



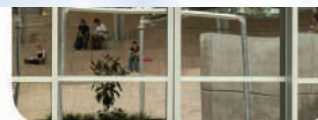
KIFT ALTC SENIOR FELLOWSHIP: ARTICULATING A TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

COMMENTARY ON FIRST YEAR
CURRICULUM CASE STUDIES:
ENGAGING PEDAGOGIES PERSPECTIVE

RACHAEL FIELD

AUTHOR:

[Rachael's] philosophy of teaching involves a commitment to making effective and efficient learning possible for students through active approaches to learning and teaching.



AUTHOR

01. Rachael Field has taught in the QUT Law Faculty since 1994; first as a sessional tutor, since 1998 as a lecturer, and since 2006 as a senior lecturer. Her philosophy of teaching involves a commitment to making effective and efficient learning possible for students through active approaches to learning and teaching. This has led to Rachael's involvement, under the leadership of Professor Sally Kift, in faculty teaching and learning policy development, innovative learning and curriculum design, and particularly in a commitment to first year transition pedagogy and practice. Rachael initiated and held the inaugural role of First Year Coordinator in the faculty's School of Justice Studies in 2004 and 2005, was a member of the faculty's Teaching and Learning Committee between 2001 and 2005, and was a QUT Teaching Fellow in 2005. One of her key research areas of interest is the enhancement of approaches to legal education, and she has published in the *Legal Education Review* about issues of gender equity in legal education.

02. Rachael is currently developing an effective learning environment for first year law and justice students that promotes student engagement by combining Laurillard's conversational framework, a commitment to active learning, and a blended delivery method (face-to-face and online). The pilot model that she is working on has been identified as appropriate for an expert commentary in the Fellowship Program because it is an example of intentional first year curriculum and learning design that embeds a commitment to facilitating the engagement of first year students with their learning through an acknowledgement of

transition issues. The model also offers an appropriate and scaffolded approach to learning and assessment design that is focused on graduate capabilities and skill development.

THE FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVE

03. The focus of this commentary on the first year case studies is engaging pedagogies.

... effective teaching cannot be achieved without engaging pedagogical approaches that create learning environments in which deep learning outcomes for students are made possible, where high quality student learning is promoted, and where superficial approaches to learning are discouraged ...

04. Engaging pedagogy is particularly critical for the first year learning environment, where issues of engagement are inextricably linked both to making effective learning possible for students (Ramsden, 1992, 5), as well as to ensuring retention of students (AUSSE Report, 2008).

05. The far-reaching significance of engaging students is reflected in the AUSSE Report's comment that: 'The concept of student engagement provides a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics,

constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions' (2008, vi). Further, from a pedagogical perspective, it has long been acknowledged as critical that teachers in the tertiary sector ensure that our approaches to learning and teaching engage student interest and energy: 'Student engagement', defined as 'students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning, is increasingly understood to be important for higher education quality' (AUSSE, 2008, 1).

06. As student engagement is critical for effective learning to be possible for

students, it follows that the promotion and development of engaging pedagogies is critical for the achievement of effective teaching. In other words, effective teaching cannot be achieved without engaging pedagogical approaches that create learning environments in which deep learning outcomes for students are made possible, where high quality student learning is promoted, and where superficial approaches to learning are discouraged (Ramsden, 1992, 86).

07. Ramsden's six principles of effective teaching include, in *Principle 5*, a commitment to 'independence, control and engagement' (Ramsden, 2003, 97). Ramsden comments that 'high-quality teaching implies recognising that students must be engaged with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding' (2003, 97). Such engagement is facilitated by allowing students a sense of independence and control over their learning (Ramsden, 2003, 97), which over time, and through scaffolded approaches, allows the learner to become increasingly self-sufficient (Bruner, 1966, 53). The AUSSE Report states that 'Engagement in higher order forms of learning that involve analysing, synthesising, evaluating and applying tends to be positively associated with most aspects of engagement' (2008, ix).

08. The achievement of deep student learning of a high quality requires student-centred, outcome-focused approaches that encourage high level cognitive connection with subject content and concepts. For Biggs, 'effective teaching means setting up the teaching/learning context so that students are encouraged to react with the level of cognitive engagement that our objectives require' (Biggs, 2003, 56). Elements of achieving this include motivation, climate and learning activity (Biggs, 2003, 56).

09. Scholarship regarding engaging pedagogies has been used to construct a framework for the consideration in this commentary of the seven case studies of Professor Kift's ALTC Senior Fellowship. This framework involves three categories of

effective support for cognitive and learning engagement:

- motivation
- learning activity
- learning environment.

10. To contextualise the commentary these categories are explained briefly:

- In terms of **motivation**, it is well acknowledged that our pedagogical approaches must motivate students to learn if deep and effective learning is to take place. Socio-constructivist theories confirm the importance of community and interactive forces to motivation which in turn link effective teaching with modes of delivery that promote engagement and discussion (Dunkin, 1983, 75; Cannon, 1988, 3), and particularly in ways that allow for egalitarian participation (Bender, 2003, 65). Motivating approaches to pedagogy can also be considered important from the perspective of the provision of learning experiences that reach out and respond to the diverse range of students' learning styles and preferences.
- In terms of **learning activity**, Biggs identifies 'learner activity and interacting with others' as two critical characteristics of rich (and therefore engaging) learning and teaching environments (Biggs, 2003, 79). Active learning is therefore at the core of student engagement with their learning. In terms of classifying activities, Biggs offers three categories that relate predominantly to who is in control of the activity: teacher-directed, peer-directed, and self-directed activities (Biggs, 2003, 81). Laurillard's conversational framework also supports learner activity — through layers of discursive interaction — to promote engagement (Laurillard, 2002).
- In terms of **learning environment**, engaging pedagogies must be supported by the structure and framework of an intentional first year *experience* across the first year. If students' transition issues, for example, are not addressed, if they

remain isolated, feel unsupported, or have no sense of belonging or fit in their institution, then students will not be able to optimally engage with their learning, even if the curriculum itself is designed to be engaging.

11. The following commentary now turns to consider the case studies using the framework expressed above; that is, aspects of each case study are used to demonstrate engaging pedagogies through motivation of student learning, through a focus on learning activity, and through provision of a learning environment that supports student engagement.

THE CASE STUDIES

MOTIVATION

12. The Information Technology (IT) Case Study (Nelson, Queensland University of Technology) demonstrates an effective use of assessment in the motivation of student learning through authentic assessment design that is focused on assessing *for* learning as opposed to assessment *of* learning. A variety of different assessment formats and media are employed, with some (only one subject per semester) team work assessment balanced with individual assessment. Explicit attention is given to using assessment to build knowledge and skills, and to exploiting the connections between subject concepts, knowledge and skills. Assessment practice in this case study also involves a strong commitment to the provision of a variety of feedback mechanisms to students, which can be seen as contributing to the ongoing motivation of deep student learning. The importance of quality feedback on assessment is acknowledged by Ramsden who comments that for students ‘of all the facets of good teaching that are important to them, feedback on assessed work is perhaps the most commonly mentioned’ (Ramsden, 2003, 96).

13. In the *TechOne* program (Applied Sciences, Fee and McCracken, Simon Fraser University), there is an emphasis on creating a learning community to motivate student learning, with young and enthusiastic

campus staff working in an integrated way with academic program staff to achieve this objective. The program also harnesses assessment as a motivating factor for engaged learning, allowing students a high level of control and independence in their assessment activity through assessment design. Motivation is also achieved in the *TechOne* program through provision of extensive feedback at each of the stages of the progression of completing assessment activity.

14. The student-centred focus of the Bilby program (Writing and Communication Case Study, Radbourne and LeRossignol, Deakin University) can be seen as promoting a motivating and engaging pedagogical approach through stimulating students using creative content and imaginative learning activities via the virtual town of Bilby. The approach to assessment, as with other motivating programs, has a strong focus on regular formative feedback.

15. In the *Explorations* Case Study (Arts and Social Sciences, Marchbank and Fee, Simon Fraser University), the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum design, covering both arts and social sciences, is used as a tool to motivate student engagement by stimulating high levels of enquiry, analysis and creativity as students connect with the idea of establishing the foundation knowledge and skill bases for later year learning.

16. The Law Case Study (Westcott, James Cook University) is another example of harnessing the reality that students focus much of their learning on assessment, and therefore using assessment as a key motivator for student engagement with their learning.

17. The Education Case Study (Healy, Queensland University of Technology) uses learning by experience to motivate student engagement, as well as, for example, a scaffolded approach to assessment in which detailed feedback is again a critical factor.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

18. The IT program provides an excellent example of learning activity that is designed

to foster student engagement through a focus on a case study approach to learning design, and also through strategic use of group and collaborative learning.

19. For example, students work in collaborative groups in *ITB360* and *ITB363* without the added stressor of assessment dependency. Team work and small class engagement are a feature of other key subjects, and staff/student collaboration occurs in *ITB363* and *ITB366* through a flexible teaching model that rewards students for their application of learning to case studies.

20. The Science (Biology) Case Study (Gleeson, University of Melbourne) involves a focus on learning activity through, for example, small group tutorials, study groups and opportunities for working with a partner.

21. The key learning goal of the *TechOne* program is to prepare students academically for a diverse set of Bachelor degree programs with each core subject having to accommodate 400 students. The program design to achieve this goal is activity-centred and focussed on the student experience. Of importance in pitching the level of difficulty of these activities is the role of the 'UBER TA' who provides (as a graduate student teaching assistant) a critical link between experienced faculty and the developing knowledge of the first year cohort.

22. In the Law Case Study students are assisted in thinking about their legal studies in a holistic and integrated way through a focus on learning activity. Students participate in buzz groups, debates, small group work, role plays and discussion, as well as online activities. The emphasis in the design of these activities is on practical real-world relevance.

23. The Bilby Case Study demonstrates a program in which learning activity is at the centre of the pedagogical design, thus achieving a high level of engagement. In Bilby, students are required to take on personas of characters in the virtual town, engaging them in many diverse writing activities. The program also has an emphasis on promoting social engagement as students learn through

the Bilby groups and through discursive activity. Engagement is further promoted by a supportive and structured approach to collaborative learning and peer to peer activity.

24. In the *Explorations* Case Study subjects are designed around the principle of student focus and interactivity, with students being encouraged to participate, comment, challenge and answer each others' questions.

25. The Education Case Study exemplifies facilitation of engagement through active, interactive and collaborative learning. In particular, the focus in the curriculum design on explicit knowledge processing experiences, which involve students mapping their learning via experience, creates scope for learning activity that builds bridges between the known and the new. Providing students with opportunities to co-design these learning experiences is also an engaging strategy involving student activity.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

26. The IT Case Study provides an excellent example of the provision of a positive climate for engaged learning through the faculty's 'Green Room'. This room is a dedicated common room and social space for first year students containing computers, comfortable lounges, notice boards and games consoles. The room is consistently in use and students in the faculty have indicated in a survey that one of the best things about studying IT at QUT is the 'Green Room'. The room is seen as a benefit of being a student in the IT Faculty to be compared with other faculties that don't offer this supportive measure.

27. Another important climate factor in the IT Case Study is its articulation of a deep understanding of the transition needs of first year students and demonstration of a number of critical responses to those needs. The pedagogical design of the first year curriculum scaffolds foundational skills and connects with the real world of IT professional practice to contextually ground and support the acquisition of new skills. There are also other support

measures in place that create an engaging climate for learning. For example, the Program Coordinator plays a central anchor and support role, students are assigned a peer mentor prior to orientation, and the orientation process itself maximises student interactions and minimises the amount of talking 'at' students.

28. The Science (Biology) Case Study also indicates a commitment to a dedicated space for students to provide an engaging environment for learning, while additional tutor assistance and support are available in the Biology Learning Centre.

29. The Law Case Study provides a strong example of a commitment to creating a supportive learning environment via an holistic, integrated first year program approach. For example, learning outcomes, teaching settings, and assessment practices are constructively aligned across all subjects. Further, a number of engagement strategies are embedded progressively in a timely manner to allow the first year experience to evolve gradually. These include supporting student engagement with faculty registrars in terms of managing the administrative aspects of their learning (for example, enrolment), university support services and peer mentors are invited into the classroom, and professional connections are supported, for example, by a court house excursion.

30. The *TechOne* program evidences a high level of commitment to providing a supportive climate to encourage student engagement. For example, the TechZone portal (the *TechOne* online community space that is moderated by peer undergraduate students) provides an early opportunity for students to feel welcomed and to ask questions. Orientation and the 'Week of Welcome' build on this climate of support to facilitate a strong foundation level engagement, while strategic interventions throughout the first year also assist students with decision-making about their

academic major. Overall, the environment is one in which the learning design supports students getting to know each other and working closely and collaboratively together, for example, through project-based, team building assessment. The provision of extensive 'state of the art' technologies can also be seen as an environment factor that supports engaged learning.

31. In the Bilby Case Study it is the virtual learning environment itself that provides an environment of support; for example, by allowing students to work at their own levels of pace and interest as they build links between their own previous experience and their learning experience at university. The writing activity that occurs via the Bilby program provides a pathway for writing development through university and into the world of professional work, as well

as promoting reflective practice through online group discussions. This learning environment is undoubtedly engaging.

32. The *Explorations* Case Study also provides a good example of a learning environment aimed at supporting student engagement with an emphasis on creating,

from an early stage of the semester, a friendly learning community that allows students time and space to discover and explore new interests. This is supported with just-in-time provision of information to ensure that students are not overloaded with 'administrivia' as they learn. As with the Law Case Study, professorial involvement also contributes to creating an engaging learning environment by demonstrating to students that their learning is valued and deserves high level support. Students also have access to a strong program of support across the campus and university, such as Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS).

33. The Education Case Study evidences multiple approaches to creating a supportive learning environment via social engagement opportunities (for example through peer mentoring programs), explicit strategies for keeping students connected

... a number of engagement strategies are embedded progressively in a timely manner to allow the first year experience to evolve gradually.

via PASS schemes, collaborative work and staff-student interaction. The Education program also has an emphasis on clarity of communication with students — being clear, consistent and explicit about assessment information for example — and this provides a supportive environment by relieving student anxiety and confusion.

CONCLUSION

34. **T**he case studies are a rich resource of excellent practice in first year experience. Each case study evidences a clear and uncompromising commitment to placing the student at the centre of both curriculum, and overall program, design. Against each of the three ‘engaging pedagogy factors’ used as the framework for this commentary — motivation, learning activity and learning environment — we have multiple examples of successful achievement of supporting effective student learning in the first year through promoting student engagement.

REFERENCES

- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2008). *Attracting, engaging and retaining: New conversations about learning* [AUSSE report]. Retrieved December 20, 2008, from http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/AUSSE_2007Report.pdf
- Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2nd ed.). London: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking university teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge Falmer.
- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge Falmer.

Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Further resources developed under this ALTC Senior Fellowship, *Articulating a Transition Pedagogy*, are available at <http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design>