently

fragmented and separated) is also strongly recommended by Kift (2009) as a key factor in assisting students' transition. Our specific focus on scaffolding the assessment tasks is supported by Kift's (2009) convictions that for First Year students, assessment represents the crunch – this is where they direct most attention and time, where they experience most uncertainty about their own competence, and where their persistence is tested. An important part of our collaboration with academic staff was that we all shared clear expectations of what students were required to do, so that students were receiving consistent and meaningful help from all members of the support and teaching team, and from all resources used in the subjects. Finally, we wanted to excite and engage our First Year students, and the redevelopment of our subjects was informed by the work of Kuh (2008) and the AUSSE (2009) surveys. This is reflected in the design of these first year subjects as core for all BA students – shared intellectual activities where they explored 'big questions' such as time, truth, the human condition, space and narrative; they completed group assessment projects; and we structured in skills-intensive and writing-intensive activities.

The session will provide a brief description of the institutional context, and of the Building Core Strengths project. Participants will be given a taste of the two First Year core subjects developed, and will be provided with samples of the tutorial activities, assessment and online resources developed. Preliminary student and staff evaluations of the effectiveness of the subjects and embedding strategies will also be shared.

Talking points for participant discussion will be:

1. Enablers and constraints for collaboration between faculty teaching staff and student support staff located outside the faculty.
2. Principles for creating and sustaining successful collaborative communities among teaching staff and student support staff.
3. Getting the balance right between online and face-to-face embedding of academic and information literacy skills
4. Making it all relevant, challenging and fun for a diverse first year body.
5. Persuading generation Y of the value of generic skills

The following sections will be developed for the nuts & bolts presentation:

### **Section 1: Introduction and context**

This section will provide details of the JCU context, including student demographics for FY in the BA, terms of the institutional Curriculum Refresh, and more detailed information about the "Building Core Strength" project. Central to this work was the recent ALTC scoping project "Nature and Roles of Arts Degrees in Contemporary Society: A national scoping project of Arts programs across Australia" (Gannaway & Trent 2008). The project was also informed by Kift's (2004, 2009) work on Transition Pedagogy. Early foundational work focused specifically on the role of core subjects within the whole BA program. A further feature of the process was the 'backward mapping' approach to curriculum of the subjects.

### **Section 2: The Process: Building community among staff**

Particular focus will be on the planning and development processes that involved staff from many disciplines and support services from across the university, structural affects and funding. We will present our shared experiences of the organisational/contextual and personal factors that facilitated collaboration, and suggest a draft set of principles for establishing and sustaining successful staff collaborations. In particular, principles that allowed teaching and support staff to step beyond their fractional responsibilities of specific disciplines and examine key strategies for embedding academic and information literacies into the core first year BA subjects.

### **Section 3: The products: Resources and pedagogies for embedding academic and information literacies**

In this section of the nuts and bolts session, we will share the tangible products, electronic, interactive and face-to-face subject specific resources, the concept of 'backward mapping,' and scaffolded assessment practices as effective approaches to curriculum construction. Culminating in presentation of subject specific libguides developed for the two BA subjects. This section will focus on how as an electronic portal, the libguides enabled students to find and access information pertaining to academic and information literacies for each core first year subject in the BA in an interactive and engaging way. This section will highlight how academic staff found the resources an asset to the teaching process.

### **Section 4: Tracking student uptake and responses**

This section will discuss student engagement with the online resources and explicitly taught skills and how engagement was captured with the tracking mechanism built into the design of the libguides. In particular, how the tracking mechanism had the potential to indicate how many students engaged with particular resources at various stages across the study period will be presented. As part of the evaluation of the total curriculum refresh project, focus group interviews were also conducted and the results of such interviews will be shared (Derrick 2010). Specific focus will also be placed on student engagement and interactions with learning advisers and librarians for these subjects.

### **Section 5: Continuing the collaborations**

During this section ideas for continuing sustainable collaboration models will be shared, particularly how the defined project of creating the new subjects provided meaning and purpose to the collaboration. The task of curriculum development are reflexive and ongoing, and so working as a collaborative community needs to be guided by a similar approach yet has the potential to build core strengths across the first year of a degree program. This section will also present implications for future collaborations, in light of existing evaluations and feedback.

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