Engaged Teaching for Engaging Students: Explicit, Inclusive, AVID

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Abstract

This Nuts and Bolts session will explore the purpose and parameters of a recently won OLT grant entitled Professional Development Program To Embed Inclusive And Explicit Teaching Practices in HE First Year Units. This project is underway at Victoria University in Melbourne, Victoria and in Edith Cowan University in Perth, W.A. Both universities have diverse student bodies and are engaged in a process of improving their learning experiences and thereby improving their retention rates. The purpose of this project is two-fold. Firstly, it is to trial a holistic, systematic approach using AVID Tertiary to improve the quality of the teaching experience for sessional tutoring staff and the quality of the learning experience for students. The second purpose is to develop a collaborative, inter-departmental, multi-disciplinary model that has an evidence-based, data-driven approach to informing and implementing improvements in teaching and learning.

What is being done?

The model for AVID implementation is being developed under the leadership of The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning with partners from the College of Arts and the College of Health and Biomedicine, and support staff from Victoria University College. There are two components to this project that will:

1. Embed explicit learning and teaching pedagogies in first year units employing a significant number of sessional staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning and therefore improve retention and success
2. Provide intensive, ongoing professional learning in AVID’s explicit teaching strategies for sessional staff who teach as tutors in large first year units but who have little or no teacher training

Training is conducted in burst mode a few weeks before the start of semester, with ongoing support during the teaching period. This will be provided by AVID Staff Developers, course and unit co-ordinators and support staff. Together, they will provide ongoing professional learning for the pilot group of sessional and academic teaching staff.

The units involved were identified by Academic, Unit and Course Coordinators based on need identified through trend analysis of progress and attrition rates.

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<tr>
<th>University/faculty/unit</th>
<th>Enrolment numbers</th>
<th>Tutor numbers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Victoria, Health and Biomedical Sciences</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>10</td>
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Frameworks for Nursing/Working with

Engaged Teaching for Engaging Students: Explicit, Inclusive, AVID. Nuts and Bolts.
Following is a discussion of the pedagogies at use, and the experience of working collaboratively to embed them in diverse disciplines.

**How is it being done?**

AVID is a university-readiness system which has been operating in the USA for over 32 years and currently serves over 500,000 students in 5000 schools across 48 US states and three other countries. It has a compelling evidence base for its efficacy and was recently highlighted as a case study of excellence of an OECD report (OECD, 2012, p. 141).

AVID works by simultaneously equipping low SES and underperforming students with the academic, social and emotional skills to be successful at university (‘bottom up’) and at the same time providing an ongoing professional learning system that raises teachers’ aspirations and builds explicit teaching skills with additional support for school leaders to help these students aspire to and succeed at university (‘top down’).

The AVID for Higher Education pilot identified several key conditions necessary for AVID to effectively address student success at an institution of higher education:

- There must be strong campus leadership, vision, and support.
- Students must have access to rigorous credit-bearing coursework rather than remedial, developmental coursework.
- There must be coherence in student experiences. This coherence can be achieved through structures such as peer-mentoring, learning communities, or innovative online options.
- Teaching must be learner-centered and engage students in AVID’s WICOR components (writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization and reading)

AVID for Higher Education consists of two initiatives: **Student Success** and **Teacher Preparation.** Both initiatives can be described as a holistic, integrated university-readiness system for students with the determination to succeed and for campuses and teacher education programs committed to promoting student success. AHE is predicated on the proposition that university students who are supported will succeed—if they are challenged and given the academic and psychosocial encouragement needed to meet that challenge (see Hubbard & Ottoson, 1997).

In our project we are using the AVID tertiary system to:

1. provide immediate professional learning for HE teaching staff who have little or no formal teacher training; and
2. to embed explicit, inclusive teaching practices in to large foundation units for commencing students.
The College of Health and Biomedical Science has been aware that significant areas of its first year teaching load has relied on sessional staff with limited teacher training or experience and it is difficult to attract staff to teach first years. Crosling, Heagney and Thomas (2009) devote considerable discussion to the benefits of interactive, student-centred active learning approaches and pedagogies in tertiary teaching to improve student engagement, promote deep learning and improve retention and success. Given that “every 1% drop in attrition would save Australia’s public universities almost one billion dollars, or up to $2.6 million per university” (Adams, Banks, Davis and Dickson, 2010, p.18), it is worth investing in training sessional and academic teaching staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning, particularly those teaching in first year units where attrition rates are the highest.

In a tertiary setting, AVID pedagogies centre on:

1. Using explicit pedagogies in all class settings
2. Cultivating an open development of academic literacies
3. Unambiguously and unequivocally valuing students’ prior knowledge and life experiences
4. Ensuring that discipline discourses are precisely explained and scaffolded
5. Resourcing and supporting teachers of LSES students (see Devlin et al, 2012: 3).

They complement the work of a range of scholars who emphasise not only the need for clarity and scaffolding, but the clear advantages of building collaborative classrooms (see Cuseo et al, 2012; Conley, 2012; Devlin, 2012; Kift et al 2010)

Specifically, HE teachers are taught a range of Socratic methodologies that engage students in dialogue about concepts in ways that promote critical thinking skills and that progressively work towards more abstract levels of thinking. Tutors are trained to make explicit the metacognitive thinking processes for analysing increasingly complex ideas incorporating real world connections as students become more independent learners motivated to take intellectual risks. Tutors are taught how to scaffold tutorials, seminars and laboratory exercises using collaborative learning and small group strategies to provide a more interactive learning experience that engages students in deep learning. Particular emphasis is given to the specific nuances and strategies of reading and writing for purpose, which AVID materials make explicit for each discipline. In addition, tutors are trained to make explicit vital organizational skills necessary for tertiary academic success.

These strategies will be embedded in three first year units from a range of disciplines where tutoring is predominantly undertaken by sessional staff. This multi-disciplinary approach is focused on identifying and improving common areas of learning and teaching that will build a professional learning community among the participating academic and support staff and student cohorts. Customising the AVID pedagogies across the disciplines will provide a common language with which to engage in ongoing professional learning activities aimed at improving the quality of learning and teaching in large, first year units that have traditionally experienced high rates of failure.

This project provides an efficient, practical response providing a ‘toolkit’ of effective teaching strategies that can be used in classes immediately. As part of the medium term solution to raise the teaching quality and commitment of sessional staff, a team teaching
approach between the tutorial/sessional staff and the Student Learning Unit using AVID strategies are embedded in the reconceptualisation of these large first year units.

The major dissemination strategy is to build a trial site of a suite of video examples of effective tertiary teaching strategies exemplifying AVID’s WICOR strategies and Socratic methodologies. The videos will be available on a website as exemplars of effective tertiary teaching that can become a resource for a much wider audience to improve professional learning activities across the sector. A prototype of professional learning workshops for sessional staff using the videos and AVID methodologies will be developed.

**Case Study: Biomedical Sciences**
The Biomedical Sciences cohort at VU largely comprises students with limited educational capital and with one or more of the complex mix of social and cultural disadvantages that exist in many low socioeconomic status (LSES) and immigrant communities (see Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Mendiola, Watt & Huerta, 2010)

To understand the cohort better, a questionnaire was developed to capture information about student experience, transition, engagement and student learning needs. This was presented at the FYHE conference last year. The information yielded confirmed that we are working with: a female dominated cohort (70%), most of which are aged less than 25 (88%), are highly culturally diverse (45% of students were not born in Australia and 19 countries of birth were reported from 34 students; 63% of students indicated they spoke a language other than English at home (LOTE) and about a third are first in their family to attend university. Interestingly, 24% of students had carer responsibilities which limited their study time, 47% of females frequently felt overwhelmed by coursework and 34% of the cohort felt socially isolated; whilst 40% had difficulty in motivating themselves to work and 25% had difficulty in adjusting to the teaching style at university.

Regardless of socioeconomic status or cultural background, students wanted strategies to help them cope overall, and in particular, the workload and greater independence required at university.

To date we have employed a variety of support activities for teaching and learning which have yielded mixed results. The commencing student attrition rate averages 25%. Research highlights the positive role that focussed support can have in student engagement (Ramsay, Jones and Barker, 2007).

In this project, there is a clear focus on equipping a diverse staff team to meet the specific needs our students have in terms of both their academic literacies, and their sense of engagement with the university itself. We understand that our students have relatively high levels of demand on them from both family and employment, and it is incumbent on us to provide them with classroom activities which are time-efficient and very effective. In addition, we aim to provide an educational experience which is engaging and enjoyable. This will be enhanced through strategic community-building and collaborative work amongst the students- both key factors in student success (see Hattie 2009). The anticipation, based on other universities’ experiences (see Swanson et al, 1995; Watt, 2011) is that there will be a marked improvement in engagement, success and, ultimately, retention. For both students and staff.

**Discussion questions**
1. How well is the tertiary sector, generally, equipping its staff to teach?
2. In a context of social inclusion, what kinds of pedagogies best meet the needs of diverse students?
3. Is it possible to better equip students to survive university using explicit pedagogies?

References


