



Developing Teaching Communities at the Program Level

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Abstract

In a three year project sessional staff were inducted in an introductory workshop with ongoing academic staff, and met fortnightly in carefully structured reflective practice groups known as Teaching Communities. Sessional staff not only improved their teaching and students' outcomes but became more engaged and satisfied with their experience.

Context

At the time of the project there were large class sizes in the first year of both degrees, with practical classes and tutorial classes limited to 25 students.

Many sessional staff were required to take the multiple classes, with a high proportion of the programming tutors either new to tutoring, very young, or both.

Both programs were suffering from poor student evaluations and had high attrition rates.

A large Federal Government staff development grant allowed a research assistant to be hired to provide observational data that could be fed back into the project.

Aims

To have all sessional staff attend a training course and attend fortnightly planning meetings as part of a structure known as "Teaching Communities".

To improve the learning experience of the students, and reverse high attrition in Engineering and Computing.

To make sessional teaching more attractive and satisfying was an important element of this goal.

Outcomes

The goals of the project were met, but it was successful in unexpected ways.

There were clear improvements in the learning outcomes of the students; student satisfaction rose strongly in university evaluations; and the number of students who reported working in a learning community increased dramatically.

The teaching approaches used in tutorials became much more student-centred and interactive.

Both sessional and permanent staff participating in the Teaching Communities reported greater satisfaction and enjoyment with their teaching.

Participation was high, with the Teaching Community meetings considered high quality preparation time worth attending.

Many of the sessional staff worked specifically to receive the Certificate of Undergraduate Teaching.

What was done?

Tutor Training Workshop

Prior to semester start a 2 day tutor training workshop was run for all the staff involved in each program.

The workshop ran for 4 two hour sessions over two days, and was run by the project leader who had an education background.

Participants were paid to attend the workshop, but the meetings were considered “preparation time”.

An hour of teaching was associated with one hour preparation and one hour marking when the pay rate was determined.

Full-time and on-going staff were also encouraged to attend as mentors of the sessional tutors. Interestingly some of the full-time staff came back each year to participate as they found the workshops enjoyable.

Fortnightly Teaching Community Meetings

Each fortnight a Teaching Community meeting was held for each unit involved in the program.

In this 90 minute meeting a three point agenda was followed:

1. Share experiences from recent teaching:

- raise awareness of any student problems in concept construction/learning;
- hear about the practice of others, and the way they solve problems;
- gain reassurance that even the best have failures and it is OK to do so; and
- debrief own practice, with peer support and encouragement.

2. Discuss the “big ideas” to be taught in upcoming teaching:

- identify the critical concepts, and possible misconceptions;
- share knowledge and interpretations of the theory and ways of representing it; and
- identify alternative pathways to understanding for students, and likely barriers.

3. Collaborate in planning the teaching method:

- build on the exposed knowledge of current student learning;
- use the combined knowledge and ideas of many experts;
- encourage creativity and risk taking; and
- create a balanced learning situation for learning both concept and procedure.

The Teaching Community meetings were generally chaired by the project leader, with an emphasis on reflective practice leading to student learning.

During the project an extra grant was received to employ two Teaching Fellows: active year 12 teachers with appropriate discipline knowledge who were seconded for a year to be tutors. They brought understanding of the school learning context from which the first years students were moving, and expertise in teaching to contribute to the Teaching Communities. They were used to create new teaching resources as well as teach directly.

A Certificate of Undergraduate Teaching was offered to sessional staff that had participated in the tutor workshop and then completed two successful semesters of tutoring. Success was defined as having been recommended by the unit coordinator. Although not an academic certificate, it was valued as a sign of developing skills and useful for a c.v.

Critical Success Factors

The Tutor training workshop was vital, as it established a shared understanding of key concepts about good learning, and the objectives of the project. Having the unit coordinators and other ongoing staff participate also built a team relationship before the teaching actually started. The final session of the workshop planned the first two weeks of teaching in detail. Regular meetings ensured that everyone was part of a coherent team. Most of the learning about being a good teacher happened in the meetings, not the workshop. The workshop provided the framework and language to converse about student learning, but the meetings allowed staff to share experiences, experiment with ideas and learn from each other.

Education expert input was essential both in the workshop, to establish the appropriate frameworks and language, and in the meetings, where experiences needed to be “unpacked” against the frameworks developed in the workshop. New teaching approaches and techniques were also introduced when relevant.

Feedback data provided by observations from a research assistant helped the teaching team to recognise their own development and provide a sense of progress that contributed to the general motivation.

Review and Improvement

The Teaching Fellows provided a source of expertise within the group that clearly improved the culture of the groups they participated in. Other units in other disciplines were noticeably less skilful without this input.

Having grant money available to collect data from tutorials allowed the project group to get direct feedback, demonstrating clear improvements in teaching approach and allowing numerous papers to be published on the project based on hard data – building credibility.

The winning of a large competitive grant, and two other smaller internal grants, established credibility amongst the ongoing academic staff and the wider university community.

Main barriers to the project were the entrenched behaviours and beliefs of some ongoing academic staff who scorned “teaching” students and actively disrupted meetings with contrary assertions. When structured to be a minority in a teaching team, where their views did not get automatic support, they were caused to make some adjustments.

In some instances observational data showed genuine change in their teaching practice.

The preliminary training was essential, and could not be allowed to be degraded or skipped. Regular meetings were required but hard to timetable.

A 90 minute meeting once a fortnight proved the best balance.

Challenges

The project was supported by some grants, but these did not directly pay participants.

No extra funding is required to support the model.

Future goals are to build Teaching Communities into standard practice, not just for supporting sessional staff, but for the dramatic effect they have on the learning outcomes of the students.

Reference Material

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