

University of Wollongong Learning and Teaching Fellowship – 2005

Report - Faculty of Arts

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Supporting the Challenges of Higher Education – The First Six Months of the Student Experience

Introduction

Students come to Arts degrees from school or from workplace experience with great enthusiasm, but relatively few critical skills. Students who are used to doing well at school work find the demands of tertiary academic scholarship a shock. This proposal seeks to develop the academic side of a project for the transition from success at school to success at University that also provides a foundation for developing the attributes of a Wollongong Graduate during the first six months of study for a degree.

The Project

The First Six Months project planned to focus on student needs from two directions:

- Introduction of new students to the new demands of university level study in an orientation workshop, and
- Interaction among first year subject co-ordinators to more explicitly introduce the necessary skills in a number of subjects.

The project was organised in three stages: information gathering to understand the needs of new students and current good practice in student orientation; development and delivery of an orientation programme for new students, and development of an ongoing teaching workshop/working group among coordinators of large first year subjects. The first two stages have been completed, but the group of first year coordinators is still a future project, with several coordinators interested. The group could explore ways to develop and deliver small exercises to scaffold the skills needed for successful learning in humanities and social sciences. The exercises would then become a part of the most popular subjects in the different schools so that students would acquire most of the basics across their course of study, rather than a single skill (e.g. library searching) repeatedly.

Stage 1

Collect literature and information about student experience in general and at UOW in particular.

Studies in the first year experience suggest that contemporary first year students are more disconnected from University life and are engaged in relatively high levels of

paid work during the academic year. Further students often are unsure how the subjects that they study relate to what they studied in school or to each other. A greater proportion of all students report that they are in paid work than in the 1990s as well as a greater willingness to miss classes, difficulty in getting motivated to study, a sense of being overwhelmed by demands and a continuing commitment to off-campus social life. The work-study conflict and willingness to miss classes also has a negative impact on student grades (McInnis and Hartley 2002). While there is concern that these changes mean that students are generally dissatisfied with university life, that does not appear to be true, though students do consider deferring their study because they want to change courses, that they fear failing and because university wasn't what they had expected (Krause et al. 2005). Students surveyed in 2004 felt better prepared for what they experienced than students in two previous cohorts surveyed though slightly more than 40% found the standard of work required much higher than they had expected (Krause et al. 2005). In part the reasons for that sense of being unprepared comes from the difference between what is required at school and what is required in the humanities and social sciences where students are no longer being prepared to be thoughtful active citizens, but to be reflective members of a discipline or two (Chanock 2004: 3-6).

Australasian universities have been addressing the needs first year students individually and sharing that information through a number of conferences including the Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education to be held again in July 2006. The website of the First Year in Higher Education is a repository of papers from past conferences < <http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/>>. In September 2005 I attended the Student Experience Conference, Good Practice in Practice at Charles Sturt University Wagga Wagga (Charles Sturt University 2005). Among the many papers and workshops were reports on the Macquarie experience in introducing an academic induction in the context of university wide O-Week activities, an established program of email communication for students making the transition to study in a Law degree at QUT and many informal sharing experiences and small give-aways like maps.

The attempt to investigate the most common enrolment patterns among students in the Faculty to provide a base for the discussion of a pattern of explicit skill teaching stalled for two reasons: difficulty getting the data from the university systems in a usable form and what seemed like relentless reassignments of jobs among general staff in the Faculty of Arts. The latter meant that a part of the job had to be put aside. I intend to address this aspect of the project again in session 2, 2006 when I am not teaching first year. It will form a basis for deciding which subjects in the faculty should be targeted for teaching interventions by the first year teachers group.

Stage 2

The project included an introductory workshop program during Orientation Week that will combine social activity and academic activities to better prepare students for the transition to University level learning. A pilot was developed and evaluated in 2006 via feedback from student leaders and new students. The results of the evaluation were then the basis of a revision of the orientation program for 2007. The revised program will take place on one day instead of across two and be somewhat shorter over all. It will include the elements that both new students and the student leaders

found most useful: a practice tutorial, a visit to the Library and opportunities to explore the campus in the company of others. A formal exploration of the university timetable and the degree structure will be included since students regularly report confusion about both. In addition there will be an end of day function with an opportunity to meet academic staff, particularly those teaching in first year.

This portion of the Treasure Hunt is an example of the materials that were provided at the orientation day.

UOW Treasure Hunt

There may not be a pot of gold around the corner, but there is plenty of other treasure at the University of Wollongong – new friends; answers to questions you didn't know you could ask; new ways to learn; a great Library with helpful librarians; places to eat, sit in the sun, hear a band, and lots more besides. This Treasure Hunt is an opportunity to work out the map to find your treasures during your first year at uni.

For this activity, join together into small groups of 2-4 to complete the tasks below. You may not finish them all this week, but that's not a problem since you will be here for the next few months. Be brave when you make your groups, join some people you don't know from before. There are places to go, things to do and people to meet.

Have fun and begin to learn your way around. Write down questions and bring them back to the group time for a Q & A session. Someone is bound to know at least the beginning of the answer.

Use your University Diary 2006 as a resource and a place to record some information.

- Meet some new people and collect autographs (the handout suggested categories of people)
- Take the Library Tour with your Treasure Hunt group (This was another handout.)
- Find the Arts Enquiry Centre in Building 19 and collect a cover sheet for one of the subjects you will be studying.
- Write out your timetable and locate the classrooms – use the Diary
- How many places can you get a coffee or hot chocolate on campus? List a few here
- Visit a computer lab in Building 17 and click on the First Year Experience link from the UOW Home Page, URL: <http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/fye/> You could do this at home on your own or with a friend as well. Explore the links from that page. Do you have some more questions? Write them here and bring them back to your group.

Stage 3

The on-going aspect of the project will build on the current curriculum review and the work of an earlier ESDF project about the development of tertiary literacies in first year through a whole-of-degree approach. In this way, the student experience of learning in several disciplines will be acknowledged and first year subject coordinators will not feel responsible for integrating the literacy foundations of all attributes into every subject. While first year subjects contribute to students explicitly developing the foundations of Attribute 2: 'Coherent and extensive knowledge in a discipline', subject design may not teach the foundation skills for other skills that are none the less necessary for success in assessment tasks. As it turned out, the most interested first year coordinators were on leave during session 1, 2006, so that work will be delayed until at least session 2, 2006.

As an example of how skills might be integrated I include an assessment task from POL111 Australian Politics. As preparation students undertake a Library visit and exercise and work in poster groups during tutorial time. There is also a short self assessment reflection in the week following the poster presentations. An unexpected outcome was that students continued to sit in their poster groups and those who worked alone because a group member withdrew for the subject reported that it was harder to make friends in the group. The social aspect is important for new students.

1: Group Poster Project

due: In the tutorial during Week 5

weighting:	Poster and presentation (shared mark)	15%
	Documentation (individual mark)	5%
	Total	20%

The poster is the result of individual research and group discussion about one of the main national political institutions in Australia. It should include a short description of the institution, an abstract or two of articles found in the database search, a brief summary of a key book or chapter in a book about the institution and a reference to one or two useful websites. The objective is to give other members of the class a clear understanding of the role of the institution within national government and how power is exercised by and in the institution. Fasten a group bibliography on the back of the poster. One or two pieces of poster board will be large enough. The group will display the poster and have about five minutes to explain the poster to the class. Each member of the group should also hand in their poster documentation to indicate their contribution to the group effort.

Poster topics:

Australian House of Representatives
Australian Senate
Prime Minister and Cabinet
Bureaucracy (mainly Australian Public Service)
High Court
Office of the Governor-General

Skill and knowledge development:

- Have a basic understanding of the main functions performed by the houses of parliament, the cabinet, the public service, the Governor General, the constitution, the federal system, and the High Court;
- Be able to participate in an online learning environment.
- Competence in library research and use of electronic research tools;
- Self-confidence combined with oral and written communication skills of a high level;
- The ability to work collaboratively.

References

Chanock, K. 2004 *Introducing students to the culture of enquiry in an Arts degree*, Milperra, NSW, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), see www.herdsa.org.au

Krause, K., Hartley, R. James, R., McInnis, C. .2005 *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a Decade of Nation Studies*, Canberra, Department of Education, Science and Training, online
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/assuring_quality_in_higher_education/first_year_experience_aust_uni.htm (accessed 12.10.06)

McInnis, C. and Hartley, R. 2002 *Managing Study and Work: The impact of full-time study and paid work on the undergraduate experience in Australian universities*, Canberra, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science & Training, online,
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