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Enhancing the pivotal roles in workplace learning and community engagement through transdisciplinary 'cross talking'

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Workplace learning is an integral component of many tertiary studies that prepare graduates for professional practice. Various forms of workplace learning engage different stakeholders in varying ways. Through informal discussion between two colleagues from nursing and teacher education about workplace learning, a number of generic issues that transcend disciplinary boundaries were identified. This transdisciplinary dialogue particularly focused on the establishment of effective relationships between the university and the workplace and the culture of support that underpins best practice. A recent innovation in nursing education curriculum and practice was analysed as a basis for deliberations and evidence for reinforcing recommendations. The notion that key personnel are pivotal in developing and maintaining strong relationships was strongly endorsed. However a number of barriers to success were also shared. Informed by this 'cross-talk', implications are identified for enhanced workplace learning and the development of professional community relationships in nursing and teaching. The recommendations for improvement in developing university-profession alliances are considered and promoted as relevant for other discipline areas that involve workplace learning.

Keywords: collaboration; community of practice; student workplace learning

Introduction: Workplace learning

It is an expectation that higher education institutions accommodate workplace learning in the preparation and on-going learning in many professions. The experiences vary, but in general they reflect the needs of workers in modern knowledge-based economies. While workplace learning may be defined as learning derived from 'industry' experience, in reality it is much broader. Research evidence supports workplace learning as a prime source of new learning (Billet 2001) as well as a site for the application of existing practical and theoretical knowledge. Workplace learning is not just about learning to do a job; it is about personal development and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that transcend particular settings and roles that parallel the wider society or learning and working (Brennan & Little 2006). It also builds alliances that potentially

benefit all stakeholders through increased engagement and the capitalisation of specific knowledge and experiences (Walkington 2007).

A number of considerations are necessary to ensure that the best outcomes are experienced by the learner and all other stakeholders. While each professional group may exhibit specific or unique characteristics and needs, the necessity to build productive relationships is common to all. These relationships allow workplace learning practices to be evaluated and modified over time in order to respond to stakeholder and societal imperatives.

It is suggested here that 'cross-talking' across disciplines within the university setting can provide an enlightened perspective and the opportunity to learn from the experience of others. According to Hoit (2006), 'cross talking' is working across disciplinary boundaries (and therefore professional grouping boundaries) in the university setting to identify similarities in issues, roles and policies. It is a means to develop wider and more complex communities of practice, to develop support, general knowledge and challenge perspectives.

This paper seeks to articulate the considerations that underpin workplace learning across professional preparation courses resident in universities and to develop recommendations that guide continually improved practice through the enhancement of dedicated learning community attributes. The experience of the authors resides in the preparation of teachers and nurses. Reflecting upon a recent curriculum reform initiative in nursing education, comparisons are extrapolated to broader professional preparation. Amid the range of issues, emphasis is given to the pivotal roles of staff who establish and maintain the most productive partnerships and communities.

Sound bases for best practice in workplace learning

The overarching picture of universities and the professions working together is complex. In teacher education, and other professions more widely, theories and practice of work experience are well evidenced in the literature. In particular, enhancement of the partnerships between universities and professions has a positive influence on student learning as they provide authentic application of theory in practice. While conventional wisdom views workplace learning as simply a service for the university by the professions, there is strong evidence that the partnerships have potential for greater mutual benefits for the university students, academics and professionals alike (Walkington 2007). It is not merely the implementation of different processes that is required, but a rethinking of what exists and what benefit could emanate for all through capitalising upon the experience and expertise found in those participating in the process (Beck, Howard, & Long 1999; Bulloch et al, 2002; Goodlad 1994; Marlow & Nass-Fukai 2000; Peters 2002; Walkington 2006).

The discourse of partnerships and workplace alliances also embraces much that has been written about the formation of *communities of practice*. This term has had a number of interpretations surrounding the notion of social relations, with varying emphases including the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Brown and Duguid (1991), Wenger

(1998) and Wenger *et al.* (2002). A review of these authors' work by Cox (2005) exposes commonalities and differences; a commonly shared understanding is that 'given the right facilitation, technical mediation, provision of direct incentives and dedicated time such common ground can be the basis for forming dynamic groups based on direct social relations" (Cox 2005, p. 538). However, it is not merely the management of university-professional partnerships that will make them into communities of practice. Uppermost is the formation of collaborative relationships and a genuine empowerment to learn.

External influences on workplace learning

The environment for workplace learning is impacted upon by factors outside of the immediate influence of university faculties and workplace settings. Fortunately, the current focus in the tertiary sector to engage more with the wider community is emphasising the elements, strategies, policies and outcomes that will also support greater attention on workplace learning. In Australia this is evidenced by the formation of coalitions such as the Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) which "is committed to furthering the understanding, development, promotion and resourcing of effective engagement and knowledge exchange between universities and their communities" (AUCEA 2006).

Political, social and economic influence however, often places limitations upon the potential for improved workplace learning outcomes. The Australian, indeed international, socio-economic climate constantly demands more places in universities to accommodate professional preparation. In nursing and teaching, a shortage of trained professionals in specific areas of these professions is widely documented and has prompted political responses (AHWAC 2002). The directives are to increase more places in universities for these disciplines However with increased student numbers, comes the need to resource their learning adequately. Unfortunately there are scarcely sufficient resources to meet current needs (Walkington 2003). A recent occurrence provides an example of external intervention that fails to understand the complexity of the situation.

In early 2007 a joint party committee report (Top of the Class 2007) strongly supported the closer relationships required between schools and universities for improved teacher education. The Australian Federal Government at the time (The Australian, May 2007) tied specific funding to an increase in the number of days preservice teachers spend on professional experience (workplace learning) upon the assumption that more is better. While it may seem appealing, this surface treatment ignored many related issues critical for making a difference. While some funding has been made available, many universities will have difficulty meeting the targets, and the simplistic view of focusing upon quantity of learning rather than quality of learning is the obvious outcome; compromising learning outcomes. A more holistic treatment is required that acknowledges the complexity of workplace learning and the comprehensiveness of stakeholder needs. This demonstrated a political tendency to be reactive to socio-political pressures, and is one of fiscal expediency rather than based upon demonstrated need.

Balancing the very public attention to insufficient numbers of graduates for some professions is the emphasis on graduate quality performance indicators. The accreditation

of university programs and the criteria for graduate registration are developed by the professionals themselves. Standards serve to identify sound practice benchmarks and therefore drive decision making in pre-registration courses. Processes for course accreditation and graduate registration include requirements for integrated workplace learning, and as such provide a quality assurance mechanism (Brennan & Little 2006). Unfortunately, the high standard of outcomes expected is not supported by the means to achieve them.

University and professional staff charged with ensuring that workplace learning happens efficiently and effectively endorse that their ability to meet the needs of external decision-makers is seriously confounded by the lack of recognition and commitment in terms of necessary resources and intellectual capital (Walkington 2007). Availability of dedicated professionals who are fully engaged in the development of their profession is required. In the ever changing landscape of social and political influence upon higher education, the area of workplace learning rarely sees the sufficient support from the translation of the policy rhetoric to the practical implementation (Walkington 2005).

For example, insufficient university staff to support the field partners leads to a tendency for casualisation and potential inconsistency of practice. Additionally, the required content/knowledge of critical mentors/teachers in the field is variable in terms of assisting novices to learn. Professional learning of the partners is required to ensure the learning needs of the students are met. These are symptoms that demonstrate that workplace learning is still peripheral to the 'main game' and not given the resourcing and decision-making commitment that is required to accommodate best practice.

While it would be appealing to think of professional learning communities as seamless and totally collaborative, in reality their formation brings together different 'worlds'. Different imperatives drive cultures and agendas. While external influences will continue to shift the boundaries of learning potential, the greater development of professional communities between universities and the 'field' is the site for real growth. The following case study demonstrates an initiative in nursing education that made large scale changes to both the university curriculum and the relationships with the professional community. Reflection on its progress provides substance for greater understanding.

Nursing case study

During the development of a new Bachelor of Nursing curriculum in 2006 the University of Canberra engaged a large reference group from industry to support the process. In response to feedback from this group the new curriculum centred clinical practice as essential to learning to be a nurse. This shift in pedagogical philosophy demanded a new model of clinical education delivery be sought: an opportunity to also address many issues plaguing the provision of clinical education over some time. Existing clinical education models of supervised practice were unsatisfactory. The stimuli for the adoption of another model included decreased clinical budgets, increased interest in student learning by health facility staff, and decreased ability of units to sustain high numbers of students in one small area. A disturbing characteristic was that the teaching undertaken

by clinical nurses from the health facility became 'invisible' and therefore often not valued (Owen & Grealish 2006).

Contrary to recommendations in national reports such as the *National Review of Nursing Education* (2002) and the Senate Report *The Patient Profession: Time for Action* (2002), support for clinical education continues to be inconsistent. Given the contemporaneous national and international shortage of nurses, alternative clinical education models that recognise and support the teaching undertaken by clinical nurses were imperative (Grealish & Trevitt 2005).

The Dedicated Education Unit (DEU) model is a collaborative approach to clinical education that saw its genesis at Flinders University in South Australia (Edgecombe et al, 1999). The DEU model was proposed because it blends the best of hospital based training and university education and is both a model and a process for clinical teaching and learning. A primary benefit of this approach was that students become a part of a real work team not just a visitor, and learning an experiential and social activity. This type of learning required engagement, participation and shared understanding (Wenger 1998). Communities of practice theory (COPT) underpinned the DEU model particularly in that it understands practice, exposes the skills, and actively encourages participation in learning in the lived experience. The collaborative nature of the DEU maximised the achievement of student learning outcomes as well as nurturing closer partnerships between clinical staff and academics.

There are a number of key differences exhibited by the DEU compared to a traditional supervisory model that make it so effective (Gonda et al, 1999). Students are allocated to the one unit for the entire semester under the direct supervision of one of the registered nurse team members rather than a shorter placement under the supervision of an 'outsider', classically a sessional supervisor. Peer learning is integral as students from all year groups are placed together and provide mutual support. Learning outcomes are developed by the students in consultation with the academic staff member, the Principal Academic (PA), who also completes the student assessment of performance. Assessment is through ongoing consultation with clinical staff and the Liaison Nurse, a clinician from the area who has been selected for this role. The key to the success of a particular DEU lies with these two roles.

The PA supports the clinical staff who in turn support the students. This facilitation addresses the potential risk of students being immersed into a clinical environment where a lack of reflection may lead to unquestioned practices passing from one clinician group to the next. The learner must be engaged in this process to prevent learning becoming merely acquisition of skills; a common experience utilising a supervisory rather than DEU model (Grealish & Kaye 2004) .The Liaison Nurse provides the link with the university and is a central player in the daily provision of feedback on performance to students after clinical events.

Although a recent tri-university study by Clare et al (2003) proposed indicators for effective clinical education, there is no well established benchmark for quality in nurse education. The evaluation of the DEU model in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

was undertaken by the various reference groups comprised of key stakeholders from the DEU area of health, the PA (as Chair) and university students. The groups discussed the implementation and monitored outcomes. They considered research and other potential collaboration with the health service and university. Raw data from staff and student evaluations was reviewed by team members in relation to the model itself, the student learning and related workload issues. The issue of workload causes ongoing concern as some staff found the provision of care coupled with teaching students a daunting task.

Overall there was satisfaction with the implementation of the DEU. Staff reported being stimulated by the challenge to critically reflect on their practice whilst students commented on the importance of the role of the PA in facilitating their learning (Grealish et al 2005). In response to ensuring continued high level of student outcomes, particularly in the areas of confidence and critical thinking, a further project was designed to develop clinician facilitation skills. This project also addressed the importance of other health professions which require work-based learning through the adoption of an inter-professional learning (IPL) framework (Grealish et al 2007). This broader faculty-based project responds to the need for cross fertilisation of ideas and more resource efficient strategies.

Learning from the case study

The nursing case study identifies some critical issues in developing and maintaining effective workplace learning. Importantly, there was a recognition that change to existing practice was needed. It was more than merely a change in processes; it was a re-invigoration of the importance that workplace learning has in the formation of skilled professionals – a re-examination of curriculum and its implementation.

There exists a 'cultural boundary' between perceptions of learning by those in universities and those in the professional fields (Gore & Gitlin 2004). This is to be expected, as while the overarching goals of academics and professionals should be complementary, they also have a different focus. Professionals have already taken the journey of learning the theory which is embedded – often unconsciously – in their experience. For the academics in the nursing case study, the central role of clinical learning within the complexity of learning content and theory was renewed through reflection and evaluation related to the DEU.

The nursing development team also recognised the need to investigate other models of clinical practice. They were prepared to make large scale changes to traditional practice. Underpinning their move was the adoption of a strong theoretically-based model of communities of professional practice. This provided confidence in the outcomes that is often absent when change simply responds to the external imperatives of other agendas.

Another major attribute of the changed practice was the strong support for staff by the academic leadership. The resulting model of clinical practice for this nursing faculty embodied a greater commitment to making supportive and effective connections between the university courses and the practice of staff in the health professions. However the issues of sufficient resourcing continues to be an issue and mirrors the situation found in

a large number of university-profession alliances. At the boundary between university and professional culture, a greater concentration of dedicated and skilled personnel is required to facilitate the best learning outcomes. The more common scenario is that staff from both sides of the professional boundary stretch their own capacities and capabilities, and 'weaknesses' in the relationship occur under pressure. The project in the case study to develop clinician facilitation skills is one strategy aimed at addressing this issue.

Pivotal roles: Issues at the boundaries

At the core of successfully bringing about effective outcomes for the partners are the people who engage in the partnership activity at the 'grass roots' level. Teacher education research has shown that key personnel who span boundaries of the university/work place are critical in effecting success (Clark, Foster, & Mantle-Bromley 2005; Perry, Komesaroff, & Kavanagh 2002; Scanlon 2001; Utley, Basile, & Rhodes 2003). All personnel working across professional contexts represent the 'face' of their context (Cooper & Jasman 2002) and therefore deserve recognition as 'key' or 'pivotal' players in the alliances.

Those who cross educational-professional boundaries have been referred to as boundary spanners (Scanlon 2001; Utley et al 2003) and hybrid educators (Clark et al 2005). In essence the roles include a key person at the professional site (school, hospital etc) and one at the university (supervisor, liaison etc). The larger the scale of the workplace program, the more likely dedicated people are involved. Nuances of the roles will exist. Where they are situated, what their title is, what other tasks they undertake, will vary in context. However their ability to work diligently to establish rapport, protocol and support of program relationships and participants is universal.

In large workplace programs such as teacher education, the literature identifies roles such as 'School Coordinator', 'University Liaison'. In the nursing case study, 'Principal Academic' and 'Liaison Nurse' fill these roles. On a smaller scale, the titles may be less distinguishable as personnel undertake the liaison role as part of a wider brief. However, certain attributes maximise the boundary spanning effectiveness. Boundary spanners exhibit highly effective interpersonal skills (Hall & Danbu 2003; Hall 2005) and are sympathetic to the cross-cultural perceptions and ways of work (Gore & Gitlin 2004). They are aware of the potential conflicting nature of roles (Dallmer 2004) and able to negotiate shared practice. Being conscious of the attributes that enhance working together and committing the time to facilitating interaction and action, are characteristics that enhance the growth and success of professional partnerships (Walkington 2005).

There are other relationships (short-term projects, research etc) that are established between members of the university and the profession in which roles and responsibilities may be less formally expressed, but nevertheless the interaction between staff is just as important in defining and maintaining the perceptions and working arrangements between the two or more contexts. Issues of administration, responsibility and learning are clarified through respectful boundary spanning. Dedicated personnel to span the boundary are best placed to champion the importance of workplace learning as they are intimately involved and well informed.

In reality, there is an insufficient number of staff with the combined capability, motivation and support to fulfil these vital roles. In the nursing case study, evaluation of the DEU implementation confirmed the importance of these roles, yet its scope was limited by the number of appropriate academics in the faculty. Likewise teacher education faculties do not have the available staff to commit to these important tasks. There are issues not only of quantity, but 'quality' (defined as having the appropriate knowledge, skill and experience) staff.

The incidence of casual staff is extremely high. In such situations it is difficult to maintain a connected and consistent approach to high quality partnerships when commitment is governed by the number of hours worked. Casual and permanent staff alike also need the professional learning opportunities to ensure appropriate engagement in workplace learning. While programs such as the DEU and counterparts in teacher education continue to bring levels of improvement, their potential is limited by insufficient support for the pivotal interface roles by universities and employing authorities alike.

The barriers that continue to impede best practice across disciplines include a lack of recognition by the university processes for academics engaging in professional community work as academics continue to be rewarded most expansively for their research, not their community service. There is a lack of time release for professionals and academics alike to train to be effective mentors, to fulfil the pivotal roles. Additionally there is a lack of a culture in many professional settings that recognises the gains to be made for individuals and the profession through increased commitment to the development of future professionals.

Implications for practice

If the pivotal roles are not valued and supported, the effectiveness of partnership activity is severely limited and student learning outcomes compromised. While many graduates are making the transition into their chosen profession with apparent readiness, the reality is that quality is variable. Amid the array of success stories, anecdotes abound about graduates unable to make the successful transition into professional practice. Evidence has demonstrated that the variable quality of their workplace learning support precipitates this. Professional responsibility is about ensuring that graduates have meaningful and successful preparation; but in the current climate, it is very difficult to do so.

Recommendations for continual improvement in all areas of professional preparation programs must be based upon policy and practice that demonstrates:
- Recognition that workplace learning is fundamental to the preparation of professionals and is the responsibility of both University and employers.
- Recognition that workplace learning is a core component of university courses, and needs to be the valued business of all teaching staff.
- Leadership at the University and employer levels, encouraging collaboration, promoting participation and longer term outcomes – a cultural commitment.

- Commitment to provide resources - particularly human resources- and the training they require (Walkington 2003).
- Commitment to further research into communities of practice in higher education workplace learning.

With this foundation, an environment for improvement is established. Working across disciplines has been both illuminating and affirming. It is strongly recommended that more prominence is given to enabling evaluations, research and dialogue across professional disciplines in the area of workplace learning. The potential for mutually beneficial outcomes is heightened through networks of ideas and strategies.

The 'cross-talking' reinforced the need for universities and professions alike to move beyond the rhetoric about the importance of workplace learning to the commitment to greater practical support. Sufficient evidence-based research is emerging, and needs to continually emerge, to argue strongly for greater emphasis on the university-profession interface.

A renewed approach must focus upon universities and professions working as partners in professional learning, motivated by the potential for mutual benefits. It is not merely the implementation of different processes; it requires a rethinking of what exists and a consideration of what might be (Walkington 2007). Changing traditional practices is a difficult task; changing how people think about practices takes deliberation and commitment. This rethinking is nothing less than a shift in the 'culture' of professional learning for professional bodies, employers and universities alike. Providing focus on the interfaces and pivotal roles engages educators to value workplace learning as part of learning that begins in a university course, and continues throughout the life of a professional career.

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