

Two heads are better than one: community building in the Foundation Studies program to promote student engagement in learning

Dr. Christopher M. Klinger and Ms Dale Wache

University of South Australia,
Australia

Abstract

A major challenge for enabling/inclusive education is to effectively engage students so as to maximize their prospects for success and subsequent transition to undergraduate degree programs. Generally, in the literature and anecdotally, we see that many academic staff view the widening range of preparedness as a problem - and one which has little to do with teaching practices. Yet there is considerable evidence from literature on learning communities and elsewhere that highlights the importance of acknowledging and responding to affective dimensions of learning while noting that students' persistence and success rates are greater in institutions that promote ways for academic staff to better connect with their students. Here, we present the theoretical background underpinning a teaching and learning project for the University of South Australia's Foundation Studies enabling education program that will implement a strategy of community-building. Further, we describe how the concept of the project was developed both from the context of the literature, where we consider the value and likely impact of the proposed community-of-practice model, and from the standpoint of empirical observations of students' experiences in the program. Finally, the framework of the project itself is outlined and we discuss our expectations of the benefits that will accrue in terms of greater student engagement, improved retention, consequent qualitative and quantitative improvements in student evaluations, and an increase in the number of students who subsequently gain admission to undergraduate programs as a direct consequence of their enabling education experience.

Introduction

Australian higher education institutions have been coming to grips with a diverse student body for the past twenty years. As a result of the 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), Australian universities are facing a

future in which participation will change from the present mass system to a 'universal system' (Trow, 1974) that will reflect community diversity within the higher education student body. Preparatory programs for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and socially and educationally disadvantaged communities, now and in the future, offer an increasingly prominent strategy for alternative access to tertiary education. They also offer participants hope for achievement and success as future undergraduate students. However, a major challenge for such enabling/inclusive education is to effectively engage students so as to maximize their prospects for successful outcomes.

Within the University of South Australia's Foundation Studies enabling education program, we have observed a tendency for participating students to spontaneously form peer networks that provide levels of mutual support, both academically and socially. In this, they are exhibiting several behaviours that appear to be very similar to characteristics found in formally established 'learning communities' (see, for instance, Tinto (1997); Lenning & Ebbers (1999); Smith, (2001); Zhao & Kuh (2004); Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes & Schneider (2008); as well as resources at the Washington Center's National Learning Communities Directory, online at <<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter>>). We have also observed that a number of academic staff who contribute to the program appear to be particularly 'in tune' with their enabling students and the nature and level of their interactions with students often exceeds what might usually be expected (within undergraduate programs, for example). The degree of commitment that they give to the development of under-prepared students, however, is not universal. Even within enabling education teaching and generally, both in the literature and anecdotally, we see that many academic staff view the widening range of preparedness as a problem (McInnes, 2000) – and one which has little to do with teaching practices (Asmar, Brew, McCulloch, Peseta, & Barrie, 2000). Yet there is considerable evidence from the above-cited literature on learning communities and elsewhere that highlights the importance of acknowledging and responding to affective dimensions of learning while noting that students' persistence and success rates are greater in institutions that promote ways for academic staff to better connect with their students.

Here, we report on the development of a teaching and learning project at UniSA, the aim of which is to facilitate, through a focus on academic staff, the development of an overt learning community culture for the Foundation Studies program that will contribute to a more inclusive teaching and learning environment.

Background, theory and literature

The University of South Australia's commitment to equity and diversity is enshrined in the legislation by which the institution was established (University of South Australia Act 1990).

Section 5 of that document specifies the functions of the University, including the provision of 'such education programmes as the University thinks appropriate to meet the needs of the Aboriginal people [and] ... the needs of groups within the community that ... have suffered disadvantages in education; and ... for the benefit of the wider community or ... for the enhancement of the diverse cultural life of the community' (Government of South Australia, 1990, p. 3).

From its inception, UniSA has been acknowledged for its work in student equity and the diversity of its admissions policies and entry pathways (Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner and Barratt, 1996), which includes the delivery of a number of enabling, preparation and bridging programs. Building on this, in 2006 the University of South Australia established the Foundation Studies program, an innovative, alternative, non-traditional pathway into university for applicants who do not meet standard entry criteria. Typically, such applicants are richly diverse in terms of age and social, cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds. They have no previous university experience, most will have left school before completing Year 12, and many will have experienced educational disadvantage. Frequently, they are the first in their family to seek to enter university and often they do so in the face of considerable sociological and socio-economic obstacles.

Table 1, below, shows the proportional rates by which designated equity groups (Indigenous (ATSI), Disability, Isolated, Low socioeconomic status (SES), NESB, and Rural) accessed the Foundation Studies program over the first three years of its operation. These data illustrate something of the diversity of learners within the program. For the majority of these participants, the program provides a 'first-chance' opportunity to access higher education. For other participants, who perhaps have not experienced particular disadvantage but, rather, made life choices other than following a higher education trajectory, the program provides a 'second-chance' opportunity to change their direction in life.

Table 1: Access rates by equity group, 2006-2008

Equity Group	2006	2007	2008
Low SES	39.7%	43.2%	39.2%
Rural	17.2%	23.1%	28.6%
Disability	9.7%	11.6%	10.1%
NESB	7.6%	8.5%	5.0%
ATSI	7.9%	1.0%	1.5%
Isolated	1.4%	0.0%	0.5%

While success (in terms of average GPA and retention rates) for Foundation Studies students who complete the program and transition to undergraduate study are at least as

good as those who enter university by any other means and considerably better than those who enter via the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) (Klinger & Tranter, 2009), an ongoing challenge shared with institutions offering enabling programs across Australia (and elsewhere) is that *within* those programs students' success, retention and completion rates have always been well below the sector averages (DETYA, 2001; Ramsay, 2004) and there is a substantial proportion of students who disengage, for all sorts of reasons. Only a minority do so having made an informed decision; most withdraw due to external, non-academic issues (Ramsay, 2004) that might have been overcome had the students been sufficiently engaged to develop effective survival strategies and supports.

Levitz and Hovland (1998) have identified five domains that ultimately influence students' decisions to 'drop out':

<i>Personal</i>	<i>Lost, stressed, closed to new ideas and experiences, undisciplined, unmotivated, insecure, uninformed, unrealistic expectations, student/institution mismatch</i>
<i>Social</i>	<i>Alienation and social isolation, subject to negative peer pressure, uninvolved in college activities, little involvement with faculty members or advisers</i>
<i>Academic</i>	<i>Underprepared, under-challenged, poor study habits, does not see value in assignments and courses, low academic performance, part-time course load, lack of educational and career goals, feedback that is too little too late</i>
<i>Life issues</i>	<i>Insecurity about financial circumstances, job and school time conflicts, home and family difficulties, personal problems, health problems, college not necessary to meet career goals</i>
<i>Institutional issues</i>	<i>Experience the run-around; experience operational problems (for example, in billing and scheduling); experience negative attitudes in classrooms, advising centers [sic], administrative offices; experience poor or indifferent teaching; encounter instructional equipment or technology that is out of date; academic program not available</i>

While Levitz and Hovland were referring more generally to 'mainstream' students ten or so years ago, it is almost self-evident that the domains and most of their descriptors are largely applicable to enabling students today. On this assumption (and in the absence of other factors), the lower success, retention and completion rates for enabling students suggest either that they are less resilient than mainstream students (which seems unlikely) or that

their negative experiences occur with greater magnitude or frequency. Perhaps they are even more lacking in 'independence, skill, and savvy' than the mainstream students to whom Levitz, Noel and Richter (1999) referred when they used the term in association with the above list of 'drop-out' attributes. Yet the students who complete their enabling education and transition to undergraduate-level studies, often against considerable odds, are manifestly resilient and typically display considerable independence, skill, and savvy in their determination to succeed.

This begs questions of what makes the difference between those who persevere and those who do not and how to reach the latter more effectively so that they might be better guided and encouraged to develop the sorts of attributes displayed by the former. Anecdotal evidence and observations of student behaviour in Foundation Studies indicates that the students who are most likely to persist in their efforts tend to interact readily, spontaneously forming networks with their peers and engaging more openly with their lecturers and tutors. A major consequence of these exchanges appears to be that they tend to develop more strategies to cope with the pressures and problems they encounter and thus are more likely to complete the program. Literature on 'learning communities' suggests reasons why such networking in the presence of shared objectives can be effective, even if it occurs informally – typically, learning communities focus on learning activities that have collaborative elements coupled with opportunities for academic and social involvement that are not confined to curricular settings, so that:

...students become members of a community focused on academic content, which allows them to further develop their identity and discover their voice as well as to integrate what they are learning into their worldview and other academic and social experiences (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 117).

Through the mediating effects of peer group interactions, students' academic and 'educationally purposeful' involvement is greater and they assume greater responsibility for their learning outcomes (Tinto & Russo, 1994), with learning communities providing a 'fertile environment for student growth' (Pike, 2000).

In devising the project that is the subject of this paper, we were guided by two principal observations. Firstly, that while formally established learning communities involve not only students but also teaching staff, the sort of collaborative and supportive networks that arise informally nonetheless share numerous common elements with formally established learning communities. Many of these elements revolve around affective dimensions of learning – and, importantly, affective dimensions of the *obstacles* that so impact upon non-traditional students – which serve to leverage engagement. We have observed that students who

network with their peers tend to be those students who ultimately succeed and they tend to fall into one of two camps. In the first, we find students who are capable and resilient in their life skills and the networking seems to occur largely as a consequence of inherent characteristics that drive them to discover strategies that will facilitate success, including the value of peer interactions. In the second camp, we find uncertain, prospectively less resilient students or those with particularly challenging circumstances, who are sufficiently open to others to gravitate towards their seemingly more capable colleagues where the ensuing peer interaction serves as a safety net that keeps them engaged.

Our second significant observation is that staff who are empathetic towards non-traditional cohorts and supportive of the equity objectives of enabling education demonstrably recognize that their enabling students are not prepared for university, nor are they capable (initially) of being independent learners – at least, not in the traditional sense used in the context of undergraduate students. These staff display a high level of understanding: they are patient with their students' academic naiveté; they are supportive and encouraging, often going beyond their formal remit in their efforts to maintain their students' engagement; and they appear to invest heavily in their students' successes – that is, they appear to acknowledge and value the affective domain and this manifests as a driver in their interactions with students.

A university consists of diverse parts, which include academics who teach and undertake research; academics in turn favour students who 'can engage with the conceptual demands of university study' (Brett, 2009, p. 75). Staff who are open and in tune with enabling education will likely embrace the opportunities afforded by such situations whereas those who lack this understanding may feel threatened and react negatively, with adverse effects for themselves and their students. While it is easy to focus on students who are most likely to succeed, it is considerably harder to do so for those who are at risk of disengaging, yet this is what must be done systemically. As the student profile broadens to reflect the diversity of the larger community and the likelihood increases that 'many more students who have not been optimally prepared will engage with the sector' (*ibid.*), there is a need for academics to reflect upon and redevelop both the curriculum and the level at which it is delivered so as to meet effectively the different learning needs of a diverse student body. Arguably, this is never more true than when the 'diverse student body' is a cohort of non-traditional students in an enabling education program such as ours.

Diversity at the level we have described raises the issue of the quite different learning needs that co-exist within a cohort of dissimilar (even disparate) students, who, although they may

enter university with similar aspirations and hopes, may have had very different learning (and life) experiences. Empirically, these non-traditional students tend to have teaching and learning characteristics that are manifestly different from those of traditional 'main stream' undergraduate students, commonly presenting academic staff with teaching situations that are both distinctively challenging and rewarding. While every student entering university does so with a unique set of prior experiences (of learning and of life), 'transition [to university] is more difficult for those students whose capital may not be in tune with mainstream university discourses' (Lawrence, 2005, p. 248). There are numerous discourses at work: those of the students, perhaps reflecting rich life experience but academically inexperienced and naive, and those of academic staff, each with their own disciplinary flavour and expectations. Often, connections are not made between these multiple discourses and the resulting mismatch undermines otherwise common objectives. To us, it seems self-evident that educators need to be aware of the role of multiple discourses in modern learning environments and that they need to address the diversity of students' socio-cultural experiences and implement appropriate teaching practices to facilitate engagement and inclusion of all students (New London Group, 1996). However, we accept that this view does not generally permeate the institutional teaching and learning culture.

Students at university level are expected to engage with a vast body of knowledge, analyse, synthesise and evaluate arguments and engage in the discourse of their discipline by constructing their own wide-ranging, enquiry-based, integrated argument. As Laurillard (1993, p. 30) observed,

...we expect them ... to exhibit some point of contact with the consensus view of a subject: if they cannot agree on the substantive content, then they must be able to provide an acceptable argument for the opposing point of view.

This is a formidable expectation for any first year student, let alone for those students drawn from diverse educational, social, cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds who are participating in a pre-undergraduate preparatory program, yet this intellectual element is but one of many factors to be found among the five domains of risk identified by Levitz and Hovland (1998). It is a major challenge to help our students to traverse the great divide between where they start and where they need to arrive, just to *begin* their undergraduate careers. While the UniSA Foundation Studies program already meets that challenge through successful outcomes for a great many of its participants, an even greater challenge is to counter the attrition that denies such achievement to those otherwise potentially capable students for whom the struggle proves too great. We need to find new ways to engage more students more effectively, and to keep them engaged.

A natural focus for our teaching and learning project, then, was to seek to draw together the foregoing aspects of community and empathy via a structured approach intended to build a program-wide academic community of practice with a strong ethos of inclusivity that finds ways to enable greater success for all participants. It is intended that this will serve as a platform to extend the students' spontaneous and informal learning community behaviours so as to encompass and actively involve staff.

The 'Two Heads are Better than One' project

While much of the discourse on equity is focused on access and entry, our considered opinion, informed by our decades of collective experience, is that rather less attention (beyond broad institutional expectations that this will occur) is paid to the curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment tasks that need to underpin the learning of diverse equity cohorts. At the inaugural forum of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), participants posed a series of research questions in relation to 'Challenging Higher Education and disability'. One of these was: how do universities prepare academics 'to teach and be more responsible, and inclusive of the student body?' (NCSEHE, 2009, p. 63). This question is equally valid when applied to enabling education and it is one that our 'Two Heads are Better than One' project seeks to address directly by establishing a 'teaching commons' (Huber & Hutchings, 2006) – a conceptual space for the community of educators involved in the delivery of the Foundation Studies program to come together to exchange beliefs and ideas, and to share teaching and learning strategies and practices to meet the challenges of preparing the program's non-traditional students for undergraduate learning. The pedagogical focus of this undertaking may be regarded as a practical application of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The project is a collaborative undertaking between the director of UniSA's Foundation Studies program and an academic developer from the University's Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) under funding from a competitive internal teaching and learning grant. This is an innovative approach which acknowledges that 'teaching and learning are highly dependent on contextual factors' (*ibid.* p. 28) and that for enabling education the contexts differ, often dramatically, from those of mainstream undergraduate education.

A principal reason for introducing a 'teaching commons' model is to open dialogue with, and between, academics who contribute to the program – firstly, to counter views that 'diversity equals dumber'; and secondly, as a means of identifying strategies that will better engage academics with concepts of equity in teaching and learning (Brett, 2009, p. 75). To implement this, we will conduct a number of intense interactive sessions periodically throughout the teaching year. In these, through practice-based explorations of what participants do, how they could do things differently, and the contextual and situational

factors that influence their practice, our approach will seek to make explicit the knowledge that practitioners have not previously articulated. Through reflective dialogue and collaboration, by promoting professional conversations and fostering a strong sense of community, the aim is that staff will themselves determine a clear program ethos centred around shared values of inclusivity and so construct a common understanding of, and appreciation for, the identity, purpose, value, and objectives of the Foundation Studies program that will become self-sustaining. Moreover, as a result of their own community-building practice, it is intended that they will 'discover' that the program's identity is recognizable as a 'learning community' of which they are an integral part and through this awareness begin to adopt behaviours that reinforce and promote the creation of a program culture in which staff and students interact with greater collegiality stemming from a sense of common purpose.

To evaluate the project and its outcomes, two methodologies will be adopted. The primary methodology will be the standard process of pre/post on-line surveys to identify any significant changes in:

- participants' appreciation for, and understanding of, diversity and principles of inclusivity;
- participants' perceptions of the program and of their roles;
- behaviours that exhibit characteristics found in learning communities; and
- the sharing or development of effective teaching and learning strategies.

The secondary methodology will focus on key performance indicators (KPIs) via:

- ongoing monitoring of student participation via attendance reports and assignment submission rates (the provision of such data being a standard program reporting procedure); and
- analysis of the University's student information system data on retention and success rates for the Foundation Studies program to detect statistically significant pre/post and longitudinal differences.

It is a reasonable hypothesis, supported by the literature on student engagement, to predict that positive correlations will be identifiable between the results of these two distinct evaluation methodologies.

Conclusion

In the context of equity groups, Comber (2009) emphasized that there is 'a tendency toward constructing certain student groups as problematic that is, as the problem of other sectors or agencies' (p. 107), drawing attention to the 'challenge of unsettling deficit thinking about educationally disadvantaged groups' (*ibid.*). The University of South Australia is a strong and

effective advocate to counter such views and the enabling education mission of its Foundation Studies program is proof of the University's commitment and its preparatory focus explicitly goes well beyond mere considerations of access and entry. Nonetheless, the challenge remains of mitigating student disengagement and raising success, retention and completion rates – ideally to levels that are at least comparable to sector averages.

Here, we have presented the background, theory and literature relevant to the development of what we hope will prove to be a significant teaching and learning initiative: the 'Two Heads are Better than One' project. We have also sketched the framework of the project, which aims to improve the engagement of our Foundation Studies students and promote their prospects of success by working intensely with academic staff involved in the delivery of the program. Our explicit or overt focus in this will be on building a self-sustaining community of practice via a teaching commons that will set aside any residual 'deficit thinking' and allow the evolution of a clear program ethos based on principles of inclusivity and the celebration of diversity. Less directly, it is intended that this will naturally progress so as to dovetail with the informal peer networks that students already form spontaneously so that, over time, students and lecturers will increasingly come together as scholars and colleagues within an emergent learning community.

We envisage that by promoting a more open, egalitarian teaching and learning environment, more students will engage more fully, fewer students will yield to inclinations to disengage, and those who are at risk of disengaging will be more readily accessible to effective interventions. These are ambitious aims, to be sure, but they reflect a resolve to heed Tinto's (2008, pp. 9,10) admonitions:

To be serious about student success, institutions would recognize that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings... It is simply not enough to provide ... access to our universities and claim that we are providing opportunity if we do not construct environments that support their efforts to learn and succeed beyond access. Simply put access without support is not opportunity.

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