Engaging and Retaining Students through Team Teaching: Reflections on initiatives at Monash University, Australia and Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, UK.

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Abstract

This paper is a collaborative report of research undertaken at Monash University, Australia and Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, UK into the use of team teaching to enhance the student learning experience for diverse student populations. Team teaching can be used as a mechanism to construct an enriching and supportive environment both for students and academic staff. Both institutions have recognised that simply broadening access to tertiary studies is a meaningless initiative if measures to create an appropriate learning environment are not also examined and developed. The use of team teaching has been found to generate a number of positive outcomes but has resource implications. The quantitative findings suggest that it can result in improved student achievement and retention; the qualitative findings demonstrate that it enhances student engagement in the learning process.

Introduction

In a commissioned report examining the student experience in the first year of tertiary study McInnis, James and McNaught (1995, p.121) observed that “[i]t is in the first year that students are most likely to form lasting outlooks, values and patterns of behaviour with respect to higher education and lifelong learning.” It is then rewarding to have students look back on their first year to essentially confirm this by noting “I think first year, I’m not sure if that’s a generalisation, but it tends to be … where probably you set in stone how well you do in the rest of your years” (former DoFS student). This paper reports on the beneficial outcomes that have been witnessed from the adoption of team teaching approaches for first year student engagement by two institutions. In both cases the initiatives stemmed from a recognised need to seek strategies that are more effective for engaging students in response to broadening educational access and participation for non-traditional student groups.

Australian and UK higher education reflects the impact of national policy directed at broadening the participation of previously under-represented sections of the population. Facilitating access and inclusiveness for such groups is formally recognised in university policy statements, and, as McInnis (2003, p.387) points out, “there is considerable institutional kudos in the extent of diversity in the student population.” Universities have acknowledged the need to develop their capacity to manage student diversity and its impact
on student completion with a range of institutional approaches. Such strategies “are not responding to diversity for the sake of promoting diversity. They represent the beginnings of systematic attempts to change the mainstream university experience generated by the diversity of student backgrounds” (McInnis, 2003, p.391).

The team teaching approaches and rationale

The definition of team teaching underpinning this research was derived from the work of Goetz (2000) who suggests that team teaching is a group of two or more staff involved in planning, delivering and evaluating learning activities for the same learning group. The applied research in the Business School at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (BCUC) involved collaborative sessions where two tutors delivered sessions at the same time, exchanging and discussing ideas and theories in front of the learners (Robinson & Schaible, 1995; Maroney, 1995). Similarly, Monash University have responded to widening participation by developing within the Diploma of Foundation Studies (DoFS) program a supportive learning community around a small teaching team. In these contexts, team teaching provided an effective strategy for developing a collaborative and open approach to teaching and learning that has proved to be remarkably effective in engaging first year students.

Students enrolled into the DoFS program are representative of Monash University’s commitment to extending participation in tertiary learning to non-traditional and under-represented student groups (Monash University, Monash University Global Equity Plan, 2003). A defining characteristic of all students accepted into this program has been modest secondary school successes that do not qualify them for normal entry into Monash University Degrees. A second defining characteristic is the locality in which the students reside. The majority of DoFS students are recruited from the Gippsland Region of Victoria, Australia that has a higher proportion of low and medium-low income households than Victoria generally with a correspondingly lower rate of senior secondary school retention (Collis, 2005). The link between the socio-economic status of school leavers, modest secondary school achievement, and their ability and propensity to access and experience tertiary education has long been appreciated. “The combined effect of the achievement divide and economic and socio-economic factors is a pattern of marked social inequalities in post year 12 destinations” (Teese, Polesel, and Mason, 2004, p.23). A final defining characteristic is the amount of paid employment undertaken by these particular students. A national survey of tertiary students in 2004 found that 55% of full-time students worked in some form of paid employment (Krause, 2005, p.53). By comparison an average of 83% of DoFS students were engaged in some form of paid employment. At a national level, 22% of full time students worked 11-15 hours a week in paid employment (Krause, 2005, p.53) compared with 50% of DoFS students who worked 9-16 hours a week. The teaching initiatives developed in this program were intended to broaden educational participation amongst government designated equity groups and to address their engagement needs.

As a first year alternative entry program DoFS has been built upon a core of common units (three units out of eight) taught through the year by a small teaching team. It confirms that in an environment characterised by increasing student numbers and diversity, an appropriately supportive program and environment can broaden access and participation in non-compulsory post-secondary education. Further, it can assist students with modest levels of secondary school achievement to develop the necessary skills, capacities and attitudes to engage
effectively with tertiary learning practices and embark upon the enterprise of becoming lifelong learners (Candy, Crebert and O’Leary, 1994). Completion has been uniformly high throughout the program’s history with an aggregate rate of 90%. This suggests that, aside from its success as an access initiative, the program has been effective in engaging students once they have enrolled, with few withdrawing. Furthermore, a supported approach to encouraging the engagement of students and their participation in learning is crucial. Simply broadening access to study would be a meaningless initiative if central to that were not also measures to create an appropriate learning environment.

Monash University’s DoFS program has sought to engage new students with the process of tertiary learning through team teaching. Over the last six years the same teaching team has taught three units, albeit with different staff from year to year. One unit is taught in the first semester by the entire team that then divides into two subgroups for the purposes of teaching two units in the second semester. In each unit the expectation is that all members of the teaching team will participate in, or at minimum attend, the lectures. A colleague from the Language and Learning Services Centre has been a regular contributor on each of these teams providing complimentary support focused on related topics and study skills (Goetz, 2000). In this way a learning community is created (Tinto, 2000) in which students have the opportunity to create effective learning relationships with members of the teaching team that last throughout their first year.

At BCUC there is a clear commitment to support the government’s drive to extend participation amongst non-traditional entrants and under-represented groups. The current student profile is predominantly full-time and undergraduate. Approximately 40% of students are under the age of 21 and this rises to 65% if the age category is extended to 25. In terms of ethnicity, over 25% of the total student population are from ‘non-White’ ethnic groups with the significant majority of these coming from the ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’ groups. The largest proportion of students lives within the immediate region of the University College, defined as a 25-mile radius. It is recognised that the widening of participation and the growth of non-traditional entrants will entail new frameworks of support to meet student’s different learning needs and to ensure that the completion and retention levels within these groups are managed. (BCUC, Strategic Plan, 2002-2007).

In the Business School at BCUC strategies to engage with and support student learning and improve completion and retention rates has become a key focus of attention. At Level 1, many new initiatives are now embedded which are designed to create a learning community and support students on their paths to becoming independent learners. These include academic tutors assigned to specific tutor groups with weekly contact time; a Personal Development module to cover a range of study skills critical to success in higher education; a Virtual Learning Environment to encourage students to take their learning further; and a common first year with year long modules designed to create cohesive student groups to generate a feeling of attachment and encourage networking. Despite these external support mechanisms less attention had been paid to what went on in the classroom to engage students and enhance their learning experience.

Educational theorists (Biggs & Watkins, 1993; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) indicate that learning does not take place in a vacuum and that the context of learning is a crucial component of the learning process. Further research on widening participation has highlighted that students have become “more ‘consumerist’ or ‘instrumental’ in their approach, less
academically able than their predecessors and are less interested in their subject” (Rolfe, 2001, p.4). Coupled with this, much research has been undertaken on surface approaches to learning. The development of deeper approaches to teaching requires support and effort from the tutor (Abernathy, et. al., 1995). This view is further developed as Biggs (1999) puts forward the notion that less academic students will only engage deeply with their learning if the tutors create the right conditions. As a result, staff within the Field of Human Resource Management in the Business School trialled a team teaching approach with Level 1 groups in order to research the possible impact on student engagement and learning. Using the model of team teaching suggested by Benjamin (2000), key aspects of which are based on the work of Senge (1990) and Schrage (1995), both student perceptions and practitioner experience of team teaching were researched. Improvement in the student learning experience from a team teaching approach is also supported by Austin and Baldwin (1991). They argue that it can improve the capabilities of students, particularly in areas of critical evaluation and analysis, which are essential within higher education. Helms, Alvis and Willis (2005, p.30) confirm this and suggest, “[p]resenting students with contrasting views on a topic can promote creative thinking and allows students to explore alternative positions.”

What goes on in the classroom is pivotal to developing student engagement in the learning process. Team teaching can be used as a mechanism to construct an enriching and supportive environment both for the students and the academic staff. At institutions responding to diversity, the role of the teacher in building a range of mechanisms to encourage learning and student engagement is crucial (McIlnnis, 2003). Team teaching deepens understanding and encourages reflection about individual staff delivery styles with synergies in the classroom emerging from the varied expertise and viewpoints of staff (Helms, Alvis and Willis, 2005). It generates a “scholarly discourse on teaching and student learning” (Benjamin, 2000) and provides a ready mechanism for constructive feedback. Learning then becomes a communal and collaborative exercise between staff and students rather than a private encounter between one tutor and a group of students.

Observations and Outcomes

McIlnnis (2003, p. 393) identifies that “a powerful but easily neglected response to diversity is to ensure that the fundamentals of good undergraduate teaching are supported… ‘Good teaching is good teaching is good teaching’ is the message now underlining effective intervention programs”. One of the successful features of both initiatives has been the positive impact on student learning and staff teaching practice as a consequence of the collaborative partnership between staff. Using a cycle of sharing information and knowledge, negotiating meaning, implementing new approaches and reflecting on the outcome (James, et.al., 2004) has led to successive improvements in learning for both students and staff. Most importantly, this learning cycle has transformed tacit, implicit knowledge into explicit articulation. This means, then, that students are more likely to have an understanding of what is required, with associated positive effects on performance. This suggests reconsideration is needed of the ‘lone academic’ system universities are so heavily dependent upon (Twigg, 2003).

Research at both institutions into team teaching confirmed that it could change the learning experience of staff and students. For staff the experience of team teaching removes pedagogic isolation and solitude (Shulman and Hutchings, 1995). This can encourage experimentation with innovation in the classroom to support a range of different learning styles and student needs. At BCUC the practice of having two tutors simultaneously in the one classroom
created a secure environment in which to experiment with different teaching approaches that may be daunting for one tutor or too ambitious in terms of control and logistics. Research by Schon (1987) and Argyris (1993) supports the view that qualitative improvements in outcomes result when practitioners are able to focus, reflect and evaluate their practice jointly. At Monash University, staff collaboration has resulted in curriculum rejuvenation, rethinking of assessment, redevelopment of marking criteria, and changes in teaching practices based on each member’s unique experiences and expertise.

An increased workload for staff has been identified and associated with team teaching (Goetz, 2000; Leon and Tai, 2004). Whilst team teaching allows some tasks to be shared, if learning programs are to be delivered in a co-ordinated and well-planned manner they have to be jointly prepared. The reflection and evaluation process can be time consuming and routinely requires meetings between members of the teaching team. This necessarily involves a high level of co-operation and coordination, a willingness to be adaptable to colleague’s ideas and styles, and a preparedness to have individual strengths and weaknesses exposed in an open forum (Robinson and Schaible, 1995). This is, however, the process through which pedagogical isolation and solitude is reduced and benefits do arise in the form of collaborative research and teaching insights.

The team dynamic is perhaps the most critical aspect as a high level of trust and respect between staff is required. Research suggests that an important variable is the ‘intention’ of the team and whether it is established on a voluntary basis or imposed (Benjamin 2000). The success of the team appears to be influenced by this factor (Goetz, 2000) and experience at both institutions confirms this. When staff have been co-opted onto teaching teams the necessary collaboration has been absent and the students have been adept at exploiting differences in staff commitment. As noted by Goetz (2000) ‘clever students may attempt to play one tutor off against another’. Whilst collaborative teaching teams can have a significant impact on the student learning environment (James, Skillen, Percy, Tootell & Irvine, 2004), a barrier to success can be the co-ordination and continuity required.

At both Institutions a positive outcome of the creation of a learning community using common core units and a common teaching team has been that staff members have the opportunity to guide students throughout the year in their development as tertiary learners. Previous studies (Bruck, Hallett, Hood, MacDonald, and Moore 2001; Peel, 2000) have found that personalisation and ‘being known’ were important contributors to student’s perceptions of a positive learning experience. This allowed for a more holistic and student centred approach to learning that avoided the ‘silo effect’ of learning within discrete units by which students were only ever recognised as ‘fragments’ of their learning whole. In addition to this Rust, O’Donovan and Price (2005) have argued that the construction of knowledge depends upon students engaging with the learning process and both Institutions have found that creating a learning community can help to encourage this. Increased familiarity with the students as learners provided increased opportunities through which to engage them and avoid standardising the student learning experience as if their learning needs, interests and abilities were identical (Twigg, 2003). It also allowed for more timely intervention and the provision of pastoral care if required. Team teaching core subjects also facilitated the effective development of overlapping themes and learning objectives that would otherwise be impractical in more mainstream approaches where a variety of units, and the staff that teach them, operate in isolation.
The qualitative research findings drawn from student feedback at both institutions can be clustered into three main categories. A sample of student responses is provided below:

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<th>Broadening the curriculum experience</th>
<th>Buckinghamshire Chilterns</th>
<th>Monash University</th>
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<td>Having two tutors in the class made me work hard. Every week I had home work to do, which made me feel as if I was being pushed but learning as well.</td>
<td>I have really grown from this program. It helped me finally decide what I really want to do and gave me time to consider the options. It helped me understand what university is about and my role in the institution.</td>
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<td>Two lecturers teaching at one time helps to keep me interested as different view points can be discussed.</td>
<td>it wasn’t just about learning, if that makes sense, it was about learning … other things. It wasn’t rote learning or book learning; it was just learning sort of life skills in a university context. So that’s probably one of the best things, and meeting new people … from so many different Faculties… I think just the experience of everybody and the[ir] perspective[s]… you get sociology people with their views and the nurses with their views, just sort of incorporating all the views into one.</td>
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<td>We got different views…… I liked that. We were encouraged to discuss topics and could put across our views. Sometimes it got really noisy which was fun.</td>
<td>the classes we had and the support network, it made me more comfortable to be at uni and it was a smooth transition from school. And you sort of get opened up to this new world of knowledge and this new way of thinking and writing… I think that’s what gave me the confidence to then … go onto the other areas I’m really interested in. I suppose it makes you really inquisitive and I think more… critical of everything you read and things like that.</td>
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<th>Engaging students</th>
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<th>Monash University</th>
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<td>The two tutors mixed us up a lot and I got to know a lot of people. At school I didn’t get involved – here at Uni the two tutors encouraged me to say things. I think I have got more confidence now and I am willing to have a go in class.</td>
<td>[The teaching team] know your name, they know your learning style as well, like if you’re confident or not. I like the feeling that people know each other. I think it’s back to the networking. You’ve got this network of people that know you.</td>
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<td>Paired teaching makes module more interesting as different style of inputs I liked being part of everything – you had to get involved.</td>
<td>Everyone had to participate, it wasn’t just sit there and yeah you’re here, it was you [who] had to actively participate.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Added variation to keep attention. The team teaching maintained concentration and interest. It kept me awake.</td>
<td>They [teaching team] create a strong network for the student to improve their self-confidence/self-belief, set realistic achievements.</td>
<td></td>
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With two tutors the whole class had to get involved.

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<th>Developing Understanding</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Buckinghamshire Chilterns</strong></td>
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<td>If I didn’t understand I felt I could ask questions. No-one laughed at me so I felt I could check things out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I liked the fact that I could go and get help outside class as with two tutors there was always one of them in their office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in groups in class meant I got different points of view. It has made me think about things like personality and equality. I enjoyed it and two tutors explaining things really seemed to help me. I have done well in this module.</td>
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Further feedback indicates that students appreciated the fact that all members of the teaching staff participated in the lectures hence providing a genuine sense of communal and collegial learning. Enhanced accessibility and support outside of the formal learning sessions, coupled with variation in delivery style, helped maintain student interest and encouraged engagement.

Personal investment, by both students and staff, appears to be the key to engaging students and building a successful learning community. As observed by McInnis, James and Hartley (2000, p.4) “[u]niversities, by themselves, do not ‘make’ the student experience; this requires an active contribution from the students.” Community building takes place in the tutorials and daily interaction between staff and students and this is most easily achieved through the use of small teaching teams engaged in team teaching. Research (Peat, Dalziel and Grant, 2001) has shown that students perform best in their first year at university when they negotiate successfully the social transition between secondary school and university. Engagement in the first year is not just about acquiring academic skills; it also involves developing an appropriate level of social maturity and social well being. Students who can picture themselves as an integral part of the university will more readily identify with a personalised learning setting and establish an individual learner identity. Qualitative evidence suggests team teaching can be a valuable tool in creating such an environment. The networks created through this environment have been observed operating into the later years of students’ study and confirm that it is typically within the first year that patterns of engagement are set.

Team teaching as an engagement strategy can be assessed through qualitative feedback from the students and staff involved in conjunction with quantitative data detailing student performance. Certainly this has been the experience at BCUC where feedback from external examiners noted an increase in performance and improved achievement rates at Level 1. Prior to the use of team teaching on the common first year module, Organisational Behaviour, student achievement was recorded as a mean of 48.9% with a Pass rate of 73%. The results following the research into team teaching were recorded as a mean of 55% and a pass rate of 89%. At Monash University, 91% of DoFS graduates subsequently gained places in degree
programs based upon their first year diploma results. DoFS students entered the institution with significantly lower levels of secondary school success compared to their mainstream peers. Despite this, DoFS students have subsequently performed at a level comparable to students admitted through mainstream avenues. These outcomes at both institutions suggest team teaching can be an effective method through which to engage students with successful learning practices.

Concluding Remarks

The UK and Australian governments’ drive to widen participation in higher education creates many challenges for both students and staff at the learning interface. A higher education environment characterised by competing demands of teaching and researching, increased diversity, and decreased funding can result in a rationalised response to teaching and learning demands (Bruck, et.al., 2001). A key challenge is how to support the student transition into higher education and engage students in the process of learning and the development of appropriate study habits. Traditional methods of delivery and assessment can no longer be relied on as the only mechanism to achieve this. It has been noted of the Australian Y Generation (Krause, 2005, p.7) that “there is a need to strike a balance between fostering independence and providing scaffolded support for a diverse range of students needs.” Research into team teaching at both Monash University and BCUC has provided a valuable insight into ways to engage these new student populations.

Engaging students through team teaching does have additional resource costs associated with it, however, these should be evaluated with respect to the institutional costs incurred by a failure to engage and retain students beyond their first year of study. The resource costs associated with team teaching are primarily related to staffing but the costs of failing to retain students are often hidden and displaced from faculty budgets. These costs occur at both an institutional level and, for the students, a personal level. The loss of students results in both immediate and long term revenue reduction for the institution, while for the individual there are economic, opportunity and “valuable ‘life’ time” costs (Swail, 2006). The findings of research conducted at both institutions suggests that team teaching and the establishment of learning communities as a means of engaging, and subsequently retaining, students is a means of minimising these costs.

The benefits of team teaching for student engagement are clearly evident and the challenges are always going to be those of time and resources. It is not the view of the authors that all units undertaken by new students need to be team taught, however there are certainly benefits in an approach that would see all new students experience team teaching in some of their first year units. The research carried out at both institutions suggests that the process of team teaching can help to encourage student engagement with the learning process.

References


http://www.ucalgary.ca/~egallery/goetz.html


