How Can a “Teaching & Research” Academic Scientist Survive in the Current Economic Climate

By Ian H Frazer

A keynote address at the HERDSA Conference 2006

I was asked to make this a provocative talk, and scientists by their nature are conservative. However, I’ve nothing to lose, so I’ll tell it like I feel it. Self-evidently these comments are my own and do not represent the views of my centre or University.

Academics Should Be Setting Their Own Agenda

It is of course dangerous to ask any academic to comment on how universities should work, and particularly on what their own job should look like—“Inmates running the jail” is the expression that comes to mind. However, someone has to propose what we are, as academics with a focus on biomedical research at Australian universities, trying to achieve in the 21st century. I believe the relevant academic staff should do the proposing. To some extent, of course, the golden rule applies: the government, who has the gold, makes the rules. However, the gold they have is our gold, and there is an increasing tendency these days to devolve responsibility for professional and academic matters from the experts to the bureaucrats. This is as true in the medical profession, where I’ve watched the consequences over my career with some despondency, as in education, where we’re observing the effects of extensive social manipulation of university structure and purpose in the 1980s and 1990s, with some good outcomes and some less good. Of course, external intervention in University affairs does give us an excuse, when we don’t like what’s going on, as we can always blame “them”. However, to do this would simply be a further example of the externalisation of blame that seems to dominate society these days— if I dive off a beach and break my neck, then that must be someone’s fault—never mine. So let’s accept that we should continue to take, as academics, a large part of the responsibility for the future of our universities and of their academic activities.

What Should We Be Doing as Academic Staff with a Focus on Biomedical Research?

If we wish to take control of the nature of our jobs, we need to consider what we’re trying to achieve, and whether there’s currently a problem with achieving it. If there is a problem, we should define the problem, the threats, and the opportunities that we have to face. For the purposes of this discussion, I assert that academics [and here I draw no distinction as to seniority, or as to discipline, or even as to the basis of their funding] have four components to their job:
From the Editor

The September issue of HERDSA News has become focussed mainly on the annual conference which this year was held in Perth. The conference is the highlight of the Society’s year providing not only opportunities for sharing research and development but also for members to meet and share experiences and establish useful co-operative work. The Executive meets to discuss projects and plans for the coming year and becomes very visible to members at the AGM.

For the second year the Institute of Learning and Teaching at Sydney University sponsored a prize for the most creative presentation at the conference which was won by Shelley Yeo from Curtin University. Shelley has written an article about her presentation in this issue and I suggest it should be included in every delegate’s satchel at next year’s conference.

This year there were some distinguished keynote speakers, who included Professor Ian Frazer, the current Australian of the Year. Professor Frazer kindly agreed to his address being reprinted in HERDSA News thus enabling all HERDSA members to learn what he had to say. Professor Frazer’s proposals for new academic’s to have minimal teaching responsibilities in the first five year’s of their appointment are controversial as was his support for posts that are mainly teaching. Although I suspect that such proposals would largely be rejected by HERDSA members it is useful to consider them before the Federal Government makes any move in these directions. The resources for research in universities will surely not stretch much further to enable all staff to be engaged in meaningful research and yet the concept of a “teaching only” academic seems very bleak. We need to continue to look for ways of to maintain teaching informed by research. Hence the value of hearing views from Professor Frazer.

I welcome Peter Kandlbinder’s new column Higher Education in the Headlines. Peter has been trawling the press in Australia, the UK and the States to see the latest issues in higher education in the three countries. The column will become a regular feature in the News.

There are also two reports of research projects that have been recently completed, one of particular interest to examiners of PhD theses and I have been promised several more reports for the December issue so we look forward to that.

There is an international flavour to the issue with the report on the ICED conference in Sheffield, UK by Barbara Grant and a cast of thousands and the third article in the International Column Exchange series to which we welcome the article by Videen Carlson, the Immediate Past President of the Professional and Organisational Development in Higher Education Society (POD) in the USA.

Roger Landbeck

HERDSA Budget 2006–7

The budget for 2006–7 is now available in the Members section of the web site.

To login enter your last name as the user name and your membership number as password.

Your membership number can be found on the mailing wrapper that came with the News.
How Can a “Teaching & Research” Academic Scientist Survive in the Current Economic Climate

AIM 1: creation of new knowledge, i.e. research
AIM 2: its use for the good of humankind, i.e. application
AIM 3: fostering the next generation of critical thinkers, i.e. mentoring
AIM 4: imparting knowledge as part of a general tertiary education, i.e. training

For the purpose of this discussion, I assume that academics wish to end up with jobs achieving some or all of these aims and that are satisfying, feasible, and appropriately rewarded. I also assume that the university collectively wishes to see the totality of these aims professionally achieved.

As an aside to the definition, I note that while university training has become rather focussed on providing professional career orientated knowledge and training, I don’t subscribe to the belief that an academic education should have a sole purpose in fitting someone for a specific career; rather the university’s responsibility should be to impart the critical thinking skills as well as core knowledge. In doing so they train the student to gather and interpret further core knowledge as it becomes available. Only this mix of training will enable the person so trained to enter continuing professional education well equipped. So I see aim 3 and 4 as rather distinct, and am increasingly concerned that the academic workload associated with aim 4 has become so considerable in most disciplines that the mentoring (and indeed the practical training) has almost vanished.

Why is the Government Setting the Agenda for Universities?

In Australia, government provides the majority of funds that enable universities to function, although nowadays only half of university funding comes from government directly, largely to fulfill the training aim, and much of the funding for research and mentoring is distributed competitively. This contrasts us with universities in some countries, though it’s hard to conclude from university performance that any one method of university funding is more effective for achievement of university goals than any other. For most academics, the major attraction of a university job is the opportunity to pursue research and student mentoring. However, in a business model driven society, whether capitalist or socialist, the community by and large expects that knowledge to be translated into policy or products. So there is a disconnect between the training being paid for by government, the translational research perceived as needed by society, and the research and mentoring that the service providers want to provide. There are recognised general solutions to the problem of staff and paymasters who expect different things of a job. However, given that quality academic staff are a rare and dying breed anyway, the most likely successful strategy is bribery – significant financial or other incentive to undertake the training and translational components of the job! This not ideal and a more appropriate approach would be to find a mechanism to enable all parties needs to be met by redesigning individual job descriptions to meet individual needs and expectations, of which more later.

What then are the challenges, set by government policy, that constrain the nature of an academic job focussed on biomedical research? Clearly, there are plenty.

• If 50% of youth is to be offered a tertiary education, which seems increasingly to be the case, a monotheistic tertiary education institution model with broad entry criteria – tertiary education for plumbers and theologians alike – is inconsistent with stretching the minds of the most able to the fullest.

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• Imparting of knowledge to large numbers diverts academics from competitive research, as there are insufficient resources to properly staff “tertiary education for all” with academics with time to pursue research, if direct payment for education is deferred through the tax system.

• Control of opportunities for post tertiary mentoring by quota allocations of PhD student scholarships restricts opportunity for institutions to fund academics to provide mentoring, an integral part of research.

• If research is seen primarily as a mechanism for generating intellectual property for commercialisation and sale, as seems increasingly to be the case, then decisions about research priorities, and eventually about the worth of particular areas of human intellectual endeavour, will be coloured by the saleability of the product rather than by a serious desire to understand the physical world we inhabit and the intellectual world that we have created for ourselves, or to solve the social inequalities of the society we live in. Following this argument to a logical conclusion, generation of basic knowledge would go by the board, and with it, the opportunity for academics to pursue this aspect of their profession.

• If, in the global village, education is seen as a commodity to be sold to those that can pay, rather than a means to help solve the significant social injustices that follow from a significant maldistribution of wealth across the planet, then educational institutions will be marketed as a commodity, and compete for market space rather than striving for excellence. Academic effort will be directed to what will sell – professional courses in law, rather than discourse on how to solve the problems that beset us.

• If universities are to be run and judged as businesses, and academics are to be passed over as decision makers in favour of those with business acumen, then collaborative and democratic management of university life will be replaced by benevolent (or not so benevolent) dictatorships. There will be in consequence little regard paid to the concept of academic freedom of opinion, which allows intellectual honesty and moves research forward through debate and dissent.

These are of course just a few of the external constraints that have the potential to send academic jobs of the future down
rather soulless tracks. Students will sue for lack of quality service, and research objectives will be set by consumer need for more appealing toothpaste, rather than by strategies to avoid tooth decay (or maybe they’re the same thing ...!) Clearly, I’ve painted a black and white picture, where we are really looking at shades of grey, but it does no harm to learn from worst case scenarios, and plan accordingly.

What Opportunities Does Government Provide?

If these are the challenges, what are the opportunities provided by government policy? They too are many.

• Successive governments have, to date, affirmed that the academic research community is a better judge than government of the research that should be pursued in Australia, and have not made any serious effort to set a national research agenda beyond the definition of “broad principles” priority areas which are little used to determine research funding priorities. Thus, academics still have the opportunity to determine a responsible and appropriate approach to the choice of research activity we pursue.

• Universities are permitted and even encouraged to appoint research only staff who are relatively free to choose their own level of involvement in teaching and administration. Such freedom has its price, and the price in this case is high: a total lack of security of employment!

• The academic community is rightly seen as a “good performer” producing more than 3% of global research output, from 0.5% of the global population. We have not, however, been so good at reaping the commercial benefits of such research, for a number of reasons that need correcting.

• Academic advisors, when providing independent expert advice, are listened to. There has only been minimal attempt to censor expert opinion voiced by government funded researchers. We can speak to the people and their elected representatives as we feel inclined, to promote a cause, and without penalty.

• A level of research funding not too far from the OECD average is provided, at least in biomedical research, and we have just won significant promise of increased funding over the next few years. I note that the same cannot be said for government funded research in other areas of endeavour.

Is There Really a Problem, and if so What’s the Solution?

Given the opportunities mentioned above to set the research agenda, to contribute to policymaking, and to fund our research, what then are we missing, that hinders us in our work, if we are to provide academics with satisfying jobs, the community with their needs and the government with their expectations? I believe that in a word the answer is “flexibility” – specifically flexibility of career structure.

Why Don’t we have Flexibility at Present?

The current education system virtually mandates separation of the four roles of the academic described above.

If academics raise money to pay their salary to do research, they are judged, for practical purposes, only on research performance, and will therefore need to spend most time doing research, writing about research, writing for funding for research, and judging other people’s research, to remain competitive for funding. In consequence, however much the research only academic might wish to take part in teaching or in assisting in applying the products of research, they’re aware that time spent away from research diminishes their competitiveness in a very competitive world.

If conversely an academic accept the “king’s shilling” and take a teaching and research job, they will be busy servicing a substantial teaching load, examining, and administering courses, and will rarely get near the lab. In due course, they are likely to become burnt out and uninspiring teachers.

Academics that choose the route of applied research, be it consulting or commercialisation, are cut off from the other two groups because they likely won’t be in a university.

These are worst case generalisations but they seem to be truer than once they were, and not to be too far from the actuality of academic life, at least in the universities that I have experience of.

The Australian government dictates the size of the pot for the teaching, mentoring and research (a little overseas funding excepted), and makes the latter two funding sources competitive within and outwith universities. The size of any further pot for translation of knowledge to practice is partly government determined (clinical service, consulting) and partly determined by industry, and is almost a zero sum in Australia.

How can we Engineer Flexibility into the System?

We should be aiming for as a solution to the problem, in my opinion, using a “dial-a-pizza” approach, in which we let the individual academic choose the mix of their career, from the repertoire of research, consulting, mentoring and teaching. Its one I’ve adopted, and that I’ve encouraged within my own centre. Unfortunately, in Australia you are generally granted the option to follow this path only if you’ve been successful in research and are approaching the end of your career, or of course if you’ve actually retired and are not being paid any more! However it needn’t be that way; mix and match can be provided universally, so long as certain basic criteria are met, and everyone knows the rules, and should at some level be facilitated by AWAs.

We need to ensure that there is a mechanism that caters for the needs and expectations of both the academic and the community.

The first requirement, to achieve this, is that those providing funding and those judging individual and university performance need to accept that a flexible approach to developing academic job descriptions on a person by person basis is an approach which better serves the need of the community. They then should support the flexible approach when evaluating all aspects of academic performance.

The second requirement is that it is critical that academics that are largely recruited to teach are nevertheless given the opportunity to participate in research and mentoring, at least intellectually, through discussion with research focussed academics. This should, within the biomedical sciences, be easier than it once was, as research has largely become a team effort, and there are many potential roles for academics within a team: Program leaders, initiators of new projects, mentors for students, cool face experimenters, writers of grants and of
papers, providers of service (peer review etc), and assists with research translation and commercialisation. Traditionally all of these have been expected of one person, and indeed performance was judged on the ability to keep all the balls in the air at once! Perhaps its time to change this paradigm and accept that while not all academic staff will initiate and steer research effort they all have something to contribute - of course teaching focussed academic staff" themselves have to recognise that according to ability, chance, and stage of career their contribution to the research effort (while expected in at least one dimension to enable them to retain currency of knowledge for teaching) may not be constant.

To ensure that the aspirations of newly appointed academics can be tested for appropriateness, the opportunity for investigator discovery research should be provided to all "new" academics to whom a first university funded position is offered. This can be achieved through fixed term start up salary and infrastructure funding for up to 5 years. Of course, many will have pursued a career in research prior to this time outside a university environment, and may have already made decisions about the nature of their contribution to teaching, and to one or other aspect of a research program. However, for those who are truly "new" to university research, teaching responsibilities for the first 5 years should be minimal to enable maximal research opportunity, though not zero, as each new academic should develop teaching skills, and evaluate their interest in this aspect of an academic career. Thereafter, the mix between teaching and research related activity will be a matter for negotiation based on ability and personal desire. By and large, each new academic's research activity would be integrated within a program. Appointments would be made to research programs rather than to teaching disciplines:

1. past the first 5 years, the value of the research contribution would be judged by the program and the component of academic salary related to research would be determined accordingly.

2. The opportunity to assist with applying and/or commercialising discovery research, either through contract work or through secondment to industry, should be open to the academic to pursue as a means of testing this area of academic activity and also of supplementing income. Such opportunities usually emerge as a result of experience, and should be competitively awarded. They offer relatively higher financial rewards with less stability of employment.

3. Mentoring of research trainees should be encouraged and can be rewarded according to the number of students under supervision; a substantial component of the research formula allocation or of the student fees should be credited directly to the account of the academic to offset salary. Fees should be set so that the net available funds from an optimal maximum student load (say 6 students) provide a reasonable wage for a junior academic.

4. The teaching component of any position would be purchased from the research program by the university, as discussed further below.

At a university level, implementation of a flexible job description for academic staff requires organisation of the university round stable research programs rather than teaching disciplines - by and large the performance appraisal of the individual staff member will be within the context of the research program. Research programs will be larger and stronger and new programs will be initiated rarely, though the directions of a research program may shift with time. Each research program will offer teaching, and a program's teaching contribution to the university will likely be to multiple areas. The university may not be able to offer teaching in all the traditional disciplines - but is that necessarily bad: logically, the teaching offering will be determined by what's needed for generation of new knowledge, and will likely be of high quality. The university will buy teaching from the programs, and this purchase may comprise a core minimum in return for access to infrastructure plus extra according to teaching delivered above the minimum expectation. An averaging process, as is commonly used for distribution of university funding would be needed to ensure some stability for both parties.

Please note that I have made no intellectual evaluation of how or whether this might work in any discipline other than the biosciences - the argument is constructed round the natural need in biosciences research for multidisciplinary teams with a focus on international competitiveness and cutting edge technology.

If this flexible program for defining academic job descriptions sounds familiar, with the major novel component being the shift of focus from departments and schools to research programs, it's meant to! The benefits of the change are:

- each member of the academic staff can determine what they're good at and do it, and their focus can more easily shift over time
- the university can offers teaching programs reflecting current expertise.
- there is a greater focus on the international competitiveness of a research program rather than a research individual, and there is a clear place in the system for those who wish to contribute research as part of a team but are not the one who will be the program leader.

Of course there are downsides to all of this, not least that if an academic is not able or willing to be productive across any of the teaching or research domains of this academic "brave new world" they will need to find alternate employment. In effect this is currently the situation anyway, and this new approach would allow, I believe, broader opportunities for success not only for the academic but also for the collective effort of the university.

Conclusion

My thesis is that we can, by and large, appoint academic staff in the biosciences to jobs that fit their preferred mix of work, and provide them with ongoing flexibility of job mix, provided that:

(a) staff accept that performance appraisal in each area of their job will determine their ongoing ability to access that component of their salary and that their research effort cannot always be as team leader.

(b) Universities accept that their strength and responsibility is primarily in generation of new knowledge, and that their activities should therefore be focussed round research programs rather than conventional teaching disciplines. Teaching will in consequence be more about quality than about breadth of coverage.

This approach is consistent with the goals of the current Research Quality Exercise. As far as university activity is concerned, its "back to the future" of a pre-Dawkins era with research intensive educational institutes distinct from those that are training focussed.

Ian Fraser is Director of the Centre for Immunology and Cancer Research, The University of Queensland. He is currently Australian of the Year in recognition of his work to develop a vaccine against cervical cancer.

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Prizes and Awards @ HERDSA Conference 2006
Eight More HERDSA Fellowships Awarded

At a cocktail party to mark the end of the first day of the conference eight HERDSA Fellowships were awarded. Each new Fellow was introduced with a brief description of the work they had done to achieve their award.

All HERDSA Fellows displayed a high degree of reflective practice and presented evidence for the application of a scholarly approach to their educational practice.

Beena Giridharan
Deputy Director - English, Commerce & Media Units, School of Pre-University Studies, Curtin University of Technology, Sarawak, Malaysia

Beena has built strong commuity and professional networks that are used to enrich the students' experience of their discipline. She uses a constructivist approach to learning and the development of critical thinking skills with students. Her assessment practices involve students in real-world, relevant tasks that are engaging.

Samantha Hardy
Faculty of Law, University of Tasmania

Samantha has developed programs that enhance the writing skills of law students, and has made significant contributions to the areas of online delivery, effective practices for large group lectures as well as small group seminars and tutorials, and the use of videoconferencing. Samantha has used reflective practice effectively to enhance student learning.

Alison Kirkness
Centre for Educational and Professional Development, Auckland University of Technology

Alison uses the premise that teachers are also learners and that students have a teaching role, making learning and teaching a two-way process. She has undertaken significant work in supporting staff in the multicultural classroom and with issues of intercultural communication in tertiary education.

Catherine Layton
Charles Sturt University

Catherine shows deep concern for the individual learner. She has used student feedback in a reflective manner to enhance her educational practice. Catherine has displayed leadership in the development of innovative curricula.

Rob Philips
Teaching and Learning Centre, Murdoch University

Rob supports academics in enhancing student learning, particularly through the use of educational technology. Rob plays a significant role as an educational designer of technology-supported learning environments and has written widely on the scholarship of learning and teaching.

Margaret Potter
Smartmoves Consultancy

Margaret has created opportunities for her students to build their professional knowledge in physiotherapy through authentic learning pedagogies that engage students in real-life and problem based learning experiences, such as case studies and practicals that are relevant to their future careers. This approach engages students and promotes analysis, interpretation and application of knowledge which facilitates deep rather than superficial learning.

Damian Ruth
College of Business, Massey University

Damian has created a community of practice within his discipline area that enhances learning and teaching. He has strong evidence for the engagement of
students with the learning process; he presented his research story which painted a strong philosophical view about the role of tertiary education and the context of his educational practice.

Janet Taylor
Coordinator of Academic Learning Support, University of Southern Queensland

Janet has developed online tools and strategies which create an inclusive learning environment that supports first year students. She makes effective use of group-problem based workshops and off-campus online discussion groups to motivate students.

Prizes

The following prizes were also awarded at the conference:

The Edith Cowan Prize for the Best Paper in Authentic Learning was awarded to Richard Ladyshewsky from the Curtin University of Technology for his paper:

Extending the boundaries of learning in management education: An integrative approach for promoting transfer of training into the practice environment.

Abstract

The business environment has been critical of academic business schools for not preparing its graduates adequately for the world of practice. Business schools have responded by sharpening their focus on the achievement of professional skills in their graduates through outcomes based initiatives. Development of these skills, however, fare better when tested in their graduates through outcomes for eight weeks following the academic year students. She makes effective use of group-problem based workshops and off-campus online discussion groups to motivate students.

Giving a "most creative presentation" or just good teaching practice?

By Shelley Yeo

As an academic staff developer I cannot bring myself to give a "talk" to academics explaining why a transmission mode of teaching to passive students is largely ineffective and that other methods are much better at promoting learning. It is the ultimate irony—"do as I say, not as I do". To me, delivering a conference presentation as a "talk" is akin to lecturing and can reinforce the same passive, received knowledge view of learning. The alternative, however, demands some creativity.

From a constructivist perspective, new knowledge is constructed through perception and action and is determined by pre-existing knowledge (Hendry, 1996). Each person in the audience, therefore, must be actively engaged. However, while what we say or do must connect in some way with each person, at the same time we cannot expect everyone to learn the same thing. This will be largely determined by what they already know, and thus it is pointless trying to explain everything we know in fine detail to a diverse audience. Something that is always in the back of my mind in preparing a seminar or presentation is the off-quoted: It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does. (Shuell, 1986, p. 429). I treat a conference presentation in the same way—but with the added complication of a strict time limitation.

So, given a short presentation time what can one do to engage the audience immediately and then continue that engagement? To start with, few of us can do this by talking alone, unless the topic is inherently interesting. Other ways are to pose a question, put forward a contentious proposition or use a controversial image. Ask for a question from the audience in the middle of the presentation. Challenge peoples' beliefs, but be prepared for the consequences—people will defend strongly-held beliefs because they are often supported by a whole belief system. Create cognitive dissonance, whereby a person finds himself/herself promoting mutually exclusive arguments. Start a dispute or debate. Use your voice creatively and use pauses for effect.

For a 10-minute presentation, I try to adhere to the following (I don't remember where or when I learned these but they work):

- Relax and get the attention of your audience (joke, image, something creative).
- Make 2-4 points only. Don't even try for more—talking faster does not cause more rapid understanding or learning!
- Limit the number of slides or transparencies to 5 ± 2.
- Eye-contact is important: talk to the audience, not the slides.
- Present data or tables in abbreviated form (don't use tables from the paper).
- Keep PowerPoint slides simple but attractive (bells and whistles are distracting).
- Above all, get the timing right so that you are able to finish as you want to finish.

A common error of judgement is taking too long to get into the presentation (i.e. setting the scene) and then exceeding the time allocated. Steadily ignoring the chairperson's "time's up" signal does not endear you to either the audience or the next presenter.

In short, I hope that any conference presentation I give, no matter how short, will spark interest, promote learning and leave the audience with a desire to know
Reflections on the HERDSA 2006 Conference

**Editor’s Note.** Each year I invite two or three HERDSA conference delegates to write short personal reflections about the conference. Usually one of those invited is a first time attendee. This year Michael Kelly from the University of Wollongong came to his first conference while Georgina Fyfe had done it all before and was encouraged by the differences she noticed from previous conferences.

**Georgina Fyfe**

The 2006 HERDSA conference, set in the stylish UWA Club, brought together new and existing HERDSA members from Australia and beyond to share ideas and contribute to discussions about teaching and learning in Higher Education. The six keynote speakers brought their varied experiences to the conference, but their messages converged in many ways. The challenges that the keynotes threw out to HERDSA members were to think more broadly about our roles as University academic staff, and to drive change in the ways that we think about off-shore programs, indigenous programs, research funding, and the general public good that they all think this way; International students’ experiences in constructing knowledge in higher education.’

**Abstract**

Various studies explore the difficulties international students encounter in Australian higher education. Relatively little research has however focused on the challenges arising from the students’ negotiation of different ways of constructing knowledge in doing specific tasks for their course and compare their perceptions with the academic staff’s expectations. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework for discourse analysis which I have developed based on Lillis’ (2001) heuristic for exploring student writing and positioning theory (Harre and van Langenhove, 1999), this study examines international students’ experiences to construct knowledge in their first texts at an Australian University and the lecturers’ views on this aspect. This paper argues that the students’ understandings of the possibilities to incorporate their previous working experiences embedded in their home countries in constructing knowledge in Australian higher education and the academic staff’s expectations appear to be dissimilar. These mismatches may disadvantage the students in their attempts to take control of their academic life. The discussion indicates that in order to make the curriculum accessible to the increasing diverse student population, there seems to be a need to demystify the opportunities and the relevant ways for students to articulate and reflect different dimensions of knowledge, including international students’ past working experiences, into pedagogical practices in specific disciplines.

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change and uncertainty. "Uncertainty" he said, "looks both ways at once to capture something of what we are at any time". As usual, his perceptive address had depth and insight and was a rich resource for some serious hard thinking, although the many references to philosophy made me feel rather poorly-read. I liked his quote from Sartre; "Being has not been given its due".

As always in the breakout sessions, selecting what to go to was a problem, with eight options for most timeslots, but I think the tiering of presentations as critical insights, spotlights and snapshots worked well. Timing and chairing were good in the sessions I attended, and there was plenty of time for discussion during the tea and coffee breaks, if not after all the presentations. However, I did find a couple of times that, when there were only three snapshots in the allocated 55 minutes instead of four, I didn’t have time to swap across to the last snapshot or spotlight in another session.

Best spontaneous interjection of the conference goes to Rob Phillips who, when Shelda Debowski was talking about Biology and Anatomy, and her research interests include curriculum change and developing reflective practice in undergraduate students.

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Michael Kelly

HERDSA Conference 2006 – Critical Reflections on a Positive Experience

As a new member of HERDSA, I was not sure of what to expect of the 2006 HERDSA Conference, nor of Perth itself. My first impression of the city was the rain, although our taxi driver insisted that it was the first rain in 6 months in the city, and thus it was welcome. I, too, was welcomed by the city and found its shops, restaurants and bars very friendly. From the start of the conference, with the enthralling Welcome to Country by a member of the local indigenous nation, I felt that HERDSA had a lot to offer in the way of variety and engagement.

One of the defining points of the conference for me was the introductory addresses. I found the juxtaposition of the Hon. Julie Bishop’s address with that of the esteemed Professor Allan Luke very striking, particularly given their different messages. Coming from UOW, it was with some interest that I listened to the Minister’s description of the change in the National Teaching and Learning Performance Fund, and the developing role of AUQA. The challenges that the Minister set were distinctly quality and innovation oriented. Allan Luke’s challenges, however, were of a different sort. With a background in international education, I was fascinated by Professor Luke’s description of the way in which universities conduct their transnational affairs from the perspective of someone who has been on the receiving end of advances from Australian institutions. Allan Luke’s description of the problems of ensuring positive teaching and learning outcomes in an environment of disciplinary and managerial development in universities was a worthy challenge to us all.

On the subject of challenges, it would be a mistake for me to omit those posed by Professor Ian Frazer. Given Professor Frazer’s background, I approached his address with a great deal of respect, which made his challenges all the more controversial for me. Taking what was a science-centric view of the teaching-research nexus, Professor Frazer made two key controversial statements. The first was universities should not teach the professions, whilst the second, on rethinking the role of the academic, seemed to suggest a split in the teacher/researcher role. Whilst I have no doubt as to Professor Frazer’s eminence in his field, I found myself disagreeing with a number of his arguments. Nonetheless I immensely enjoyed his talk and the subsequent days of debate.

Another address that I personally found challenging was that of Professor Ron Barnett. I found it challenging in two ways. It was firstly challenging for me to engage with the philosophical approach that Ron took. The second challenge he posed was for the teacher and even institutions to address the student as a whole and engender a desire to deal with complexity and challenge. Having recently undertaken university studies, I found Ron’s address very enjoyable, but I did disagree with aspects of his arguments. The “what-are-we-being-assessed-on” phenomenon is not to be taken lightly, and issues such surrounding those undertaking education based on a sense of duty to do so (such as some international students) do offer significant challenge to Professor Barnett’s enthusiasm for the student as a Being-for-complexity with a strong will to learn. I found question time after Professor Barnett’s address particularly interesting and am grateful to him for his willingness to engage in discussions.

I am a highly social beast, and personally one of the most positive aspects of HERDSA for me was the room for social interaction. At both the cocktail function and the conference dinner (both held in the beautiful surrounds of UWA’s

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University Club), I had the opportunity to meet a great variety of colleagues who were more than willing to share and discuss ideas. I found this particularly striking as some "professional" conferences I have been to in the past have involved a great deal of posturing rather than engaged discussion, and whilst this cannot always be avoided, I was heartened by the many interesting debates and discussions I had with colleagues from other institutions.

Sheida Debowski's closing remarks (of which I note that highlights were subsequently published in the Australian) certainly hold true on the challenges that are facing academics and tertiary institutions as a whole. As the son of two academics, I have watched the profession and the sector go through some major changes in the past few decades. Perhaps the most positive outcome of HERDSA for me was seeing that people were engaging on every level in discussion as to issues in teaching and learning, governance, the teaching-research nexus and the ever-looming RQF. Although there are many challenges across the sector at present, my participation in HERDSA 2006 has allowed me to see that we have the best minds in the business on the issues.

Michael Kelly's role at the University of Wollongong is in academic development, coordinating the "Carrick Project", which was instigated to address the broad ambit of awards, grants, schemes and initiatives of the Carrick Institute. He is responsible for internal change to form synergies between UOW processes and Carrick processes, and to generate a program of long-term academic development in line with the Carrick aims.

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The quotations that appear in this issue are taken from A Guide to Learning Independently which is reviewed on page 26.

1. The Nature of Universities

... universities have become huge bureaucracies with an academic mind and no heart, careless and ignorant about students and their intellectual needs, organised by managers and managerial professors absorbed in their own pursuits, giving service to the existing social order and dispensing its conventional wisdom, bereft of a philosophy and the social imagination to create a new and compelling conception of their own future.


2. Choices and Decisions

Most people let themselves be pushed by chance or other people’s expectations into environments of which the make the best, rather than those which meet their inner needs.


3. Choosing Teachers

Learning grows and develops by the dialogue of teacher and student, becoming sometimes greater than anything an individual, however brilliant, could produce.

E.R. Leavis, quoted in J. Wyatt, 1990, Commitment to higher education: Seven West European thinkers on the essence of the university, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Bucks., p.82

4. What Questions Might You Ask

Every language conceals within its structure a vast array of unconscious assumptions about life and the universe, all of which you take for granted and everything that seems to make common sense ...

N.J. Berill, 1958, Man’s emerging mind, Dennis Dobson, London, p. 158

5. The Process of Writing

Find a subject you care about and which in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

Kurt Vonnegut, 1980, How to write with style’, advertisement in Psychology Today, September, p. 58
President’s Report

Each year the HERDSA conference acts as a catalyst for reflection and discussion of emerging issues and challenges facing higher education. This year the evolving expectations of academics and the likely impact on institutions and individuals was an important area of debate.

Both Australia and New Zealand are actively working to position their universities as strong players in the international higher education community. Our governments are raising the standards of performance in teaching and learning and research, anticipating that universities will adapt to emerging requirements and therefore be more competitive. And for the most part, universities are meeting the challenge by revamping many of their internal systems and processes to suit.

It is clear that the context of higher education is changing to reflect these external realities. However, the rate of change has created a strong sense of anxiety in many university members. Over the last year we have seen a number of accusations of managerialism and bullying levelled at various institutions. There is concern that universities have lost touch with their real mission and priorities as they adapt to ensure continuing funding and market share. But perhaps this is alerting us to a more fundamental shift in both culture and focus? The relationship between the academic and the institution has altered. The paternalism that once protected from many changes the academic work shifts into a higher gear. It’s an exciting time to be part of the sector, but it also requires careful consideration as to how we may best operate in the future, and what new skills and capabilities we may need to integrate. It was very pleasing to see our new HERDSA fellows recognised at the conference. They had demonstrated their commitment to both reflection and self-renewal. Their model is an important one for us all to consider.

The HERDSA Executive has three major goals toward which it is working in an effort to assist this major transition. In brief, they are:
1. Implement the new website to support effective and dynamic interaction and sharing of good practice across members;
2. Increase the HERDSA presence in the local communities, so that members can interact, share expertise and explore issues with colleagues;
3. Promote the enhancement of higher education policy and practice through lobbying, representation on national initiatives and provision of ongoing opportunities for debate and review.

Over the coming year you will see a number of changes to the Society as we work toward these outcomes. While the formative work has taken some time, you should start to see some very exciting innovations emerging. However, the success of each of these goals is dependent on each member sharing their expertise and participating in the various initiatives.

We hope that the HERDSA opportunities will be an important channel of support in your ongoing development.

If you have further ideas about how the Society might assist you, please don’t forget to let me know (Shelda.Debowski@uwa.edu.au).

With best wishes,

Shelda Debowski
Light a Candle or Curse the Darkness? A Report on the International Consortium of Educational Developers (ICED) Conference in Sheffield (June 11–14)

By Barbara Grant with (in order of appearance) Nancy Turner, Val Clifford, Catherine Manathunga, Di Bills, Brad Wuetherick, Sue Clegg, Simon Barrie, and Trevor Holmes, of the CAD Collective

Internationalisation, the theme of ICED 2006, is a difficult agenda for higher education: it's an unholy trio of altruism, greed and need. The impulse to altruism produced moments of unease in conversations and keynotes across the conference. Just what does our altruism consist of? Neo-colonial impulses to fashion higher education in developing countries in the image of the West? Asymmetrical desires to exchange with another? Longings for the lost missionary position? Feelings of obligation and goodwill towards the Other? Probably all of these in truth. This is provocative stuff and the ICED conference stirred up our thinking from the start with Professor Suki Ekaratne's contribution to the opening keynote (given jointly with Dr Liz Beaty), entitled "Enhancing academic development practices and policy for a globalised world: International perspectives for bridging a widening divide." Suki challenged academic developers in the West to choose to "enable higher education to make a positive contribution to the development agenda through mutual respect, acknowledgement of our interconnected futures and through sharing our experience". "Light a candle or curse the darkness," he said, "your choice". The metaphor of education as light shone in dark places is an old and compelling one.

There is, as always, some context here. Suki works at the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka where ICED 2006 was to have been held. But the 2005 tsunami washed that possibility away along with the lives and livelihoods of so many Sri Lankans and others in the region. Since then civil unrest and violence have escalated in Sri Lanka and universities have not been immune. A time of sorrow for Sri Lankans, a time of darkness indeed, one that is hard to imagine for many of us conference participants who overwhelmingly came from the affluent side of the global divide.

For some of us it was a first time at ICED. It is pretty special to be at a conference that has such a sharp focus on the work that we (referred to here as either academic or educational developers) do. The programme reached into all the nooks and crannies of what counts as educational development via a satisfying mix of different kinds of events and different forms of engagement. Fellowship emerged as the "real magic" (Nancy) of the conference. And then there were the wonders of the purple t-shirted brigade: a raft of cheery Sheffield Hallam students who welcomed and sorted disoriented and overheated conference participants. We were some of those participants and here are some of our memories and impressions.

The internationalisation theme was addressed directly in some presentations. For example, Owen Hicks illustrated how a candle could be lit with his experiences as a volunteer in Timor Leste. Using his newly acquired skills in the local language, Owen taught with two other teachers, preparing one to take over the course when he left while the other was a translator moving between the three languages present in the classroom, enabling the students to work in any of them. One of the debates about transnational education is the impositions that the "travelling" language has on its host culture - in his seminar Owen offered an extraordinary model for approaching this dilemma. (Val)

In another seminar Abdullah Hussein spoke of the complex issues involved in incorporating e-learning technologies into African universities. He emphasised how the adoption of these technologies in Africa could be read as a potential site of neo-colonialism. An intriguing discussion followed his presentation where one participant spoke of how the colonial metaphor grated on her but she wasn't sure why. Another participant from South Africa spoke evocatively of how colonialism becomes internalised. She shared with us a saying that "a black man's medicine is a white man" and described how colonial aftershocks continue to impact upon her university and her country. (Catherine)

There were some challenging new perspectives on strengthening links between research and teaching. Angela Brew asked us to think more creatively about the integration of teaching and research in and through scholarly communities, raising questions about the inclusivity of scholarly communities in linking research and teaching. Is institutional decision making research-based? How can communities of scholars break down long-standing divisions between researchers and teachers? What counts as research and who gets to do it? Should we expect teaching to inform research in the same way research
can inform teaching? An unorthodox approach to integrating research and teaching through academic development was presented by Gwyneth Hughes and Bruce Macfarlane from Thames Valley University, where academic development is located in a university-wide Graduate School and academic developers have expertise in both research and teaching and learning. Interesting questions were raised in this session around possible expertise in both research and teaching. Bruce Macfarlane from Thames Valley approach to integrating research and learning. (Brad)

The idea of different modes of time emerged from a number of papers and discussions. For example, Trevor Holmes’ workshop dealt explicitly with the metaphor of slow food movement. The need for space and time for thought, reflection and scholarly engagement appeared to resonate with participants both in terms of their own practice and our perception of pressure on the academics with whom we are working. The challenge is what academic development and academic practice might look like if slowness, not busyness and speed, were at the heart of the project. Thinking about time and slowness involves confronting what is lost when busyness takes over. (Sue)

The status of knowledge about academic development that was on display at ICED impressed itself on some participants. Many of the papers from other parts of the world were couched primarily in terms of the dominant western ways of knowing. Maybe this was simply a reflection of the scholarly tradition of building bridges to existing discourses. There were some challenging, creative and insightful adaptations of these ways of knowing in light of issues of culture and context, but these were not as frequent or as different as I was hoping. I was left wondering about the spaces we could create in a forum like ICED to better encourage the expression of different voices. (Simon)

Then there were tensions between what we might call conceptual leaps and what were claimed as researched certainties. There were tensions between managerial and more liberatory orientations. Also, there were tensions between what was scripted as a developed/developing divide. There was an odd tendency to assume a univocality both to developed and developing "nation" as identities, especially as expressed through individuals. Were Suki’s words too easily accorded a truth-status by the audience, for example, by our assenting to the idea that the solution to privileging "the book" was to provide better books. How are Suki’s challenges to dominant, developed culture entangled in the culture of colonial assumptions in the first place? More, how do we hear these challenges from our very diverse and particular places? (Trevor)

To return to Suki’s challenge: how to respond in a world so politically overlaid with colonialist histories and references that haunt us all. How do we hear this challenge? How might we work in the colonial contact zone when it is a place of oppression and extinction as well as one of rich adaptation and exchange? We may not have easy answers for the challenges posed by the internationalisation agenda in higher education, but ICED 2006 surely reminded us of the need for thoughtful engagement with those challenges, risky and uncertain though that might feel.

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Endnotes

To visit or join the Challenging Academic Development (CAD) Collective, go to http://mailman.ucc. usyd.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/cad-cad
I.T. IN HIGHER EDUCATION COLUMN

Has Blackboard become Blackbeard?

By Roger Atkinson

Having recently watched an entertaining DVD, *Pirates of the Caribbean* [1], the name Blackbeard comes easily to mind. And why piracy and Blackbeard? Because, by the time you read this column you may know something about an astonishing action by Blackboard Inc. The company announced in a press release dated 26 July 2006, that “it has been issued a U.S. patent for technology used for internet-based education support systems and methods. The patent covers core technology relating to certain systems and methods involved in offering online education, including course management systems... patents corresponding with the U.S. patent have been issued in Australia, New Zealand and Singapore...” [2]. The patent referred to is United States Patent 6988138, filed on “June 30, 2000” and apparently granted on 17 January 2006[3].

Why has it taken over six months for this news to break? Who was asleep on the IT watch? Some hypotheses are discussed below, but in brief the news broke because Blackboard Inc., widely regarded as top IT watch? Some hypotheses are discussed below, but in brief the news broke because Blackboard Inc., widely regarded as top培训机构, Gerhard Schubert, of Desire2Learn Inc., distant second in the commercial LMS ranks, for patent infringement, filing in the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Texas, on 26 July 2006 [5].

Firstly, there is no doubt about the fervour of the anti-Bb backlash. Consider a brief, illustrative sample of “backlash” phrases from some forums and lists [7, 8]: “Software Patents are Evil”; “... almost equivalent to Microsoft trying to patent the concept of a web browser”; “Blackboard can shelve their WebCT”; “Vultures”; “If this is their business style, then I want absolutely nothing to do with them”; “Blackboard has turned its back on those who have built it up from scratch”; “...they'll drain D2L of financial reserves and establish a legal precedent that they can use in subsequent cases against other entities”. If I were a Bb executive, I would be engaging maximum hyperdrive on the corporate damage control system.

Related to the anti-Bb backlash, there is widespread scepticism [7, 8] about patent law and its administrators: “Isn't it ridiculous what the patent offices allows companies to patent?”, “… probably it's one of those ‘cases’ that are needed to finally crush the whole patent industry worldwide and send all those patenting bastards to hell!”, “The ever-brilliant US Patent and Trademark Office has apparently granted Blackboard a patent for ... well ... pretty much anything remotely related to learning management systems”.

Also related to the anti-Bb backlash, there are academic analyses of the flaws in a system that allows patents where patent law should not venture:

...what Blackboard claims to have invented in 2000 is almost an exact clone of what I described in 1997 and published in 1999. ... my response to Blackboard is this: where do you get off taking /my/ invention, which I shared freely with the rest of the world, in order to advance learning, and claiming it as your own? Is this the model of learning to which you subscribe, to use the legal system to deny learning to people who cannot afford it? [10]

And there's much academic-amateur-legal advice of the kind: “... Desire2Learn could also use the defense that the patent is “obvious” to a “person having ordinary skill in the art”; or, very succinctly, “…we need to flush out a ton of prior art” [7, 8]. The specific term “prior art” is new to me, but it seems to be equivalent to IP Australia's statement about one of the prerequisites for granting a patent: “... the invention must not be obvious to someone with knowledge and experience in the technological field of the invention” [11].

As you may expect, numerous veterans of the 90s, including myself, are combing the archives for recorded evidence of LMS developments or component developments that precede Bb's patent filling date in Australia. There is the problem, referred to earlier, of “being asleep on the watch”, or to be more specific, “being too focussed on pedagogical issues and neglecting the corporate issue”. To quote a somewhat risque statement of the corporate issue, “Do we think open source Moodle is driving the cutting edge trends? Which suggests that the mega corp will need to catch up to rear end us” [7]. Or, in the also risque warning from another Moodle Forum correspondent, “My experience has been that the bad guys will come up and bite you in the bum if you aren't looking under every rock for them” [7].

Secondly, I believe that we need to publicise concerns about the fuzziness of the division line between intellectual property and intellectual piracy. One theme in the anti-Bb backlash discussed above [7, 8, 9] is a deeply resentful feeling that Bb has, in effect, “pirated” everyone else's academic work, and fluked an assignment of intellectual property rights, with the help of an examination procedure that many view as flawed. Now being duly licensed to sue, that is precisely what Bb is doing, in effect accusing others of patent “piracy” (infringement). To assess for yourself whether Bb's patent really does represent an “... inventive
step” [11], read their pitch filed in Australia, Standard Patent Application No. 2005203324 [12]. The actual date of writing isn’t clear, probably 1999 or 2000, so in looking for “prior art”, try pre-2000. For example, scan AJET 1996–1999 [13] and you will see a progressively increasing proportion of articles that are concerned with online learning, using the Internet, etc., for education, or as Bb terms it in the patent’s title, “Internet-based education support system and methods”. Check Hart (1996), Freeman (1997) and Brown (1997) for starters [13]. Around the world there is quite a large number of educators who worked very hard and effectively to implement fundamental change based upon the technologies, and who wrote papers for AJET and many other publications, prior to Bb’s patent applications. Quite justifiably, many will resent and dispute Bb’s claims in the press release [2] and in the patent [12], such as: “For nearly a decade, Blackboard has been a thought leader in the e-Learning industry and has developed products that have helped to fundamentally alter how educational institutions and their educators teach and communicate with students,” said Michael Chasen, CEO of Blackboard. [2]

The present invention also provides for access to a plethora of academic resources that supplement the student’s online education experience. The user may browse discipline-specific information, resources and communities linked to each course website [12, p.31 of 120].

In my own reading of Application No. 2005203324 I looked for evidence of “thought leadership”, but in my humble opinion the document contains more “thought copying” than “thought leading”. For example, the second quotation above seems to me to just restate something that our librarians at Murdoch University were busy doing even before the arrival of the first web servers and web readers (just change “present invention” to “Library website”).

To take just one example of claims in the “We claim” section of Bb’s application:

1. A system for providing to a community of users access to a plurality of online courses comprising:
   a) a plurality of user computers, each user computer associated with a user of the system having predefined characteristics … [five lines of detail omitted]
   b) A server computer in communication with each of the user computers over a network, the server computer comprising … [about ten lines of detail omitted]

Heck, that’s what we were doing in Murdoch University’s TLC in 1995, where the “system” was a Unix computer known as “cleo”, running among other programs the NCSA web server that predated Apache, and shareware discussion forums Discus and NetForum. The “network” was the campus LAN, 10 Mb/s Ethernet.

All very communal, public, published knowledge [for example, 14], nothing patentable about cleo (though it was a sad day when cleo was retired). However, my humble opinion about what’s patentable and what’s not, and the intellectual property-intellectual piracy dividing line, is unlikely to have any influence upon events in the scene where these matters are determined for Australia, at IP Australia [11]. For a good short cut into researching Bb’s patents in Australia, see Blackfate [15].

This links into my third topic, what roles can we and our academic societies such as ASCILITE, HERDSA and ODLAA undertake in informing our institutions and IP Australia about this issue? It’s a big issue, and a task for teams, notwithstanding Blackfate’s individual effort [15]. Academic societies should be in a leading role, representing their older members who did the “prior art”, and their younger members whose future work should not be stifled by the threat of Bb’s big legal artillery. As publishers, the societies possess the research papers that, in my humble opinion, substantiate “prior art”. If acting together, societies could afford the specialised legal advice that is an almost mandatory feature of the patent world. Also, societies can decline to invite Bb to sponsor and attend conferences. On institutional fronts, the task may be harder, but at the very least every one of us can insist that the ethical record of a software supplier should be evaluated, just as carefully as we evaluate fitness for purpose, user friendliness, cost and numerous technical details. We should propose that every institution needs a “Plan B”, so to speak, for changing LMS provider, should things become really nasty as Bb’s strategy unfolds and if attacks upon its patents are unsuccessful.

References

The Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) at The University of Sydney is pleased to announce that a new issue of Synergy is available. Synergy is a scholarly forum for the discussion and debate of higher education teaching and learning at the University of Sydney.

Issue 23, August 2006 features brief scholarly articles, profiles and reports on teaching and learning innovations.

- Enhancing research students’ learning experiences through overseas placements
- Feedback for Teachers surveys
- An e-Learning resource for the Health Sciences
- Giving students a voice: discussion, reflection and interaction in teaching and learning
- Learning outcomes approaches to curriculum design and review in Agriculture
- In their own words: finding out what students think about their university learning experience
- Profile: Associate Professor Jennifer Hodgson (Associate Dean, Learning & Teaching), Veterinary Science

The issue also includes a review of two book publications: Alan Skelton’s Understanding Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: Towards a critical approach; and Angela Brew’s Research and Teaching: Beyond the Divide; a run-down of recent work in the ITL; and a list of forthcoming learning and teaching conferences.

Visit Issue 23 of Synergy at http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy. For further information, comments or feedback, contact the Editor, Dr Tai Peseta at synergy@itl.usyd.edu.au

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PhD Thesis Examination Overview report on an ARC Discovery Grant project 2003–06

By Allyson Holbrook, Sid Bourke, Terence Lovat & Hedy Fairbairn

Introduction
The research team of Allyson Holbrook, Sid Bourke and Terence Lovat, assisted by Hedy Fairbairn have just completed a study of PhD assessment in Australia. The researchers are members of the Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORT/) at the University of Newcastle.

The PhD is clearly the pinnacle of formal qualifications in our education system representing excellence and attracting both resources and prestige to universities. Candidates are highly valued in their institutions and hold a privileged position. In turn the expectation is that their projects will provide an original and significant research outcome, in the form of a thesis.

For Australian PhDs, normally the only assessment made is through the medium of written reports on the thesis by either two or three external examiners. The examiners effectively set PhD standards. It was the content of the examiner reports in providing indicators of thesis quality that was the major focus of this study. These reports were linked with candidature and examiner information to provide background information thought to be relevant to the thesis examination process.

The Candidates and Examiners
Personal and candidature information was collected from 804 candidates spread across all discipline areas at 8 Australian universities, together with the 2121 examiner reports on their theses, and some information about the examiners (eg, gender, location). Universities included in the sample included the Go8, IRU, new generation and unaligned categories.

The candidates’ age on enrolment ranged from 21 to 66 years with a mean age of 34 years. Age on submission of the thesis ranged from 24 to 76 years (mean 39 years). There was almost an even balance of candidate gender with 47% of candidates being female, 77% were native English speakers, and 59% held a scholarship for at least part of their candidature. The most common entry qualifications were an honours degree (46%) and a coursework masters degree (27%). On average each candidate had 2 supervisors over the course of their candidature with 35 candidates (more than 4%) having had four supervisors.

Theses across all Broad Fields of Study (BFOS) were represented. Science theses made up 26% of the sample, and Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences 22%. Other BFOS proportions were Health (16%), Education (11%), Business (9%), Engineering (8%) and Agriculture (5%). There were much smaller numbers of Veterinary Science, Law and Architecture theses.

Almost half the examiners (47%) were located outside Australia, with the other largest groups being from the USA (19%) and the UK (9%). Only 24% of the examiners were female.

Thesis Examination Results
Five of the eight universities involved in the study use three examiners, the other three use two. The examiner recommendations on the theses and the university committee decisions are shown in the table below as percentages of the total number of candidates. Clearly the message is that submission of a PhD thesis normally results in the eventual award of the degree.

The Examiner Reports
The examiner reports, which ranged from one line to 1272 lines of text, were coded, line-by-line, identifying 28 specific codes, each in one of four major categories: Examiner and process (4 codes), assessable areas covered (12), dialogic elements (3), and evaluative elements (9). Multiple line codes were the norm with a mean of 2.2 text codes per line of reports.

Overall, 22 of the 28 specific text codes were significantly related to the quality of the thesis as indicated by examiner
recommendations. Some of the more prominent codes are mentioned below.

Examiner and Process

Typically examiners focussed about 5% of their report on each of two aspects about themselves and the examination process, not directly associated with the thesis - personal and professional context (positively correlated with quality) and application of anticipated criteria (negatively correlated).

Assessable Areas Covered

By far the most text in these areas relates to analysis and reporting of findings (37%, negatively correlated). Other major content concerns the significance and contribution of the thesis (10%, positive), and the approach used in the thesis (13%), focussing on method, design and execution. Approach was not correlated with quality, suggesting there was a balance of positive and negative comment on this area of the theses.

Dialogic Elements

The most common of these codes was examiner use of the first person (17%). This usage was generally an indicator of an examiner feeling relaxed because s/he was examining a good thesis.

Evaluative Elements

The most common types of comment in examiner reports were positive summative and other positive judgments totalling 29% of reports. Given that most theses will pass, this should not be a surprising result. However, the largest single code was formative instruction (21%) which involved the examiner in attempting to teach the candidate (and perhaps the supervisor) how to do or understand something. Use of this code implies there was something in the thesis that should be improved. More obviously negative summative and other judgment totalled only 4% but, in addition, prescriptive comment accounted for 11% of examiner reports. Prescriptive comment consists of “fix it this way” type of advice or instruction, and is also a clear indicator of problems in theses.

The first level of coding described above is being supplemented by more intensive, extended analyses involving code intersections, particularly between the assessable areas and evaluative elements codes. These intersections provide even more powerful indicators of thesis quality, particularly for the highest quality theses and the marginal theses. In even more fine-grained analyses, the ways in which examiners treat the literature review in theses has been shown to be a particularly powerful indicator of thesis quality. Other analyses include the application of the Habermasian “ways of knowing” thesis to power discourse in PhD examination.

Other areas being investigated include PhD examination in the creative arts, with a focus on the exhibition that is commonly an additional element in the process.

A few interesting extracts from our various papers arising out of the study include the following.

1. Once the specialist vocabulary was removed, there were no major differences in the content of examiner reports between most of the disciplines. Creative arts disciplines where the examination normally included an exhibition or performance were the exception here.

2. When the detailed content of their reports were considered, examiners of the same thesis were quite consistent. Although there were some differences in the examiner recommendations made, only 4% of theses had examiner reports that differed from the committee decision by at least two categories on the list of five possible recommendations shown above.

3. In terms of overall thesis quality, we defined the highest quality theses as those where all examiners and the university committee uniformly agreed the thesis should be accepted as submitted, and marginal theses as those where the examiners and the committee concurred that the thesis should be revised and resubmitted for further examination or failed. On these definitions, almost 8% of the 804 theses were of the highest quality, and almost 5% were of marginal quality or worse.

4. With respect to theses in the Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, for which more than one-third of the examiners were female, “Revise & resubmit” recommendations were made twice as frequently by the female examiners (10.4%) compared with the male examiners (5.2%). This suggests that the female examiners in this BFOS were setting higher standards. Despite this finding, when one looks more closely at the texts of the reports written by the female examiners, the language used tended to be less dismissive in tone.

A Few Concluding Comments

There are a number of issues that this study addresses and/or raises for further consideration. First, there is the issue of thesis quality, its assessment and recognition. With the coming Research Quality Framework (RQF) exercise, the importance of assessing in PhD research training and particularly the quality of the thesis outcome should not be underestimated.

Secondly, the study provides information about what examiners comment on, and therefore presumably value, which can be used to assist candidates and their supervisors to better meet examiner expectations. This is an ongoing commitment of the researchers who, to date, have been invited to visit and present lectures, seminars or workshops to candidates and/or supervisors in six universities in five States.

Thirdly, the study adds considerable empirical information to the literature in the important and neglected area of doctoral assessment. Further studies are planned in this area.

We are particularly grateful to the eight deans of graduate studies or their equivalent in the universities that provided the information for this study. Publication is proceeding, but current information about articles and conference papers produced from this study is available on the SORTI website: http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/sorti/

Sid Bourke is a Professor in Education specialising in quantitative research methods, affective assessment and research on research training. His other current projects include work on completion/attrition of PhD candidates, research journal quality and impact, and the attraction of engineering as a profession.

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Dental Students’ Perceptions of their Problem-based Learning Environment

By Vicki Skinner, Tracey Winning, Gerry Mullins & Grant Townsend

What Were We Interested In and Why?

We wanted to better understand our students’ experiences of the hybrid problem-based learning (PBL) Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) curriculum. Of interest was students’ perceptions of the purpose and nature of PBL packages and assessment and what these required them to do. Our curriculum/PBL package design aimed to provide motivating, self-directed learning opportunities with a focus of students’ learning on integrated and systematic patient care. We asked how well our students’ perceptions matched our design intentions. We are concerned that if our students’ perceptions do not match our curriculum intentions, then intended outcomes may be compromised.

Our study draws on evidence from other learning contexts that students vary in their perceptions of what is required of them in specific learning and assessment tasks (Biggs, 2003; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). This research showed that variations in perceptions lead to different approaches to learning that are positively or negatively associated with learning outcomes. There is also growing evidence that students’ understanding of PBL is not necessarily aligned with PBL curriculum aims (Caplow et al., 1997; Duke et al 1998; Forbes et al 2001).

Where was the Study Done?

The BDS at the University of Adelaide (Australia) commenced a hybrid PBL curriculum in 1993. It is a five-year undergraduate-entry program (approximately 50 students per year level at the time of the study). Students start investigating PBL packages from week 1 in first year and continue throughout second to fourth year, while fifth year is a predominantly clinical year. The PBL packages consist of a patient scenario (presented in video, audio and/or print format) and supporting authentic patient case materials (eg, clinical photographs, radiographs, dental charts and models). Students work in groups of eight to investigate a PBL package, resulting in identification of learning questions related to the patient. Students then research their learning questions in groups and report back on their research in subsequent sessions. Learning from PBL packages is also supported by related classes such as laboratory, resource or clinic sessions provided after the initial investigation of the PBL package.

Our PBL packages continue to be developed in terms of the materials provided and format used. One of the major changes we have made over the years has been to provide students with more support and structure. This particularly relates to linking the process used in PBL packages to the processes used in clinic with patients. The PBL introductory first-year unit (weeks 1-7) was also changed to provide more structure and guidance for the PBL process and other support sessions on self-directed learning and learning in groups.

Who was Involved?

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee (H:67-2001). To explore variations among students’ perceptions of the PBL packages, we wanted to sample a broad range of students. Therefore, we planned to select students on the basis of their “Study Processes Questionnaire” responses (voluntary; 90% response rate; Biggs, 1987). However, clear preferences for either deep or surface approaches were not evident. The sampling strategy was modified to selection of two groups of five students in each year level—one with the highest and one with the lowest scores on the “deep approach” sub-scale. This resulted in participation of ten first- and nine fourth-year students. First-year students had completed six PBL packages. They experienced the updated introductory PBL unit and PBL packages. Fourth-year students took part at the end of Semester 2. They worked with the updated packages in their fourth year only.

What Data were Collected and Analysed?

The purpose of the analysis was to characterise students’ perceptions of PBL packages in their own words and from their perspectives. Therefore, students participated in individual, taped semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using an inductive process that involved identifying major themes and patterns in the data (Rice and Ezzy, 1999).

What do the Students Think about PBL Packages?

Our students saw PBL packages as an interesting and motivating way of learning. Fourth-year students reported PBL packages were relevant to future practice and prepared them for managing various patients. They applied a clinical investigative approach when working through PBL packages that reflected their clinical experience. The fourth-year group’s recognition of the purpose and clinical relevance of PBL packages developed gradually during their third/fourth years, while in their first- and second-years they had been unsure of the purpose or process of PBL packages.

First-year students had limited clinical experience but most recognised PBL packages were preparing them for future dental practice. However, in contrast to the fourth-year group’s report of their early years experience of PBL packages, the first-year interviewees recognised the clinical relevance of PBL packages. They realised PBL packages were about patient management or learning a systematic way of thinking about the process of caring for a patient. Two first-year students did not
Students in both year levels gave similar accounts of group processes for researching and applying information about their learning questions to the PBL packages. In general, "learning" via group-work was not talked about. There were a very few references to group processes that supported learning, such as discussions that helped students develop their understanding of the PBL package. When discussing group work, students talked about needing to manage the difficulties of group work, eg, organising meetings, or getting everyone in their group to contribute equally, or balancing doing PBL work with other coursework requirements. The groups adopted strategies often oriented to complete the task efficiently, eg, by delegating work so that not everyone had to do all the work, or to limit the need for group meetings.

There were variations in the match between individual students' strategies for learning related to PBL packages and assessment, and the extent of agreement between perceptions and strategies, eg, (i) either perceiving a need for and adopting a patient-care focus and learning for meaning for both PBL and assessment tasks; or (ii) adopting a learning for meaning focus and a mixture of strategies; or (iii) forming limited perceptions of either PBL or assessment and adopting various strategies.

What did we Learn?

Students' perceptions of PBL packages varied in complexity from learning about total patient care to learning individual topics. This variation was consistent with their experience. We were encouraged by first-year students making connections between PBL and clinical practice. This contrasted with senior students who hadn't been able to make this link until later in their program. Some students adopt coherent ways of learning for PBL and related assessment that is consistent with the aims of PBL, and others adopt ways of learning that are non-coherent or are inconsistent with PBL aims.

Where to From Here?

We need to review how these perceptions of PBL and assessment relate to student outcomes. Analysis of students' concept maps of a PBL package completed at the time of the study will give us some insight into possible relationships between perceptions of their learning context and their outcomes. In response to the variations in students' perceptions of PBL, we are collecting data from consenting first-year students about their understanding of PBL, how this develops over their first semester and relates to their end of semester performance. In response to the findings related to students' experiences of PBL group work, another study is addressing what students understand about and how they conduct their PBL group-work, and how this relates to learning.

References


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Tracey Winning is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Dentistry, The University of Adelaide. She has been involved in implementation, development and evaluation of the Adelaide PBL BDS curriculum and co-ordinates the development and presentation of a range of PBL packages throughout the curriculum. Her current research interests include analysis of student experiences and outcomes from PBL and self-assessment in clinic.

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Gerry Mullins is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Adelaide. He has been involved in the evaluation of the PBL BDS curriculum since its initial implementation. His current research interests involve analysis of the post-graduate research experience, particularly related to beliefs and values of supervisors and thesis examiners.

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Grant Townsend is Professor of Dental Science in the Adelaide School of Dentistry. He was involved closely in the planning, development and implementation on the PBL BDS curriculum and in its ongoing evaluation. He is actively involved in teaching dental students in all years of the course and his other research interests are in the field of craniofacial biology.

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The Annual Teaching and Learning Forum
30–31 January 2007
University of Western Australia

The University of Western Australia invites you to attend the annual Teaching and Learning Forum 30–31 January 2007 at UWA. The TL Forum is a combined WA universities event. The theme for the 2007 Teaching and Learning Forum is Student Engagement. What do we mean by student engagement?

How does student engagement relate to the learning environment we provide for students? The Forum will provide the opportunity to explore these questions and what it means for teaching and the student learning experience.

Keynote speakers are Professor Donald Markwell and Professor Owen Hicks.

Proposals

You are invited to submit proposals as:
* Refereed Research Papers,
* Refereed Professional Practice papers
* Abstracts for non-refereed papers, workshops and activity sessions

Key Dates

Full papers for refereeing to be submitted by 13 October 2006. Abstracts for non-refereed papers to be submitted 17 November 2006. Final date for early bird registration 15 December 2006

INTERNATIONAL COLUMN EXCHANGE

Teaching Assistants in the United States

By Virleen Carlson, Immediate Past President, POD Network

POD is the acronym for Professional and Organisational Network in Higher Education.

This article was written as part of the Canada, Australia, US Presidents of Higher Education Societies column exchange. It is the third and final installment.

The most pressing problem in the United States concerning teaching assistants is the language barrier when the graduate student and the undergraduate student are not native speakers of English. More often, the non-native speaker is an international graduate student studying in the United States and the native speaker is the undergraduate. Undergraduate students, many for the first time, are coming in contact with an unfamiliar English accent. The most unfamiliar accents are those from the Asian countries, but the “World Englishes” of the Indian sub-continent and parts of Africa can be equally challenging. This is compounded by the graduate scholars teaching the hard sciences, which are admittedly considered “hard” by undergraduates.

The best teaching assistant development programs invite native and non-native speakers to sit side by side in workshops, mentoring programs, classes, seminars, brown bag discussions, orientations, and large (guest) lectures. It is also very productive to have special programming just for teaching assistants, without faculty present, as the politics of asking questions in front of faculty has been known to keep many a TA from asking what she/he wants to know.

Centers for Teaching and Learning across the United States have a faculty development component, plus a teaching assistant component if there are enough graduate students to warrant services beyond the departmental level.

A third level of services is the highly specialised area of International Teaching Assistant development programs. This work combines the pedagogy of TA development, plus the pedagogy of pronunciation for comprehensibility.

The difficulty lies in the foundations of the two TA pedagogies. Whereas the TA developer traditionally comes from the pedagogy of higher education research on learning, the ITA developer hails from the English-as-a-Second-Language and linguistics background. This is not always the case, but it occurs often enough to make it worth noting. When working with the two groups of developers, very few people move fluidly back and forth between the “learning” literature and the linguistics literature, so to speak.

Even the traditional professional development conferences split the two groups. Whereas POD in the US now draws over 100 participants who identify themselves as being interested in TA Development, the TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) conference has an equally dedicated group of over 100 participants who identify themselves as being interested in ITA development.

POD conferences become the ideal forum for all teaching assistant developers to meet, exchange ideas, and present sessions. Because the wider goal is the success of the graduate student, the POD committee for teaching assistant developers chose a new name recently, the committee for Graduate Student Professional Development.

There are two levels of success. The first occurs when the graduate student, native English speaker or non-native, has a positive experience in the American classroom. Undergraduate students find it easy, comfortable, and rewarding to study with a well-trained and supported graduate student, particularly if comprehensibility is there. The second occurs when the graduate student, degree in hand, leaves the University for a teaching position. This teaching position could be anywhere in the world. Increasingly, US natives seek positions around the world, and international students return to their home countries seeking faculty positions. There are many permutations of these global changes and exchanges.

It is the goal of every teaching assistant and international teaching assistant developer that I know, myself included, to ensure that the next “crop” of faculty members assume their teaching careers with the best start possible, and that the undergraduates have the best teachers as soon as possible. We have too much research going back a quarter of a century to ignore the ethics and pragmatics of making all our TAs better, faster.

For details about the POD Network go to www.podnetwork.org
Higher Education in the Headlines

A summary of the top stories on higher education from the last 3 months of Australian Higher Education, Times Higher Education Supplement and the Chronicle of Higher Education

This is a new feature in HERDSA News. I am grateful to Peter Kandlbinder for offering to compile this article.

In the Australian sector the change of Minister led many universities to call on the new minister to reduce government red tape, which she later reportedly agreed to do. Whatever changes are made will need to demonstrate increased diversification in the sector which at various times meant through university mergers, calls for increased links with industry or the introduction of specialist universities. At the same time universities have had to come to terms with the introduction of voluntary unionism and students continued to focus on the financial benefits of higher education, preferring to take courses that offer the employment opportunities than science and maths. They are also reported to be more inclined to complain about the quality of higher education than in previous years.

The British higher education sector has been preoccupied with a pay dispute during which the Times has reported imminent job cuts and increased casualisation in a time of larger revenues for universities and bonuses being paid to attract academic staff due to a skills shortage. Britain has begun to feel the impact of introducing student fees with students increasingly scrutinising courses and universities needing to offer financial incentives to attract high quality students.

The US continues to be focussed on security with the Chronicle questioning the quality of personal safety with allegations of systematic abuse and attacks on US campuses. Fears about terrorism are threatening to undermine academic freedoms through the reclassification of documents and accusations of being unable to speak out about matters of national importance. Meanwhile a poll rejected politics coming into the university classroom. Concerns were also raised in the Chronicle about the lower numbers of low-income students and an increasing gap between rich and poor attending university.

Websites consulted
www.theguardian.co.uk
www.timeshighereducation.com

Peter Kandlbinder is a Senior Lecturer in the Institute for Interactive Media and Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. His main responsibility is for academic development in area of assessment and over the past 15 years he has been providing similar support for problem-based learning, postgraduate supervision and other forms of small group learning at a number of universities in Australia and the South Pacific.

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Hawaii International Conference on Education

The 5th Annual Hawaii International Conference on Education will be held from January 6 (Saturday) to January 9 (Tuesday), 2007 at the Waikiki Beach Marriott Resort & Spa, the Radisson Waikiki Prince Kuhio, and the Pacific Beach Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The conference will provide many opportunities for academicians and professionals from education related fields to interact with members inside and outside their own particular disciplines. Cross-disciplinary submissions with other fields are welcome.

For detailed information about submissions see:
http://www.hiceducation.org/cfp_edu.htm

Hawaii International Conference on Education
P.O. Box 75036 Honolulu, HI 96836 USA
E-mail: education@hiceducation.org
Website: http://www.hiceducation.org
New HERDSA Guides Launched

Two HERDSA Guides were launched at the conference. ‘Managing Student Teams’ is a new addition to the collection and should provide a valuable resource for staff and students seeking to use teams in research projects. So often students come together to work on a project with very little guidance about the nature of team work and the result can be very frustrating for all.

‘Up the Publication Road’ has proved a very helpful guide for many staff seeking to get a paper accepted by an academic journal. Today getting published is even more urgent than it was when the first edition appeared around 15 years ago. Royce Sadler’s revised edition is therefore very timely.

HERDSA Guides have been selling well recently. Members wishing to purchase copies can do so over the web, www.herdsa.org.au Details can be found in the advertisement on the back cover.

Managing Student Teams
Donella Caspersz, Judy Skene and Madeline Wu

Effective student teams don’t just happen; they are made to happen. This guide is written for teaching staff, in any field, who are interested in using student teams as part of their teaching strategy. Stemming from a research project surveying both staff and students on operational aspects of student teamwork, the guide discusses the challenges facing staff and students in using student teams, before describing strategies that can be used to manage these. The guide discusses the knowledge and skills required by students for managing a successful student team project, provides guidance on the sequence in which strategies may be used, and highlights some overarching principles and guidelines which could be followed by staff and students in managing student teamwork. 57 pages, 2006

Up the Publication Road (3rd Edition)
Royce Sadler

Publishing in scholarly journals: how the system works, and how to help the system work for aspiring authors. Deciding on a suitable journal, copyright, refereeing procedures, preparing a manuscript, submitting a paper, proofreading, and how to cope with rejections. 40 pages, 2006 (3rd Edition)

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Changing your email address?

No need to contact the HERDSA Office or Roger Landbeck go to http://mailman.anu.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/herdsa
where you will find the steps to take.
BOOK REVIEWS

Doctorates Downunder – Keys to successful doctoral study in Australia & New Zealand

Carey Denholm and Terry Evans

ACER Press, Camberwell - Victoria, 2006, 227 pages. ISBN 0 86431 429 9 (paperback), AUD $34.95

Reviewed by Margaret Carthew

Doctorates Downunder (DD) demystifies the doctoral study process. The book is divided into twenty-eight chapters written with no-nonsense entertaining clarity guaranteeing that you don’t fall asleep in the middle of a topic. Chapters are grouped into nine major sections allowing the reader to quickly ascertain where to start answering his/her questions. Each chapter consists of a collection of short essays from several authors with experience in the field, providing meaningful insight into the various aspects of doctoral study. For those who may have completed their initial degrees via distance mode study and are continuing onto higher level degrees via off campus/external mode (as I have), DD offers a realistic appraisal of the doctoral process. Even for those already entrenched in their PhD or Professional Doctorate project, DD can provide valuable insight into areas such as maintaining contact with support staff, sustaining impetus, part-time study, producing effective presentations, being critical and ethical, publishing and the examiner’s assessment procedure.

Section Five (authored by Carey Denholm, Christopher Newell, and Terry Evans,) contains revelations about the personal obstacles candidates may face, along with information for individuals with disability or chronic illness and those trying to maintain the balance between study, work and family; very important considerations in a time when equity issues and economic pressures are prevailing factors in society. Brian Edwards, Sarah Wilks and Mary Krone feature in Section One for beginning candidature, providing questions and tips, and sharing case scenarios to explain the desirable characteristics of a productive candidate.

Personally, Chapter Ten was very pertinent during initial attempts to focus on a thesis topic; authors McCormack, Kiley, Maher and Cripps demonstrate the benefits of structure via the development of personal learning plans. The extensive nature of doctoral work confounds many prospective candidates, however, by following the guidelines set out in Chapter Ten goals are clarified, the skills possessed and needed are identified, and who/what is required to achieve the objective becomes more obvious.

For individuals who have remained in the tertiary system and, as yet, have not obtained employment, there is a chapter on "Preparing for postdoctoral life" written by Alan McAlpine.

Section Four contains the necessary skeleton of research oriented study. Margaret Zeegers and Deidre Barron analyse generic skills training; Robyn Barnacle points-the-way to becoming a critical researcher; Justin Denholm establishes guidelines for ethical research practices; and Jacqueline Rowarth and Pam Green present strategies for sustaining inspiration and motivation.

Laureate Professor Peter Doherty aptly indicates the worthwhile practical guidance provided throughout DD in the Forward: “This is a volume by people who have been there, done that, and are now well-placed to pass on the basic understanding to others. Any intending or current graduate student can dip into the various chapters with profit”.

Carey Denholm, Frances Martin and Jill Scevak are the authors in Section Six, which conveys ways to communicate thesis research through avenues including oral presentations, publishing in academic journals and most importantly guidelines for clear writing of theses. Following on in Section Seven Erica McWilliam, Robyn Owens, Robert Cantwell and Gilah Leder and Lloyd Holldiday detail the thesis preparation examining “Argumentation”, “Writing as a research tool”, “Thinking and writing for your thesis” and “Research skills and writing a thesis”. The two chapters in Section Eight reveal the examiner’s outlook and Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins give hope to all aspiring doctoral candidates explaining that examiners are “human” and for the most part look forward to reading candidates’ theses. When oral examination is a requirement of thesis completion, Rowarth and Fraser provide insight to prospective candidates on successful completion of the process, offering an explanation of the oral examination, hints on preparation and finally, words of wisdom for the acceptance of the judgement by the examining panel.

I feel if you take the time to read Doctorates Downunder, implement the strategies outlined and heed the practical advice provided, it will take you a substantial part of the way to attaining the title “Dr”. For my part I will be placing my copy of DD beside the bed and perhaps on occasion even under my pillow; it has given me heart to undertake what I initially felt was a dream well beyond my reach.

Margaret Carthew is a Master of Education with Honours Candidate in the Faculty of Education at James Cook University. She hopes to continue to the Education Doctorate. Her topic is “The Knowledge Society - Education Stakeholders’ Perceptions and how Professional Development is meeting the need for Teaching and Learning Change with a focus on Differences for Rural/Remote Areas”.

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A Guide to Learning Independently

Lorraine Marshall and Francis Rowland


Reviewed by Roger Landbeck

A Guide to Learning Independently first appeared 25 years ago in the same year that the personal computer became available. Much has happened in the intervening years, particularly in the realm of computers in daily life, which is recognised in this fourth edition. However, the principles of the book, that of learning to become an independent learner, remain the same. Back then the book was head and shoulders above other study skill manuals because of its emphasis on the learner and its style that actively engaged the reader with question after question. While study techniques were covered the reader was invited to reflect on issues like the nature of tertiary institutions (chapter 3), the assumptions of evaluation, (chapter 16) and many issues not considered by other study manuals.

The fourth edition now includes descriptions of the changing university scene, the social, cultural and political factors of the current times and their effects on learning and being a student in the 21st century. Given the current staff-student ratios and other pressures on staff the principles of becoming an independent learner are even more important and urgent than in 1981.

Each chapter begins with a discussion of the topics to be covered followed by a pithy three or four line description of the contents. The approach to study described in the book is non prescriptive and the reader is reminded that there is no “right way” and offered a variety of approaches with discussions of the differences, including some comment on what might be appropriate for different individuals. There are a large number of quotations scattered throughout each chapter, which illustrate the principles being described, very effectively. These are drawn from a wide variety of sources, which is a learning experience in itself. Finally there are further readings supplied at the end of the chapter.

The first five chapters are all about the individual learner who is encouraged to be very reflective about a wide variety of topics from the physical and emotional self to learning how to remember. The five topics are You, Planning when and how you study (approached in a refreshingly different way), Becoming an independent student, Asking your own questions, and Learning and remembering. I believe these should be compulsory reading for all students.

Chapters 6 to 10 deal with taking in and evaluating ideas, using a range of information sources, analysing and researching a topic. Approaches to reading and listening to lectures are covered here. Chapter 8 on using libraries and other information services has a useful section on identifying primary and secondary sources.

Chapters 12 to 16 deal with communication in both in writing and through discussion groups. There are useful ideas about participating in groups and the teacher’s authority in a group. Writing is approached by considering how to develop the skill with encouragement to write in different styles. I hope that the use of Blogs to encourage writing will be covered in any revisions as it does not get a mention here. Neither do Wikipedias in the chapter on information sources.

Chapter 16 deals with the important topic of evaluation in learning asking, why evaluate learning, who evaluates learning, how learning is evaluated. As you might expect self evaluation of learning is encouraged.

Finally there is an appendix dealing avoiding sexist language and attitudes.

I was surprised that, despite the emphasis of the book on learning, there was no mention of the conceptions of learning and other aspects of learning that have been investigated by the phenomenographic research methodology. Further the research on the intellectual development of the learner by William Perry is not mentioned either. I would have thought it would have been helpful to weave these topics into the text.

I have written enthusiastically about this book but I am left facing some very practical questions. Will students, who are under great pressures these days, be able to find time to read, reflect and act on the questions raised in this book? Will they be able to afford to buy another book with their limited resources? I fear that students just about manage the assessment tasks of their units and have little time for anything else. Yet I know that by following the ideas in the book students will not only be successful in their courses but will have a far more satisfying learning experience. How can they be convinced to spend the time on learning how to learn?

I know that the book has been written and revised on the basis of many years of use with thousands of students at Murdoch University so I wonder what evidence there is about the use of the book by students. Do they use the book and if so how helpful do they find it? I really hope there are positive answers to these questions.
A Learning Companion. Your guide to practising independent learning

Lorraine Marshall


Reviewed by Roger Landbeck

"A Learning Companion" is written by Lorraine Marshall one of the authors of "A Guide to Learning Independently". The two books naturally share the same approach, to encourage independent learning. However "A Learning Companion" develops the approach through a series of structured exercises compared with descriptive chapters. Hence there are exercises on Learning from Lectures and Understanding the nature of university essays.

The introduction sets out the principles, methods and outcomes of the exercises. This is followed by two sections on learning beginning with the encouragement to keep a learning log. Then follows four chapters on Learning from lectures and discussions, Reading, Numeracy and Writing essays. Thus there are some topics from "a guide to learning independently" that are not covered in this book. The chapter on numeracy is very useful particularly I guess, for those who find maths frightening.

Each exercise has a clear structure. This includes learning log entries to guide the student's writing, required reading mostly based on "a guide to learning independently", worksheets and a series of learning activities.

The exercises are based on considerable field testing with students at Murdoch University. However I am a little sceptical as to whether the suggested time allowed is realistic. For example I tried Activity 21 "Understanding the nature of university essays". There are seven parts to the activity plus six pages of reading.

The book is full of excellent material to develop independent learners, which enhances and reinforces the content of "a guide to learning independently". However I think it would require considerable dedication for students to work through the exercises in addition to their program of study, given the pressures and constraints they are under at present. I therefore find myself posing the same questions I put in the review of "a guide to learning independently". One way around this problem would be for the disciplinary units to incorporate appropriate material into their programs.

Ideally all students should purchase both these books but if it was only possible to afford one then it would be best to buy "a guide to learning independently". However copies of "a learning companion" should be made available through learning centres within an institution.

Roger Landbeck is editor of HERDSA News and moderates the HERDSA list serve.
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Incorporated

Announces TWO new HERDSA Guides

Managing Student Teams
Donella Caspersz, Judy Skene and Madeline Wu

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