

Academic advisors as agents of change in collaborations with faculty based staff

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An examination of the literature indicates that in order to meet the needs of students and enable optimum student learning, collaborative interdisciplinary initiatives that foster collegial trust and encourage joint ownership are essential. In this paper we will reflectively analyse a Flinders University experience that involved collaboratively developing and delivering a course to build commencing students' capacity to succeed in a university environment by addressing their academic literacy and professional communication skills. This initiative comprised incorporating a credit-bearing topic, jointly planned and taught by the Student Learning Centre and the English Department, into a range of undergraduate courses at Flinders University. In this paper we will consider what the literature can reveal about collaborations that involve academic learning units and other faculties. We will explore the primary attitudes, knowledge and skills required to form successful strategic partnerships that will ultimately lead to student success. The significance of unity of vision will be highlighted, along with the imperative for an understanding and appreciation of what relevant expertise each party can bring to the collaboration, in order to create the spaces for action, reflection and consultation to affect pedagogical transformation. The reality of what transpired at Flinders University was however, another matter. Through reflectively analysing our flawed experience, we will conclude this paper by offering a range of key suggestions that can be taken from our experience designed to guide other academic learning units and faculties as they embark on collaborative approaches to addressing student learning needs.

Key Words: interdisciplinary collaboration, academic advisors, whole-of-university approaches.

1. Introduction

In this paper we will reflectively analyse a Flinders University experience to involve an interdisciplinary team collaboratively developing, and then delivering, a program that sought to build commencing students' capacity to succeed in the university environment. This whole-of-university initiative involved incorporating a credit-bearing topic¹ designed to enhance commencing students' academic literacy and professional communication skills into a range of generalist degree courses. The literature (for example Kezar, 2005; Lamb & Visnovsa, 2012; Banta & Kuh, 1998) seemed to indicate that to best meet the students' needs and to create optimum student learning experiences within this initiative, a collaborative interdisciplinary approach ought to be adopted. Hence, this new credit-bearing topic was to be jointly planned

¹ At Flinders University the term topic is used to describe a subject that forms part of a degree.

and taught by the University's academic learning support unit, the Student Learning Centre (SLC), and the English Department located in the School of Humanities.

The reality of what transpired in this planned collaborative project was, however, another matter. In this paper we will identify the four key factors that contributed to our flawed experience, namely: that it was difficult to facilitate a whole-of-university initiative; that the collaborators did not hold common vision for the initiative; that the collaboration was not conducted with a full appreciation of the relevant expertise provided by all parties involved in the collaboration; and given these complexities, that there was an institutional reluctance to provide leadership in resolving them.

A number of studies have identified factors that are crucial to the success of collaborative interdisciplinary teams. Thus, we will commence this paper with a review of relevant literature to explore the primary attitudes, knowledge and skills that are required to form successful collaborative interdisciplinary partnerships. Additionally, the literature will be analysed to determine the factors that contribute to the successful implementation of whole-of-university initiatives and the importance of effective leadership in endeavours of this type.

We note that little has been offered in the literature with regards to the challenges faced when engaging with interdisciplinary collaboration and how to turn these obstacles into stepping-stones. Therefore, by reflecting on our flawed experience, we will conclude this paper by offering a range of key suggestions that can be taken from our experience that are designed to guide other academic learning units and faculties as they embark on interdisciplinary collaborative projects designed to optimise student learning experiences and outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Implementing and leading whole-of-university change initiatives

With the current focus on increasing student retention rates (McNaught & McIntryre, 2012; Murray, 2010), improving the quality of the student learning experience and student outcomes has become essential for all universities. Current Australian research indicates that whole-of-university, or what has been termed "third-generation" approaches, need to be implemented as a framework designed to increase retention rates and ensure student satisfaction (Kift, 2009; Nelson, Clarke, Kift, & Creagh, 2011). According to Nelson et al. (2011), approaches to retention have moved through three distinct phases in the last ten years. "First generation" initiatives concentrated on the impact of support services on the retention and success of commencing students. "Second generation" approaches shifted the focus to course structures and delivery modes as ways of improving student outcomes and retention. By way of contrast, the "third generation" or whole-of-university approach recommends institution-wide measures rather than localised actions. As Kift (2009) states, "third generation strategies will require an institutional vision ... that is shared by academic and professional staff who form sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries to ensure its enactment" (p. 1).

Traditionally, curriculum design has been the prerogative of the individual lecturer. However, as universities engage in greater efforts to facilitate student transition in order to reduce attrition rates, whole-of-university curriculum initiatives are increasingly being adopted (see for example Hicks & Lee, 2008; Burnett & Lamar, 2011). Burnett and Larmer (2011) identify a range of strategies that are designed to enhance the first-year student experience which can be utilised to implement positive long-lasting whole-of-university curriculum initiatives. These include: a coordinated and well-developed plan for action; processes for identifying and recognising good practice; funding to develop initiatives at the local level; and authentic support from a high-level champion. On the other hand, Newton (2003) highlights some of the barriers to the successful implementation of whole-of-university curriculum initiatives, which include: the loss of front-line academic autonomy; conflicts between local practices and local cultures; and the imperative of the "shift from teaching to learning" (p. 432).

The two most common approaches to achieving change in universities are top-down and bottom-up (Tsai & Beverton, 2007). The whole-of-university initiative that will be discussed in

this paper involved a top-down approach to implementing change. The top-down approach is characterised by implementing change through the imposition of centrally mandated policies (Cummings, Phillips, Tilbrook, & Lowe, 2005). However, Cummings et al. argue that senior managers, rather than individual academics, are best placed to grasp the broad issues that drive institutional decision-making because a diversity of views will always exist regarding whether, or why, change is needed. Hence, according to Cummings and his colleagues, “leadership is a critical element in change management in universities” (p. 10). As the case discussed in this paper illustrates, managing change in university settings involves decisions being made at the organisational level, which may well conflict with what the individual values or believes (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). As Blackwell and Preece (2001) point out, the first loyalty of many academic staff members is to their discipline, their department comes second, and the imperatives of the institution is much further down the list. Thus, according to McRoy and Gibbs, effective leaders managing change need to be able to communicate the desired vision, deal with the barriers to change and the fear of change, and recognise and engage with those who may be resisting the change process.

2.2. Collaborations between academic advisors and faculty lecturers

Developing a sustainable culture of collaboration needs the mutual support and interplay of three stakeholders: the institution, the community, and the individual. In the context of a university, the purpose of collaboration in this setting is ultimately to improve student learning and, thus, academic community members are encouraged to create spaces for reflection and pedagogical transformation (Moore, 2005). Elements of effective collaboration involve both formal and informal opportunities to meet, share and learn from colleagues, and the spaces for detailed consultation on planning and reflecting on teaching. In order to engender the growth of a professional learning community, such interactions need considerable support from all engaged in the process (Lamb & Visnovska, 2012). Effective collaboration calls for unity in diversity, a shared vision through mutual support and participation, and core acceptance of different perspectives (Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, & Yager, 2009). This occurs when:

... members understand and feel comfortable with their respective roles in the team ... feel comfortable sharing their point of view with other team members and participate freely in team discussions and decision making processes, and they feel positive about the team’s overall goals and functioning. (Lichtenstein, Alexander, Jinnett, & Ullman, 1997, p. 415)

When considering the development of students’ academic literacy, there seems to be a growing consensus that this is best addressed in the content of faculty-based courses (Purser, Skillen, Deane, Donohue, & Peake, 2008). A requisite element in successfully integrating academic literacy skills into faculty courses involves collaborative efforts between faculty lecturers and academic advisers. This is because, as Pan, Valliant, and Reed (2009, p. 139) assert, “academic support departments clearly have a vested interest in students’ academic success and retention”. The interactions occurring in this type of partnership can enhance the students’ capability to generate and apply knowledge, and foster a deeper engagement with the expected graduate qualities (Gunn, Hearne, & Sibthorpe, 2011). However, the status of most academic advisers in Australian universities is marginalised. As stated by Chanock (2007), in one-third of universities, academic advisers are classified as general staff, and for the other two-thirds, those who are classified as academics carry a heavier teaching load than academics in the faculties. In short, the nature of the role of the academic advisor is not valued as it should be (Chanock, 2007). The habits of thought which give rise to faculty lecturers viewing the process of teaching and learning which occurs in academic learning support centres as different to their own and somehow academically inferior, and the “othering” which creates a hierarchical structure where academic advisers find themselves at the lowest levels, creates a false dichotomy in the importance of the role of each type of university teacher.

Creating a culture of collaboration between academic advisers and faculty lecturers entails challenging past assumptions, values and purposes. Chanock (2007) argues that this will involve bridging the gap between sets of hierarchically valued pairs: research and teaching; theory and

practice; knowledge and skill; and thought and expression. Creating a culture of collaboration calls for a transcendence of self-interest with a view to holding meaningful and distinctive conversations. Moreover, mutual agreement and understanding needs to be accompanied by effective planning and design, good flow of communication, effective leadership, and clarity of vision (Harding, 2012). Effective collaboration fosters a respect for professional knowledge, the expertise of all protagonists, and provides a safe environment for the analysis of individual and collective beliefs and practices about teaching and learning (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009). Working with such full and complex situations is not an easy task, but it is essential for growth, because, as Pan, Valliant, and Reed (2009) attest: “true collaboration provides many challenges and opportunities” (p. 151). Examples of effective collaborations have resulted in changes to topic assignments and additional components to the curriculum (Donham & Green, 2004), and enhanced staff engagement, motivation and teaching practice (Donnison et al., 2009). In our case, an effective collaboration would have built commencing students’ capacity to succeed in a university environment by addressing their academic literacy and professional communication skills.

3. It seemed like a good idea ...

Akin to most other Australian universities, it had become clear there was a critical need to address the academic literacy skills of many first-year students at Flinders University due to the widening participation agenda. In an effort to provide these students with the best possible means of success, a First Year Literacy Expert Group was formed from across the faculties and other student support agencies at the university to review existing practices and to consider how the academic literacy of students might be enhanced and improved. Whilst a range of already existing practices were identified, it was considered by the Expert Group that from an institutional and student perspective these practices were variable in their intrinsic quality, unsystematic in their impact, and based more on coping strategies than on using academic expertise in the identification of academic literacy and communication difficulties (Brady, 2013).

The attention of the Expert Group was focussed on how a “third-generation” whole-of-university regime could support and assist faculties in addressing students’ academic literacy skills. They identified that the development of literacy skills within specific courses should be achieved *either* through the explicit integration of context-specific literacy content within particular course structures, *or* through the provision of a generic, university-endorsed, credit-bearing literacy topic. The view of the Expert Group was that the former option (context-specific integration) was best suited to professionally-oriented courses. Such courses are in the main subject to external accreditation expectations about the competency of their graduates, and indeed about the structure and content of the courses themselves. It was not uncommon that Flinders University’s professionally-oriented courses were already required to include course-specific literacy components. The option of a generic, University-endorsed, credit-bearing literacy topic was considered more appropriate for generalist courses. These courses are typically not required to develop profession-specific literacy skills, nor are they shaped or constrained by external accreditation requirements. The short-coming in this generic “one size fits all” approach is that it does not recognise the diversity of disciplinary discourses.

In relation to providing generalist literacy development and support for students at Flinders University, there had existed for an extended period of time two complementary, but significantly different, approaches. The first was a for-credit topic, *Professional English*, that was delivered by the English Department. The second was a range of not-for-credit workshops and seminars provided by the University’s learning-support unit, the SLC. In this regard, the Expert Group identified the potential for a collaborative partnership that, on the one hand provided the disciplinary expertise and logistical advantages of a faculty-based topic, and on the other hand the SLCs expertise in, and responsibility for, the support and development of students in their academic endeavours.

Thus, upon the recommendation of the Expert Group, a new credit-bearing topic *COMS 1001 Academic and Professional Communication* was created to replace *Professional English*. This

topic was to be developed and taught on an interdisciplinary collaborative basis by the English Department and the SLC.

4. So, what went wrong?

From the very beginnings of this endeavour the collaboration tripped and stumbled. Some early planning work was achieved but the outcomes of even these efforts were never to the satisfaction of either the SLC or the English academic staff. As the weeks, and then months, of the strained partnership elapsed, the possibility of any sort of collaborative enterprise evaporated. The “collaborating” parties came to see their position more as being in a forced marriage rather than a healthy partnership that gave hope and promise for the future. The collaboration was ultimately disbanded when the SLC withdrew from the endeavour. Since then, the SLC has given quite some time to reflectively consider what went wrong. As two academic advisors within the SLC who had an active involvement in the collaborative attempt, we propose there were four key factors that militated against the success of the partnership. The first is that this whole-of-university initiative was facilitated using a top-down approach with all the attendant difficulties that are associated with this type of change management. Secondly, the collaborators did not share a common vision for the outcomes of this initiative. Next, and most importantly, the SLC staff came to feel that the English academic staff were not open to taking into account the SLC staff’s relevant expertise when it came to designing the new topic. The final factor is that, given these complexities there was an institutional reluctance to provide leadership to resolve the issues.

4.1. Top-down management of whole-of-university initiative

The top-down genesis of this whole-of-university initiative, which included the imperative that it be achieved collaboratively, resulted in difficulties from the earliest days of the enterprise. Burnett (2006) highlights the importance of a coordinated and well-developed plan of action when implementing whole-of-university initiatives that involves communication with all of the staff involved. However, in this case the specific aims of collaborative nature of the initiative were not articulated, and staff members were not jointly consulted on the strategies needed to achieve these aims. So, whilst the SLC welcomed the opportunity to have a more direct involvement in faculty-based teaching, the English Department was far less open to the possibilities. There were two root causes for their resistance. The first was the expressed anguish that resulted from a formerly successful topic being forcibly replaced by the new initiative. Secondly, despite having expressed their reservations about engaging in the collaboration, they were forced to do so once the final recommendation had been made. As Scott (2003) notes, collaborative cultures do not emerge spontaneously, they need to be coached and moulded. Therefore, having this change imposed in a top-down manner meant that there was little likelihood of it being conducted in a collaborative spirit with a shared vision for the project.

4.2. A shared collaborative vision?

The attempt by the English Department and SLC academic staff members to collaborate on developing teaching and learning resources, and teaching and assessment strategies, was not successful for several reasons. Peacock (2008) emphasises that the strength of a collaborative process lies in the necessity of articulating a shared vision in order to establish a unified environment that fosters trust and communication, engenders joint ownership of the process and the content, and solves problems collegially. In short, according to Kezar (2005), “having a mission that respects and encourages collaboration is critical” (p. 53). Thus it is not surprising that one of the main reasons underpinning the failed collaborative experience was a lack of unified vision for the planned outcomes of the collaboration. It was the English Department’s view that the new initiative would lean heavily, if not entirely, on the tried and tested grammar-based content of the defunct *Professional English* topic. Whilst contemporary literature points to the importance of 21st century literacies (Beetham, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2009; Werts, 2008), the English Department was more content to settle for a traditional, well-practiced pedagogy,

rather than explore new approaches. The SLC's vision was to embrace a more expanded view of 21st century university literacies and fresh pedagogical approaches (Miller & Schulz, 2013). This divergence in vision was clearly a consequence of the lack of articulation of the aims and outcomes of this project, and a lack of consultation with the key players, in the recommendation and implementation phase to which we have already referred. It may have been that the University's institutional vision was to develop student learning and/or support student retention, however this broad vision did not translate into the plans of the academics working at the "grass roots" in terms of formulating strategies to achieve these outcomes.

4.3. Collaboration requires the taking into account the relevant expertise of all parties involved in the collaboration

Academic advisors, as specialists in the teaching of academic language and skills, can provide a distinctive insight into the relationships between learning, teaching and assessment, and in consultation with faculty-based staff, academic advisors are able to develop joint curricula to support student learning. Such collaborations can engender institutional changes where spaces are created not only to encourage collaboration, but also to provide adequate and timely support (Purser et al., 2008). In the case of the SLC and English Department collaboration, the Faculty staff members did not appear to enter the partnership with a positive viewpoint relating to planning and team teaching alongside academics from outside their discipline. This attitude prevented staff associated with both disciplines from considering the nature of their task, and preparing accordingly and effectively. It was heartening to sense that the English Department academics viewed traditional literacy as a key component of their teaching aims. However, it was disappointing to note their lack of openness to collaborating with the academic colleagues whose mandates were the development of academic and literacy skills in all university students.

Peacock (2008) eloquently describes the role of academic advisors as staff who spend time with a large cohort of students, engaging with students through face-to-face, print or online interactions. In doing so, they are able to ascertain students' needs and respond strategically, mindful to create spaces for deep learning, empowering students to become critical thinkers and writers, and enabling them to become active agents of their own learning. Academic advisors do all of this whilst continually being concerned with the whole-of-university vision for student retention. With regard to this failed collaborative experience, there seemed to be a lack of understanding about the role of academic advisors, and this may have led to a failure to fully appreciate the depth of the knowledge, skills, and abilities the SLC staff had to bring to the collaboration.

According to Donham and Green (2004), the attributes needed to develop a culture of collaboration include having mutual goals and mutual respect established on an "equal footing by those parties engaged in the collaborative enterprise" (p. 314). In the case of SLC and English Department partnership, what needed to occur was the recognition that what SLC academics brought to the collaborative table was specialist expertise. This expertise would have both complemented and supplemented the expertise brought to the table by English Department staff had it been recognised and acknowledged. What was lacking, as Chanock (2007) notes, was the "means to bring us [the SLC] into the same conversations [and] to share what we know on the basis of mutual respect" (p. 274).

4.4. Change management needs leadership

Leadership plays a key function in the university change management processes (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Cummings et al., 2005). However, in this case, the final key factor that militated against the success of this particular institutional change, was the reluctance of senior administrators at both institutional and faculty level to exercise leadership to manage the floundering collaborative process. Perhaps this ought not to be surprising because according to Kezar (2005), collaborations usually fail if those involved do not have a sense that senior administrators place importance on collaborative endeavours of this type. As Burnett and Larmar (2011) put it, what was required in this case was "authentic support from a high-level champion" (p. 25). The tensions and complexities that were evident in the struggling

collaboration between the English Department and the SLC were highlighted on a number of occasions to senior administrators who could have stepped in to actively guide and manage the process. Unfortunately, this did not occur. Thus, the nuances of institutional roles and responsibilities, and decision-making-and-taking lines, conspired against any concerted effort by those who could intervene being prepared to do so. It was only when the collaboration had almost entirely collapsed that any active intervention was taken, and by then it was too late.

5. And, what did we learn as academic advisors about being agents of change in collaborations with faculty staff?

At the risk of generalising, many academic advisors in the past would not have viewed themselves as “agents of change” in the university context. However, Percy and Skillen (2000) argue the contrary is now the case, asserting that academic advisors “have the opportunity in the current culture shift of the modern university to have a far-reaching impact on the skills of all students by working within the system, at the curriculum level with academic staff” (p. 250). In short, academic advisors are now well positioned to become effective agents of change in collaboration with disciplinary faculty staff to enhance students’ chance of success. Thus, we believe that the following key reflections taken from our flawed initial collaborative experience could guide other academic learning units and faculties as they embark on interdisciplinary collaborative projects designed to optimise student learning experiences and outcomes.

5.1. Academic advisors have much to contribute

The very nature of academic advisors’ work means that they gain broad perspectives across all disciplines, across the various stages of university study, and across the cultures and contexts from which the students come (Chanock, 2007). This breadth of vision is principally formed by the extensive and intensive interactions with the students they meet. Additionally, the very nature of academic advisors’ work means that they have entrée into the design of curricula at the discipline level, the texts and assessment that lecturers are assigning, and the comments that are written on students’ work. Academic advisors have a sense of the commonalities and contrasts in the student experience, and the sources of the difficulties that students have in their learning. On the other hand, faculty-based lecturers engage with a limited range of academic discourses, usually confined to their own discipline. Thus, our first reflective suggestion is that when academic advisors are seeking to act as agents of change in collaborative endeavours with faculties, they should demonstrate their experience and expertise across a range of discourses.

5.2. Collaboration requires a change in thinking

Well-entrenched habits of thought and attitudes affect the unfolding of the collaborative effort when it involves academic advisors and faculty staff. These need to be addressed and changed at the institutional culture level. As Angelo (1999, p. 2) asserts, change requires “a deep understanding of what ‘collegiate learning’ really means” and that “building a shared vision for transformative change requires shared mental models” (p. 7). Furthermore, Ewell (1997) describes institutional change as requiring fundamental shifts as stakeholders adopt new perspectives. This will be partially achieved when academic advisors are recognised and acknowledged for the breadth and depth of their knowledge and experience, as we have just suggested. Negative points of view that may arise from tendencies toward competition and self-interest can be gradually overcome. False dichotomies will be avoided when each collaborator understands and welcomes diversity in experiences and point of view. A unified vision prevents the tendency to see the “other” as competition and put an emphasis on the ultimate purpose of the task at hand. Mutual respect based on trusting the expertise in each other, and working together for a common cause, becomes the key.

5.3. Collaborations need to develop organically over time

In order to be successful, the process of developing a culture that promotes collaboration between academic advisors and faculties are ideally organic in nature, built over time, and not imposed, as in our flawed experience. Angelo (1999, p. 10) argues that a genuine collaboration

“resist[s] the understandable urge to rush the change process” and that “experience shows that most successful academic innovations have taken years to bear fruit”. Thus it is through taking time, together with action, reflection and consultation, that the institution of the university, and the community of teachers and learners, can begin to consider that they are treading a common path, and advancing together. As an example, Symons, Almberg, Goh, and McGowan (2012) describe a collaboration between one language expert with three disparate discipline colleagues which was characterised by organic growth, teamwork, critical thinking, and communication, which resulted in this interdisciplinary collaborative team feeling “better equipped and empowered [in] delivering content to students” (p. 310). The more mutual the exchange of knowledge and experience between academic advisors and faculties, the more these partners are able to be involved in strategic partnerships where services coalesce and support one another. Consequently, there will be a greater basis for identification of best practice in order to provide an enabling service for the students, and ultimately enhance the university’s vision and mission.

5.4. Collaborations require nurturing and leadership

The interactive nature of the processes is crucial to any collaborative endeavour, and progress is achieved through the nurturing of key participants. This collaborative relationship needs to be characterised by cooperation and reciprocity, and strong dedication to promote the interest of all involved. Recent research has shown the value of change champions in achieving this end (Cummings et al., 2005). According to Cummings and his colleagues “a good change champion is passionate about her or his cause or change” (p. 10) and thus is able to harness the collaborative effort to achieve the desired outcomes. The literature is calling for “third-generation” whole-of-institution approaches, thus the institution needs to take a responsibility to demonstrate a nurturing and consultative leadership as such approaches are developed and implemented. This type of leadership needs to be invested with authority, together with a dedication to the welfare and interests of all concerned, in order to win their confidence and respect. With nurturing and leadership of this nature we believe that academic advisors and faculty staff working as a community of collaborators ought to be far more unified in their actions than we were able to achieve.

6. Conclusion

We hope not to give the impression that our flawed experience in collaborating with faculty staff should be a salutatory message that this situation ought to be avoided at all costs by academic advisors and learning-support units in the future. Rather, the SLC is treating it as a learning experience from which we can grow and develop. Hopefully other academic advisors and learning-support units can benefit from the hindsight of our experience as well. By initiating faculty-based interdisciplinary collaborations, we believe that academic advisors can have a positive influence on the success of individual students on the one hand, and contribute to whole-of-institution initiatives, on the other.

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