

Curriculum scholars: Embedding learning and teaching scholarship in first year academic identities. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This practice report details an institutional innovation designed to enhance academic capacities for curriculum development, with a particular focus on the first year experience (FYE). The authors discuss the appointment of "Curriculum Scholars" in each of the faculties at James Cook University. This innovation can be seen as an example of third generation responses to the challenges of the first year in higher education (FYHE) (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). The report discusses the question of academic identity and the tension between a discipline-specific identity and identification with the scholarship of teaching and learning. The authors argue that this tension may have significant implications for the success of third generation approaches to the FYE. This tension is the focus of a multi-method research project being developed by the authors. The autoethnographical dimension of this project is described, inviting participants to reflect on their own journeys as academics engaged in learning and teaching.

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Responding to the challenges of the FYHE

For over a decade now there has been considerable interest in understanding the experiences of students transitioning into higher education, and in developing strategies and initiatives that might support this transition and lead to successful outcomes for first year students. Many different dimensions of this transitional experience have been explored, and a range of initiatives reported on (see, e.g. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordstrom, 2009; Krause & Coates, 2008; Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Schrader & Brown, 2008). It has been noted however (Kift et al., 2010; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) that such research and activity has often been fragmented and piecemeal, showing few signs of a “whole of institution” approach. Kift et al. (2010) argue that what is required is a third generation approach that manages to integrate curricular and co-curricular components into an institutional response to the challenges of the FYE.

As is the case with many, if not all, higher education institutions in Australia, James Cook University (JCU) in Townsville, Australia has been involved in a number of different strategies and initiatives aimed at the FYE over the last decade. As some of these approaches mature and opportunities for integration are recognised and built upon, a more thoroughly institutionalised approach is emerging which can be characterised as a third generation response to these issues. Part of this “whole of institution” response has involved introducing strategies for enhancing the capacity for individual

academics to engage in curriculum development, particularly at the first year level. To this end, JCU has appointed a “Curriculum Scholar” into each of the university faculties.

JCU “Curriculum Scholars”

The creation of the four Curriculum Scholar positions at JCU represents an innovative approach to enhancing and building capacity for curriculum development amongst academic staff. Each of the scholars has been given the flexibility to respond to their faculty’s unique situation and to develop a specific plan for their individual context. While this has resulted in an interesting diversity of foci, the importance of the FYE has emerged as a common theme across the scholars’ plans. A number of particular themes have emerged as significant in this capacity building process, including enhancing academics’ use of innovative technologies, Indigenising and internationalising the curriculum, and the idea of creating a distinctive identity for JCU as an institution which would inform all teaching, particularly at the first year level. In the case of JCU, this has focused on the idea of it as the “university of the tropics.”

The instigation and progress of the curriculum scholar innovation is in itself an interesting topic for discussion, particularly in relation to the extent to which it might represent a useful component of a “transition pedagogy” (Kift, 2009). However, during the implementation of this initiative, an additional issue has arisen which seems likely to be significant in predicting the success or otherwise of such third generation responses. This is the apparent

tension that exists between academic staff members' identity as discipline scholars and the increasing expectation that they will also be engaged with the scholarship of learning and teaching. Furthermore, there may also be tensions between academics' perceptions of their discipline scholarly roles and the more "pastoral" expectations of an institutional response to the challenges facing first year students.

Academic identity, the scholarship of teaching and learning and the FYE

The topic of academic identity has attracted some renewed interest in recent times (see, for example, Churchman & King, 2009; Clegg, 2008; Harris, 2005). Some of these explorations and discussions of academic identity have attempted to relate this concept to the scholarship of teaching and learning and to the "blending" of academic and professional identities (Whitchurch, 2008, 2009). Haigh, Gossman and Jiao (2010), for example, have highlighted the challenges involved in assisting academics to engage more effectively with the scholarship of teaching and learning. Not least of these challenges is the fact that promotion and tenure on the basis of teaching and learning achievements is still difficult in many institutions (Chalmers, 2010; Vardi & Quinn, 2010).

Through the work of the curriculum scholars at JCU, the importance of this identity tension has become clear, particularly in the sense that such tension may become an obstacle to the implementation and effective integration of institutional responses to the challenges of the FYE. Where individual academics are

reluctant or resistant to the idea of engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning, third generation institutional responses may end up collapsing at the coal face as disengaged academics retain a solely discipline-based focus in their educational practice.

Current research

In response to the emergence of this tension of identities and its potential impact on the success of FYHE initiatives, a multi-method research project has been designed by the curriculum scholars at JCU. This project aims to explore the notion of academic identity and in particular the willingness or capacity of academic staff to engage with the scholarship of teaching and learning and with "pastoral" roles, as part of their core working identity. The project will make use of survey techniques and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The position of the individual curriculum scholars as academics who have successfully made the transition from being solely discipline-focused to being academics with a strong commitment to both engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning and performing pastoral roles, has also meant that a collaborative, autoethnographical component is a congruent and important aspect of the project.

Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang (2010) describe autoethnography as "a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context" (para. 3). This approach is congruent with the scholars' commitment to the development of a critically reflective

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approach to their own practice and, in particular to the importance of identifying the assumptions (Brookfield, 1995) that may act to constrain or obscure important aspects of their practice domain.

The impacts that will flow from the curriculum scholar initiative may be thought of as having two dimensions. Firstly, through the developmental and capacity building work of the scholars, it is anticipated that an increased willingness and ability to engage in curriculum development, particularly in the first year arena, will be generated. This in itself would represent a significant outcome, however one that may still be impacted upon by the question of resistant academic identities. The second point of impact therefore flows from the research project focused on this area. It is anticipated that the impact of this research will be significant in terms of shaping institutional responses to the challenges of the FYE. If indeed the identity tension described above is operating as an obstacle to the effective implementation of such responses, then methods must be developed for better promoting the transition from discipline-specific academic identities, to identities that are more holistic and inclusive of an engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Outcomes of Session

A presentation of the report at the 14th Annual Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference (2011) offered an interactive opportunity for participants to consider and discuss their own experiences and perceptions of the transition from discipline-focused academic to an

academic identity inclusive of the scholarship of teaching and learning in first year.

The initial paired discussion asked participants to reflect on the development of their own academic identities in the context of their engagement in teaching and learning in the first year, revealing a number of different pathways into engaging in transition pedagogies.

In the ensuing group discussion, many participants identified with the experiences and pathways of others—particularly the impact of undertaking a postgraduate course of study in higher education on academic identity, and the shift from discipline focus to scholarship of teaching and learning. Another common experience shared by participants was a realisation of the teacher's role in facilitating student learning and subsequent desire to know more about how to teach effectively. This reflected the experiences of the presenters in their own journey from practitioner to discipline scholar to scholar in teaching and learning.

In the authors' experience though, not all academics will experience this identity shift in terms of being an educator in the first year and its attendant engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Indeed it was this unanticipated learning from the Curriculum Scholar project that has resulted in our questioning the role of academic identity in facilitating third generation approaches to the FYHE agenda.

To this end, subsequent discussion centred around identifying barriers and facilitators of academic engagement and identification with the scholarship of teaching and

learning in first year, posing the question that if resistance exists, is it significant and how might it be addressed?

The animated discussion around this question confirms the significance for first year academics, academic developers and professional staff, of “resistance” by some colleagues to a deep engagement with first year pedagogies. This was identified as a significant dimension of the challenge of developing sustainable, institutional, approaches to transition pedagogies. In recognition of this challenge, a variety of strategies were suggested and discussed that focussed on reducing the barriers to full engagement by staff in rolling out third generation FYE.

For example, there was general agreement on the importance of mentoring of academic staff. This was seen as a means of modelling a mode of practice within which effective transition strategies might be implemented on a broader scale. Importantly, this extended to sessional staff, who seemed to identify more with a practice-based role than with the scholarship of teaching and learning.

There was general agreement with the importance of linking research outputs with the scholarship of teaching and learning as a legitimate pathway within academia. Discussion centred around encouraging academics to see their teaching and learning practice as an important area for research and as an additional dimension of their academic identity.

Given that engagement in postgraduate studies in tertiary teaching or adult learning had been an important pathway into scholarly engagement for many

participants, the development, support and promotion of such programs within individual institutions was also noted as an important strategy.

Our thesis that academic “resistance” was an important dynamic in the implementation of third generation FYE strategies resonated with participants in the session. The observations of the group confirm that further research in this area is warranted if institutional approaches to the first year experience are to be effective and sustainable.

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