Rounding the edge(s) of a (torrid) region: Designing Arts capstone curriculum at JCU

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This paper concerns the development of an interdisciplinary capstone subject for Bachelor of Arts students at James Cook University that showcases the faculty-based approach WIL strategy outlined by Patrick et al. (2008) where WIL is incorporated into core curriculum through “sequential teaching and assessment approaches from first to final year”. In 2010, two first year core subjects were introduced into the BA to address transition, retention, and skill-building. The design of the capstone subject follows this initiative and also targets a unique set of conditions: enhancement of the stagnant outlook for graduate transition and employability; embrace of JCU Singapore student cohort; and address to the university’s strategic intent in re-branding its historical tropical profile and its expanding perspectives in the Asia-Pacific region. BA3000 Arts Edge, the resulting subject, represents not only an expansive exercise in applied and self-directed learning for students but also a unique enterprise in transdisciplinary staff interaction as well as engaging alumni, community and industry. The project has posed some formidable challenges and also exposed potential WIL and capstone interfaces. We discuss these emerging outcomes and this reconfigured space of learning and teaching in describing the development of the key activity, “The Edge”.

Keywords: Capstone, WIL, Liberal Arts, Interdisciplinary, Graduate Attributes, Transition

Introduction

The impetus for the establishment of a core curriculum in the Bachelor of Arts at James Cook University originally stemmed from a university-wide curriculum refresh that commenced at the initiative of the Vice Chancellor in 2008. This also coincided with the then recent restructuring of four separate schools – Humanities, Psychology, Social Science, and Social Work and Community Welfare - into departments of the current School of Arts and Social Sciences, a process that was accompanied by a dramatic shedding of courses and subjects in each department. The subsequent decision to introduce core curriculum in the Bachelor of Arts was therefore conceived and developed in a larger process of institutional change and shake-up. At the same time, the changes reflected the need to constructively align curricula with employer needs and articulate the value of the BA in the incremental development of much sought-after graduate attributes, a key objective of work integrated learning (WIL) activities.

Two first-year core subjects in the BA were developed with the aims of supporting students’ transition into university and also instilling cohesion in a formerly disparate set of Arts majors. BA1001 Time, Truth and the Human Condition and BA1002 Networks, Narratives and the Making of Place were first taught in 2010, employing a thematic framework – the conceptualization of time and space from various disciplinary perspectives – to derive the more practical pedagogies of first-year transition. Elsewhere, our colleagues (Kuttainen, et al., 2010) have discussed the design of these subjects and the student profile addressed, in the aims of “establishing cohort identity” and “inspiring students and showing them pathways through the BA” as well as providing grounding in academic literacies (writing, research) and “identifying and supporting students at risk”. The arrival of the capstone, BA3000 Arts Edge, in 2012 will thus cap not only the studies of that first group of students of the redesigned BA, but also the rollout of the core curriculum. With its strong commitment to WIL, the faculty has adopted this coordinated and sequential approach in recognition of the role capstones play in facilitating programme integration and student transition to professional practice as part of a faculty-based WIL strategy (Patrick et al. 2008). The establishment in 2011 of an Arts Advisory group drawn from industry, government and regional community is a further stage in establishing external WIL affiliation. The establishment of a constructive partnership with stakeholders is important so that all parties share a common understanding and appreciation of the mutual benefits accruing from engaging in WIL activities (McDermott, 2008).

Not coincidentally, these local developments coalesced in a period of national and international transition in Arts pedagogy (see Gannaway and Trent, 2008), in which the traditions of Liberal Arts learning are increasingly adapted to vocational outlooks. However, Arts is not alone in developing core curriculum at JCU as first-year
cores and third-year capstones have sprouted in the neighbouring School of Creative Arts’ programs, and in a companion degree to the BA, the Bachelor of Social Science.

The Contexts of the Tropics

The identity of JCU as Australia’s university for the tropics also now forms a strand in the approach to Arts curriculum. JCU was originally established with an express agenda to serve the tropical regions of northern Australia, the tropics being climatically a “torrid” zone by another term. In recent years, this brief has been revisited and reinvigorated to rethink JCU’s relationships to tropical regions of the world, and to the non-Australian geographic regions that abut Australia’s north, namely South East Asia and the Pacific region. While the character of tropical research seems self-evident in marine science and botanical scholarship, all JCU faculties are now challenged to engage with the tropical agenda. This process has resulted in some of the more prosaic fields of Humanities and Social Science identifying and highlighting the unique tropical aspects of their subject and course content and in profiling educational goals for students. Thus Political Science more readily identifies its specific expertise in the Asia Pacific region; History profiles its particular approaches to Indigenous and environmental histories; the Journal of Tropical Psychology emanates from that department, and so on.

The emerging reformulation of final year studies as a transition zone is itself a torridly contested one. It primes what Pamela Heath (2011) characterizes as the “tension” between the “values of the market-place and values of “education as a practice of citizenship” (p. 99). This has been manifest in our design discussions of BA3000 in a debate about whether the capstone should facilitate employability and postgraduate pathways, especially as Arts students do not have a singular profile and some mature-age Arts students will be approaching the career workforce for the second or third time, unlike younger students in first-year transition. This issue has been put a number of times by one member of staff with reference to a star graduate of past years who “why,” our colleague has repeatedly provoked, “would he do a capstone”?

In fact, the majority of JCU’s Arts students are in an under-25 age group, although there is some variance among the three campuses of Townsville, Cairns and Singapore where BA3000 Arts Edge will be offered. Townsville and Singapore have more in common demographically – age and gender – than Townsville and Cairns as Cairns students are statistically the oldest of all three campuses. Students are predominantly female on all campuses – around 80%. In spite of JCU’s reputation for the highest enrolment of Indigenous students of any university in Australia, these students represent around 2% overall, and in Arts, this trend up to around 4%. There is no such category in Singapore. The students of Arts Edge in 2012 will not deviate greatly from this profile. But the Singapore cohort who are potentially the greatest in number in future are almost exclusively Psychology students owing to the foundation role of Psychology in the recently established campus. As the participation of Singapore students in industry-interfaced activities is constrained by national regulations, this has also influenced the options for the Australian groups. Designing the capstone to allow Singapore students to engage in on-campus WIL projects is one strategy to go around country-imposed barriers to obtaining an internship placement.

Data on employment outcomes for alumni has only recently begun to be gathered and is sketchy to say the least. Part of the value of Arts Edge will be in establishing a record of students’ aspirations and employment outcomes as they pass through this subject. Some significant differences are to be expected as historically, students of JCU, including in Arts, are drawn from the North Queensland region, and are reluctant to leave to seek work even at the expense of quality employment. Family and regional values tend to prevail, except in a minority of instances, in which students have arrived from outside of the immediate region and depart for employment following graduation or some head off to pursue pathways that are simply not available locally.

Discussion

Initial discussions on BA3000 commenced in 2010, with a working group comprised of a large contingent of interested academic staff from all departments, along with Honours and graduate students, and librarians. The interests were diverse, ranging from a sense of “ownership” of students in discipline majors to more motivated senses of interdisciplinary break-out in Arts pedagogy. In summary, however, the interests of this group ranged from those in favour of vocationally-oriented activities, to those who saw a capstone as a potential catchment for Honours and postgraduate students, to those with specific interests such as Indigenous education. Some staff members viewed the capstone as something of a loss to students, forced to surrender their academic liberty to an imposed programmatic view of Arts. Some envisaged the capstone as a space for purposeful reflection on
undergraduate studies and a formal rite of passage outwards; looking back and looking forward. Others saw tremendous potential to harness and cap discipline learning, and to dress this with some vocational skills that students would otherwise struggle to acquire informally, and, with WIL components, contact with potential employers.

A number of templates and precedents were viewed from the growing literature on capstones but none seemed to cap a BA. Fyffe et al. (2011, p. 5) alliteratively name the magnet (discipline-specific capstone), the ‘mandate’ (meets external criteria such as for accreditation), and the ‘mountaintop’ (supposedly “truly interdisciplinary, crossing majors and bringing diverse groups…together”); and Kift (2011) has coined the “mirror” (reflecting on learning and outcomes “against program goals”). Fyffe et al. emphasise the variety of capstones and capstone experiences. Indeed, none of the models seemed to ideally fit our aims. Moreover, a number of models seem formulated from variants of discipline capstones and few were based in multi-campus scenarios.

From the earliest meetings, however, consensus began to emerge around a view that the capstone should be an exercise in transition and collaboration, challenging students to apply their acquired disciplinary knowledges in an externally-focused, scenario-based collaborative project such as a conference on a theme generated by the student group. This proposed format quickly emerged in preference to options for internships and placements, which presented as inadequate to the objective to cap a course of study. While the need for career skills such as CV design and interviews were seen as important, an overly vocational approach was deemed unworthy of degree credit, and already available to students in some form in university services. In the discussions, greater consensus emerged around ideas for activities than an abiding rationale for the subject, and few of the ideas put forward developed epistemological carriage.

In overcoming concerns as to how students would respond to a capstone, some consensus began to congeal around a central question that was attributed in discussion to an imaginary Indigenous student: “how will my BA work for me?” This question helped forge an initial sense in the working group as to where the interests of capstone makers and transitioning students might intersect. But the question of students’ diverse major interests and the unpredictable weighting of discipline groupings in a BA capstone class proved a consistent wall, and the theoretical landscape of capstone design is as yet rudimentary for overcoming this issue. “[A] crowning course [unit] or experience coming at the end of a sequence of courses [units] with a specific objective of integrating a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole” (Durel cited in McNamara, Kift et al., 2010) – a capstone thus defined represents a particular challenge in a BA.

Eventually, however, we perceived the need to focus on what prospective capstone students would hold in common that would enable them to work together as a group. First, most students will have completed the first-year core subjects, BA1001 and BA1002, and thus have a sense of pathway through the BA. Second, all capstone students face the experience of transitioning out of their undergraduate studies. Third, all of our students will be in some way subject to the situational semiotics of becoming alumni in the Tropics. By also recognizing the need to address some skills-based learning, the final shape of the subject has emerged, and the notion of transition has emerged in the framework and fundament of BA3000 Arts Edge.

The Edge

The subject name, Arts Edge, suggests both the precipitous character of transition as well as the launch of the soon-to-be-minted graduates. The format of the subject comprises a series of seminars supporting the theme of transition and provoking contemplation of the soon-to-be qualified self, a process supported in the first assessment, “My BA”. The collaborative project, The Edge, is at the centre of the subject but with a series of introductory lectures that draw in staff representatives from various disciplines. The proposed seminar topics include: Transitioning out; the psychology of change and leaving (Psychology); Networked writing; professional writing and the workplace (Humanities/Writing); Amazing Alumni: Invited BA alumni in an interactive panel with students; The Politics of the Workplace: industrial issues and contexts (Political Science/History); Cultural Diversity in the workplace (Indigenous Studies); Team and Group work (Social Work). Students will also caucus in a weekly forum regarding the main project, The Edge, and by week 3 will pitch proposals for their contribution to a panel of lecturers and Course Advisory Group members.

The first item of assessment, My BA, will involve an individual creative reflection on undergraduate studies to date and how the participant is positioned to contribute to The Edge. Following the seminars, three weeks are allowed for independent preparation of The Edge, all arrangements for which will fall to students, with the scope to seek the support of chosen mentors. A panel of lecturers and Course Advisory group members will
assess the presentation of The Edge, based on agreed criteria. In the following week, students will meet with the coordinator again to debrief and discuss the final assessment, The Last Word, which will require a detailed reflection on the event and an oral component in the form of an exit interview.

Conclusion

The settled format for Arts Edge meets a number of aims of the design group, and retains scope for students to take the running while facing the profound challenges of personal transition and collaborative enterprise.

WIL is highlighted throughout in activities that serve to assist in improving students’ ability to both transfer theory to practice and develop professional skills/understanding. Student experience is structured so that learning goals are set and achieved (Martin, 2006) and work-like tasks are integrated into the subject. The involvement of alumni and the Arts Course Advisory Group in the subject design are considered indicators of success of faculty-based WIL as identified by University of Canberra’s Teaching and Learning Center for its own faculty-based WIL projects (”Criteria for evaluating Faculty-based WIL,” 2010). By the date of this conference, BA3000 Arts Edge will have run for the first time and the students’ reactions and responses across all campuses will be in hand, and we shall review those findings. It is also expected that as best practice, the provision of WIL in an on-campus subject rather than the usual internships will unburden the university of the problem of too few placements. For international students, this may also address the expressed disappointment of students unable to fully participate in off-campus placements due to specific country and legal restrictions. The torrid zone of transition pedagogy is still to be navigated in Arts Edge; and the purpose and value of a BA capstone is as yet unconfirmed, and it will doubtless play quite differently in Townsville, Cairns and Singapore, however uniformly the subject content is posed. The Edge is potentially a transformative space for students and for Arts staff at JCU, a challenge that may lastingly re-define the character of Arts in the Tropics.

References


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