

Intentional first year curriculum design as a means of facilitating student engagement: some exemplars

Sally Kift, Faculty of Law, QUT
Rachael Field, Faculty of Law, QUT

The importance of student engagement to higher education quality, making deep learning outcomes possible for students, and achieving student retention, is increasingly being understood. The issue of student engagement in the first year of tertiary study is of particular significance. This paper takes the position that the first year curriculum, and the pedagogical principles that inform its design, are critical influencers of student engagement in the first year learning environment. We use an analysis of case studies prepared for Kift's ALTC Senior Fellowship to demonstrate ways in which student engagement in the first year of tertiary study can be successfully supported through intentional curriculum design that motivates students to learn, provides a positive learning climate, and encourages students to be active in their learning.

Introduction

Student engagement “is increasingly understood to be important for higher education quality” (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2008, 1). It can be defined as “students’ involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning” (ACER, 2008, 1), or equally as “the time, energy and resources students devote to the activities designed to enhance learning at university” (Krause, 2005, 3). Student engagement in the first year is not only critical to making quality learning outcomes possible for students, it is also central to achieving student retention (Tinto, 2009; ACER, 2008). Indeed, more broadly, student engagement can even be seen as providing “a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions” (ACER, 2008, vi). The issue of first year engagement is, therefore, one of critical currency and far-reaching significance.

According to Yorke (2006, 1) “the engagement of students in higher education is influenced by a number of factors – for example, how they finance their studies; how they balance studies and part-time employment; and what they see as their aims in undertaking a program of study”. Therefore, to facilitate student engagement relevantly and strategically, universities must take account of the reality of diverse commencing cohorts’ varying external contextual life factors. Factors frequently mentioned include, for example, students’ educational, linguistic and socio-cultural background and experiences, their paid work and other life commitments, and their perceptions of the relevance of university learning to achieving their personal future career goals (Krause, 2006).

In addition to these aspects, the first year curriculum, and the pedagogical principles that inform its design, must be acknowledged as critical influencers of student engagement in aid of first year student learning, success and retention (Kift, 2008; Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2009; Krause, 2009; Oliver, 2009). In this paper we use an analysis of case studies prepared for Kift's Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Senior Fellowship to demonstrate ways in which student engagement in the first year of tertiary study may be successfully supported through intentional curriculum design that *motivates* students to learn, provides a positive learning *climate*, and encourages students to be *active* in their learning.

Background: ALTC Senior Fellowship to Develop a Transition Pedagogy

This paper draws on a series of first year curriculum case studies, and a commentary on them from the perspective of engagement (Field, 2008), that were commissioned for an ALTC Senior Fellowship program framed around the articulation of a research-based "transition pedagogy". Specifically, the Fellowship has sought to reinvigorate the sector's approach to enhancing the critical first year undergraduate student experience (FYE) by harnessing cross-institutional partnerships between academic and professional staff focussed on curriculum engagement. A major Fellowship outcome has been the development of a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum renewal – a transition pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2005; Nelson, Kift, Humphries & Harper, 2006; Kift, 2008) – that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts. The premise here is that, in all their diversity, and acknowledging their multiple identities and changing patterns of engagement, it is within the first year curriculum that commencing students must be engaged, supported, and realise their sense of belonging. In this way, the curriculum has an important role to play in first year transition and retention.

In this work, "curriculum" has been conceptualised very broadly to encompass the totality of the student experience of, and engagement with, their new program of tertiary study. "Curriculum" in this sense includes all of the academic, social and support aspects of the student experience, focuses on the "educational conditions in which we place students" (Tinto, 2009, 2), and includes the co-curricula opportunities offered (outside the formal curriculum) with which students are encouraged to engage (Kift, 2009). The term "transition pedagogy" has been coined to express this broader view of curriculum and the intentional design of learning, teaching and assessment approaches that inform its enactment in ways that acknowledge the reality of the external contextual factors referred to above. Specifically, a transition pedagogy seeks to mediate entering student diversity in preparedness and cultural capital, now so endemic in our mass system. The concern is that, if we do not harness the curriculum as the academic and social "organising device" in this way – as the "glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together" (McInnis, 2001, 9, 11) – student take-up of our otherwise disparate and "piecemeal" efforts to support their FYE (Krause et al, 2005, at 8.8.6) is left to chance.

The approach to curriculum centred on a transition pedagogy is further validated by reason of its alignment with the six engagement scales identified and measured by the *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)* (ACER, 2008). These scales are: academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environment, and work integrated learning. A transition pedagogy seeks to attend to each of these aspects of student engagement in a coherent, embedded and integrated way, utilising the curriculum to mediate as many student-institution interactions as possible to enhance the broader student experience.

Under the ALTC Senior Fellowship, a case study approach was utilised in the first instance to explore good practice exemplars of intentional first year curriculum design across a representative range of disciplines and institutions. Case study collaborators were asked to write-up existing curriculum exemplars by evaluating them retrospectively. This evaluation occurred against a first iteration of six generic first year curriculum principles. Two Canadian case studies were commissioned from Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada –

- Arts and Social Sciences ('Explorations') (Marchbank & Fee, 2008); and
- Applied Sciences ('TechOne') (Fee & McCracken, 2008)

together with five from Australia –

- Education (Healy, 2008) – Queensland University of Technology (QUT);
- Law (Westcott, 2008) – James Cook University;
- Information Technology (IT) (Nelson, 2008) – QUT;
- Science (Biology) (Gleeson, 2008) – University of Melbourne; and
- Writing and Communication ('Bibly') Multimedia (Radbourne & LeRossignol, 2008) – Deakin University.

Each case demonstrates coherent, whole-of-program or individual subject (latter, Bilby Multimedia Case only) design. In each, there is a clear articulation of curriculum design that is student-focussed, explicit and relevant in providing the foundation and scaffolding necessary for first year learning engagement, success and retention.

Once finalised, the case studies were circulated to a panel of national and international expert commentators for insights, observations and synthesis around perspectives identified as critical for successful first year student engagement (perspectives such as, for example, assessment practice; academic preparedness; student efficacy; diversity; sessional staff engagement; career connections, *etc*). All of these various resources are now available on the ALTC Exchange (at <http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design>).

In February 2009, a FYE Curriculum Design Symposium was convened under the auspices of the ALTC Fellowship. The Symposium was structured around the six generic first year curriculum principles referred to above, which had now been iteratively evaluated and validated by further research, the development of the collaborators' resources, and widespread engaged dissemination across Australasia. Those principles are: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Kift, 2009). The Symposium resources are available at <http://www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/resources/>

Engaging First Year Students Through Curriculum Design

The transition pedagogy is critical in the achievement of effective student engagement. As McInnes (2003, 9) has said, "engagement occurs where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, where learning outside of the classroom is considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience, and where students actively connect to the subject matter". At our institution (QUT), we have been committed for several years (for example, Kift, Goss, Mylonas, Kelly & Stedman, 2003; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2005; Nelson, et al, 2006) to enacting a first year transition philosophy focused on the central principle of first year curriculum that must be embedded, integrated and coordinated with institutional practices across the academic, professional and administrative domains in order to effectively engage and support new learners. The operation of that principle is supported by two secondary premises that involve the provision to students of *timely access*

to support services and a *sense of belonging* through involvement and connectedness with the university. In our view, the case studies considered in this paper reflect approaches that are consistent with these principles.

The importance of an emphasis on engagement as a leading factor in intentional curriculum design to support first year transition cannot be overstated. Engaging pedagogical approaches that take place in supportive, integrated and coordinated learning environments make deep learning outcomes for students possible, promote high quality student learning, and discourage superficial approaches to learning. Students in such environments are more likely to connect with their discipline, go beyond the minimum prescribed learning requirements, and make connections with broader concepts and experience (Yorke, 2006). In short, engaged students are more likely to be enabled to reach a deeper understanding of that which is being learned (Ramsden, 2003). For these reasons, Krause (2006) has argued that any determination of strategic policy to enhance the first year experience must have engagement of the first year student as its primary goal.

The framework we have adopted for our consideration of how the ALTC Fellowship case studies demonstrate the achievement of student engagement through curriculum design, draws on Biggs' identification (2003, 56) of motivation, climate and learning activity as three categories of design orientation that are central to achieving engagement. This framework has been chosen for its fit with the broader, integrated and coordinated notion of curriculum.

Case Studies of Engagement: Motivation of Student Learning

Pedagogical approaches at tertiary level must *motivate* students to learn if deep, effective and engaged 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 (Cannon, 1988), particularly in ways that encourage active and equal participation. Motivating approaches to pedagogy can also be considered important from the perspective of responding to the diversity of students' learning styles and preferences. The Fellowship case studies evidence a variety of strategies to motivate and engage students: particularly, for example, the use of assessment and feedback, including the provision of scaffolded student choice and control in assessment practice regarding topics, methods and criteria (Nicol, 2007); student-centred approaches that provoke high levels of enquiry and analysis; and approaches that stimulate students by using authentic content and imaginative learning activities.

Motivating student engagement through assessment

All of the case studies acknowledge assessment and feedback as important engagement tools. Many embrace what Krause (2006, 6) calls the shift from 'assessment *of* learning' to 'assessment *for* learning' as a key strategy for first year curriculum design. For example, the IT case study demonstrates the motivation of student learning in this way, by assessing student understanding of theoretical concepts through blog entries and case studies that relate contemporary artefacts, such as mobile phones and MP3 players, to socio-technical systems. This case also uses a variety of assessment formats and media to provide balance to the assessment experience and to maintain high levels of interest. Additional assessment types used include on-line module tasks, reflective journals, reports, database tasks and exams.

In both the IT and Education case studies, explicit attention is given to using assessment to build knowledge and skills, and to exploit the connections between subject concepts, knowl-

edge and skills. For example, the importance of clear, consistent and explicit communication with students about assessment is emphasised in order to reduce and relieve student anxiety and confusion. Students who are less anxious, and understand assessment expectations clearly, are better able to engage (Clark & Ramsay, 1990; McInnis & James, 1995; Pargetter, McInnes, James, Peel & Dobson, 1999; Nicol, 2007).

The Law, Education and TechOne case studies provide further examples of using assessment as a key motivator for student engagement with learning. Law and Education both scaffold assessment by providing students with incremental tasks in terms of weightings, type and degree of difficulty, and the nature of the skill being developed and assessed. Allowing limited student choice and control in assessment content and process were further common engagement features; this being an aspect of good assessment practice (Nicol, 2007). This could be as simple as allowing students to decide the order in which things are done (Law), the medium adopted for delivery (Education), a choice of assessment topic (Education), or a choice about the object to be assessed (TechOne). The TechOne case study also harnesses assessment as a motivator for engaged learning by involving students in assessment design, thereby providing a high level of learner control and independence in their assessment activity.

Motivating student engagement through provision of feedback

The literature has long reflected the importance in the first year of providing quality, timely feedback to students, both formally and informally (McInnis & James, 1995; McLean, Hartley, Ryan, Macdonald & McDonald, 1999; Pargetter et al, 1999). To motivate engagement, such feedback should demonstrate concern for, and interest in, the student's progress (McInnis, et al, 1995). Ramsden (2003, 96) emphasises the importance of quality feedback on assessment when he 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".

Assessment practice in the IT case study demonstrates a strong commitment to the provision of a variety of feedback to students as a means of motivating deep student learning. Forms of feedback include peer and tutor review of work and draft material during class time, and the provision of individual comments on blog entries and assignments. The Education, TechOne and Bilby case studies also use the provision of 'rich', detailed, regular and progressive feedback as a motivating factor for student engagement.

Motivating student engagement through student-centred approaches

Student-centred approaches are important to motivating students and thus achieving their engagement (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden 2003; ACER, 2008).

The TechOne case study uses the creation of a student-centred learning community to motivate student learning, with enthusiastic professional staff working in an integrated way with academic program staff to this end. The student-centred focus of the Bilby case promotes a motivating and engaging pedagogical approach in a multi-media environment that stimulates students using authentic content and imaginative learning activities via the virtual town of Bilby. In the Explorations case study, the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum design, across various 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.

Case Studies of Engagement: Provision of an Engaging Learning Climate

In order to provide a positive *learning climate* for student engagement, curriculum design must be supported by the structure and framework of an intentional student experience across the first year. If students' broader social and personal transition issues are not addressed – for example, if they remain isolated, feel unsupported, or have no sense of belonging or institutional fit – then they will be less able to engage optimally with their learning, even if the pedagogical elements of the curriculum are otherwise designed to be engaging (Kift & Nelson, 2005). Universities must address the “social integration dimension of first year student connections” as well as the “central elements of what it is to learn with and belong to a community of scholars” (Krause, 2006, 4). Many of these issues are even more critical for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kift, 2009).

The case studies illustrate instances where both the social and scholarly aspects of university life are integrated in order to create learning climates that support enhanced student engagement. Effective approaches demonstrated therein include: creating a dedicated common room and social space for first year students; promoting greater opportunities for staff-student interaction; and integrating university support services into the faculty or school context.

Supporting student engagement through dedicated student spaces

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 is a dedicated common room and social space for first year students that contains computers, comfortable lounges, notice boards and games consoles. The room is consistently in use and students in the faculty report in surveys that one of the best things about studying IT at the institution is the *Green Room*. The room is seen as a benefit of being a student in the IT faculty compared with other Faculties that do not offer this supportive measure. The Science case study also describes a dedicated space for students – the *Biology Learning Centre* – to create a sense of belonging and to access additional tutor assistance and support. Other *virtual* learning spaces provided are discussed below.

Supporting student engagement through a coordinated curriculum climate

The Law case study provides a strong example of commitment to creating a coordinated curriculum climate via a holistic, integrated, first year program approach. For example, learning outcomes, teaching settings and assessment practices are constructively aligned across all first year subjects. Further, a number of engagement strategies are embedded progressively in a timely manner across the curriculum to allow the FYE to evolve gradually. These include: supporting student engagement with faculty registrars to help manage the administration of their learning; inviting university support services and peer mentors into the classroom; and supporting professional connections, for example, through courthouse excursions. The Canadian Explorations case draws on the use of professorial staff to demonstrate to students that their learning is valued by the faculty and deserving of high level support. Students in that case also have access to a strong program of pastoral support across the campus and university, including Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS). Additionally, students are given space for their engagement through *just-in-time* information provision, which ensures they are not overloaded with *administrivia* as they learn. The Education case study further evidences the use of social engagement opportunities (for example, through peer mentoring programs, keeping students connected via PASS schemes, collaborative learning, and staff-student interactions) to create a coordinated curriculum environment that supports student engagement.

The IT, Science and TechOne case studies also provide good exemplars of how a coordinated approach to curriculum climate may be used to support student engagement. In the IT case study, for example, 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. Other support measures also 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. In the TechOne program, the TechZone (the TechOne online community portal), which is moderated by later year undergraduate students, provides an early opportunity for students to feel welcomed and to ask questions. Orientation and a Week of Welcome are used to build on this climate of support to facilitate a strong foundational level of academic and social engagement. Strategic interventions throughout the first year, for example, assisting students with their course progression choices, further enhance the supportive learning climate, as does providing students with access to extensive *state of the art* technologies.

Supporting student engagement through an authentic curriculum climate

The Explorations case study provides a good example of an authentic curriculum climate designed to support student engagement. From an early stage of the semester, an inclusive learning community is facilitated that allows students time and space to discover and explore new interests, and creates a safe space for accessing students' creativity. In the Bilby case study, a creative virtual learning environment supports engagement through student participation in diverse writing activities as characters in a virtual town. Student creativity is promoted through social engagement and discursive activity. Engagement is further promoted by a supportive and structured approach to collaborative learning and peer-to-peer activity.

Case Studies of Engagement: Learning Activity

Biggs (2003, 79) identifies “learner activity and interacting with others” as two critical characteristics of rich (and therefore engaging) learning and teaching environments. Tinto (1997, 1) has long argued that students need to be engaged in active and collaborative, rather than passive, “spectator sport” learning, commenting that “shared learning should be the norm, not the exception, of first year experience”. Designing curricula for active learning can therefore be seen as critical to achieving student engagement in the first year. Engaging learning activities can be teacher-directed, peer-directed, or self-directed (Biggs, 2003) and should not be inhibited by large class size. The *AUSSE Report* indicates that “higher order forms of learning that involve analysing, synthesising, evaluating and applying” tend “to be positively associated with most aspects of engagement” (ACER, 2008, ix). Further, Laurillard’s conversational framework (2002) can also be used to support learner activity through achieving engagement via layers of discursive interaction. The cases reflect a range of successful active learning approaches, such as the use of case studies, small group and collaborative learning (peer-to-peer and other group work), project work, strategies for identifying students at-risk of disengaging, frequent use of online technologies, assessment and feedback strategies, choice and flexibility (for example, in assessment), and the promotion of social engagement through discursive activity (for example, staff-student interaction).

The IT case study provides an excellent example of learning activity that is designed to foster student engagement through a focus on a case study approach to authentic learning design, and also through strategic use of group and collaborative learning. For example, students work in collaborative groups without the added stressor of assessment dependency. Team-

work and small class engagement are other key features of the IT subjects, while staff-student collaboration occurs through a flexible teaching model that rewards students for their application of learning to industry case studies.

Both the Science and Law case studies focus on learning activity through, for example, small group tutorials, study groups and opportunities for working with a partner. In the Law case study students are assisted in thinking about their legal studies in a holistic and integrated way through participation in buzz groups, debates, role plays and discussion, as well as online activities. The emphasis in the design of these activities is on practical real-world relevance. In the Science case study, initiatives that extend beyond formal class settings, such as the faculty program, *Science 10,1* with its structured workshops, staff-student panels and study groups, also encourage learner activity and engagement, as do the well-attended Careers Nights.

In the TechOne program the activity-centred curriculum is facilitated by an *Über TA* (a graduate student teaching assistant) who provides a critical engagement link between experienced faculty academics and the developing knowledge of the first year cohort. In the Encounters case study, students are encouraged to engage in peer interaction and to challenge and answer each others' questions. The Education case study promotes active, interactive and collaborative learning through explicit knowledge processing experiences which involve students mapping their learning via experience. Providing students with opportunities to co-design these learning experiences is also an engaging strategy involving student activity.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how a multi-faceted view of student engagement in the first tertiary year can be achieved through intentional curriculum design as an integral component of a transition pedagogy. Using a three-pronged framework of engagement – motivation, learning climate, and learning activity – the case studies of Kift's ALTC Senior Fellowship demonstrate a rich variety of effective approaches to designing the "educational conditions" (Tinto, 2009, 1) that will promote student learning, success and retention. These approaches evidence a clear and uncompromising commitment to placing students at the centre of both curriculum, and overall program, design to enhance student engagement with the critical academic, non-academic and social aspects of the experience of tertiary learning.

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