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Collaborative inquiry using 'learning' projects

Pauline Hagel

Deakin University, Burwood, Australia
pauline.hagel@deakin.edu.au

Kerrie Saville

Deakin University, Burwood, Australia
kerrie.saville@deakin.edu.au

Melissa A. Parris

Deakin University, Burwood, Australia
parrism@deakin.edu.au

Fiona Graetz

La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia
F.Graetz@latrobe.edu.au

Fara Azmat

Deakin University, Burwood, Australia
fara.azmat@deakin.edu.au

In this paper we describe a collaborative inquiry process underway within the business faculty of an Australian university. This process involves both Human Resource Management (HRM) and Management academics and was commenced in October 2007 with the broad aim of developing and sustaining an ongoing conversation within these disciplines to enhance our teaching and the learning of our students. A key vehicle for facilitating the inquiry process is a network of learning projects. In this paper we provide a brief outline of these projects and use social learning theory to discuss and evaluate the role of projects in sustaining the inquiry process.

Keywords: collaborative inquiry, scholarship of teaching and learning, social learning theory, student experience

Collaboration in action

The collaborative inquiry described in this paper has been underway for approximately 18 months. It involves academics within the management and human resources management fields, all of whom are part of the same school – one of four schools within a business faculty of an Australian university.

Our collaborative inquiry commenced with the broad aim of developing and sustaining an ongoing teaching and learning conversation within these disciplines to enhance our teaching and improve student learning. While we started with no clear form or predetermined mechanisms, our inquiry has evolved through the conduct of a series of small, interrelated learning projects (Wenger, 2000). The mechanism of learning projects has proved to be an important way of performing and developing our inquiry.

In this paper we provide an overview of the specific institutional and individual context of our inquiry. We describe four learning projects that have formed part of our inquiry. Each project is described in the voice of the main project facilitators. Finally, we use social learning theory to discuss and evaluate the role of the learning projects in sustaining our inquiry.

Institutional and individual context

The school is part of a multi-campus and multi-disciplinary faculty of a large Australian university. Our students are predominantly undergraduates and comprise both domestic and international students. Most of the undergraduates we teach are enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com). Our students are those who choose to include a management or Human Resource Management (HRM) major in their degree. Approximately 30 per cent of our students attend externally (i.e., by distance education). Both internal and external students use online technologies extensively to engage in their studies.

The 'HRM and Management group' within the School comprises approximately 20 full-time academics across three campuses separated by a distance of some 300 kilometres. The group is loosely organised with a 'discipline head' whose main task is to allocate people to teach the units of study on offer each trimester. Most of these are undergraduate units in the B.Com. Given the school only delivers units within a faculty-wide degree course, the main teaching 'activity system' of the school (Engeström, 1999) is focused on developing and delivering each separate unit of study. The individual academic is responsible for a discrete unit of study and may make decisions about curriculum, delivery and assessment largely in isolation from the decisions being made for other units by other individuals. While 'unit teams' exist as an administrative requirement, these are often operationally discrete. Further, these may be teams in name only with the main responsibility for decision-making falling on the individual 'unit chair', particularly in units where there is a high reliance on sessional staff and full-time academics are stretched across several units.

In summary, in this atomistic system of production there is little requirement or time for discussion and dialogue between academics in teaching their units. Yet real improvement in teaching practices and the quality of the student experience are likely to be compromised without extensive, critical and sustained discussion and collaboration.

Collaborating in the scholarship of teaching and learning

According to socio-cultural theories of learning, the learning of individuals is strongly influenced and enhanced by the activities and perspectives of the group (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). Knowledge is situated in the group rather than the individual as individuals become members of the collaborative community – working towards their common goals (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, the group, working and learning together, can develop important group competencies that are distinct from those of the individual (Boreham, 2004). The question in university teaching is how to capture and develop the knowledge, experience and learning of individual academics so that the group competencies are enhanced, collective benefits achieved and outcomes for students are optimised. To this end academics are encouraged to engage in the 'scholarship of teaching'.

Devlin (2008:2) identifies four key aspects of the scholarship of teaching: rigorous and thoughtful investigation of student learning; communicating and disseminating findings, including through presentations and publications; subjecting one's work to critical review and

evaluation by members of one's community; and, the knowledge-building that results from the sharing of such outcomes. Similarly, Andresen (2000) identified three attributes of scholars: critical reflexivity, commitment to publication and an ethic of inquiry. While individuals may engage in the scholarship of teaching, it is hard to see how it can be effective without this engagement taking place collaboratively. As noted by Kreber & Cranton (2000) and Shulman (1993), the process of scholarship requires conversations between peers, collaborative evaluation of ideas and the critique of products or artefacts of teaching through peer review.

The process of scholarship (rather than its product) is essentially that of action research. Action research involves engaging in reflection and improving practices, collaborating with others in examining practices and making public the resultant experiences and reflections (Reason, 2003; Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart & Zubre-Skerritt, 2002). It is a collaborative inquiry process that explicitly acknowledges the social context of learning and action in university teaching. If collaborative inquiry in teaching and learning is desirable, then how can it be developed and sustained to improve teaching and enhance student learning?

Developing and sustaining collaboration – design considerations

Etienne Wenger's ideas about communities of practice are useful for considering the requirement for successful collaboration. Wenger (2000) identifies six design elements that can be used to shape and facilitate a community of practice. These include events (essentially the public occasions that bring the group together), leadership (multiple forms or roles that evolve and change as required), connectivity (methods of communication and the richness of relationships), membership (size and nature), learning projects (the group's learning agenda) and artefacts (documents, tools, stories, symbols). In our collaboration, we have found learning projects, in particular, to be useful in facilitating our collaboration.

Learning project agenda

Our project agenda has evolved over time in response to changing circumstances, emerging opportunities and different interests. In this section we provide a brief description of four learning projects. We describe the origins, motivations, processes and outcomes of each and the connections between them. The project descriptions are written in the voice of the main project facilitator(s).

Project 1: HRM and management review

Circa 2007. I had been frustrated some time with the reduced opportunities to talk with my colleagues in the school about teaching and learning issues and knew I was not alone in this frustration. We were all busy with the 'administrivia' of teaching, grappling with WebCT Vista (Blackboard), completing marking and squeezing in our research. Who had time to discuss or reflect on our teaching practices, exchange ideas with others, implement longer-term curriculum changes, or consider student outcomes?

Snatched conversations while passing in the corridors were not enough. Somehow we needed to open up a 'space' for discussion within the school. I approached my discipline head with my ideas for a project to address my concerns. Her response

to me was: “I’d be willing to support a formal review of all our units and provide you time release to do it”.

Hhmm...a ‘formal unit review’... That was not what I had in mind. Of course I understood the perspective of the discipline head: she had to be able to justify the project to the head of school and provide a rationale for my time release. A unit review and written report would add legitimacy to the project. But was a unit review the right vehicle for what I had envisioned?

Over the next couple of months some discussions ensued in which different interested parties had their say about the content and process of the review. The ensuing proposal was eventually presented to the entire discipline group at a face-to-face forum towards the end of 2007. The objectives, scope and methodology of the review were further amended by the group. Formally, we agreed to a number of objectives of which the following were key:

- Improve our teaching practices to enhance student learning, their experience and satisfaction.
- Provide an ongoing forum for critical reflection and conversations about quality teaching and learning within the disciplines.
- Provide evidence of the quality of teaching and learning in the discipline that can be used by academics to demonstrate their professional practice.
- Assist individuals to act strategically by aligning their own goals and development needs with those of the School, Faculty and University.

By early the following year a project team had formed and we had finalised the method for the unit reviews. These were to comprise a discussion between a ‘reviewer’ and each unit chair or coordinator. Two people ended up sharing the role of reviewer. Unit chairs were contacted by email to make a time for the discussion to take place. In preparation, they were encouraged to self-assess their units and teaching using a ‘pro forma’ that included an evaluation of various aspects including the unit content, objectives, teaching and assessment practices, online sites, student outcomes and performance on student satisfaction surveys. Assessment criteria for some of these aspects (i.e., unit objectives, assessment tasks, unit sites) were included in the pro forma as a quality enhancement measure. For their preparation, the reviewers performed an independent evaluation of student satisfaction data over the previous five years, evaluated the unit’s online site, the unit objectives and assessment tasks.

From there, the discussions took place. These were usually around 90 minutes. These sessions were not formal and did not stick to the agenda embodied in the ‘pro forma’. Rather they were treated as opportunity for open discussion, exchange and reflection with the reviewer often acting as a conduit for ideas and effective practices from other units. In some cases these discussions illuminated special concerns or interests of unit chairs and common interests with other individuals. As a result, several small projects were initiated or rejuvenated by different members of the discipline group.

The review process was officially completed with the presentation of the review findings to a specially convened meeting of the discipline group and other

interested members of the School and Faculty. This took place approximately nine months after the idea of a review was initially floated. In all 12 people attended. It was an informal late afternoon session in which we also celebrated the commencement of a new semester. This event in turn was another opportunity for us to discuss a range of teaching and learning matters. Additionally, a formal written document was circulated to all discipline members for comment. Ideas and enthusiasm flowed freely, it was clear that people were quite passionate about teaching and learning matters and this would not be the end of our conversations.

This was a project initiated by one person, but where ownership was assumed by the wider group. It spawned or facilitated further projects and group activities. It produced artefacts for the group and events which provided further opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, and enabled different modes of ‘belonging’ to the group (Wenger, 2000). In particular, this project proved important in aligning the goals and interests of individuals with each other and the group and in constructing an image of the group that could orientate it towards further action. Wenger (2000) writes about the importance of the group’s ‘imagination’ in facilitating the belonging of its members. In our case the group’s imagination is reflected in Figure 1 which was prepared as a representation of what was evolving alongside the conduct of the formal review. It has become a useful artefact to orient us for further action. The review (Project 1) is shown in Figure 1 as a catalyst for inquiry at the unit level. Through the process of practice reflection and evaluation, additional projects are envisaged. Some of these have commenced and three of these are briefly outlined below by their facilitators.

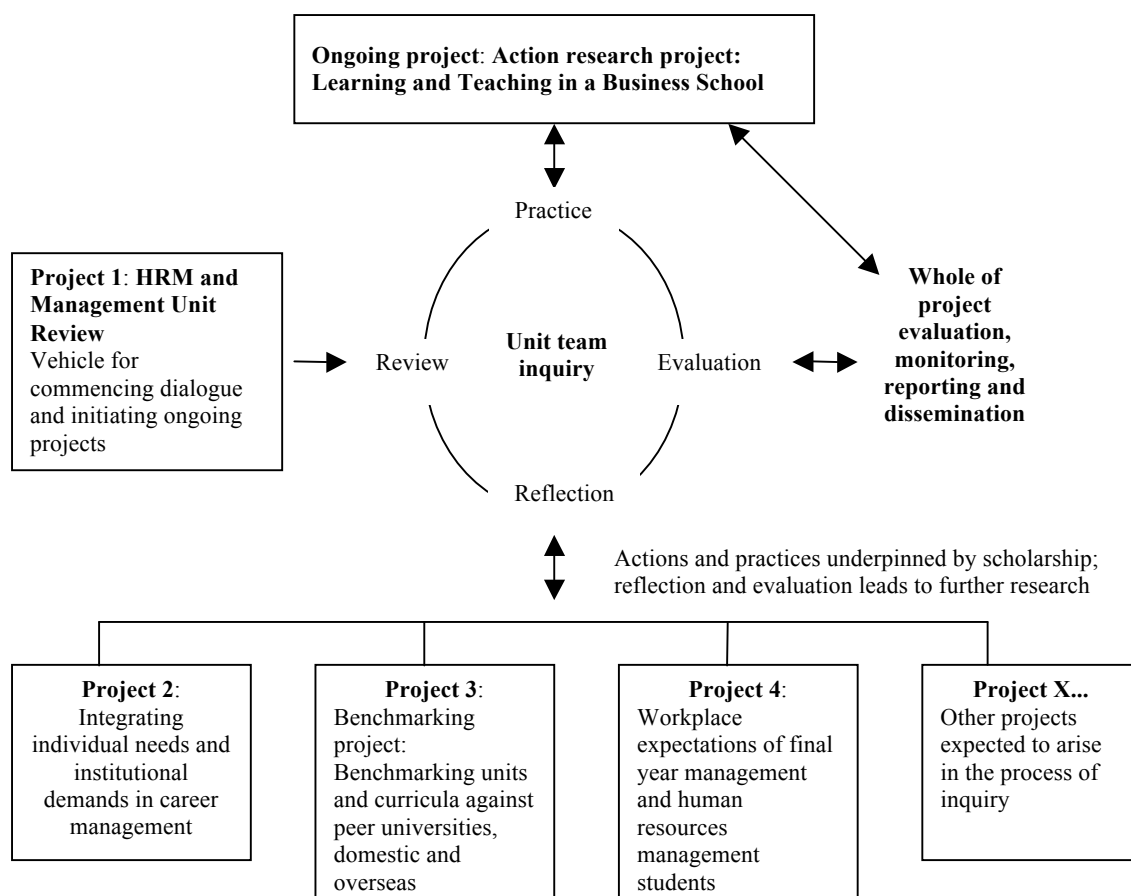


Figure 1: Collaborative inquiry in a business school

Project 2: Integrating individual needs and institutional demands in career management

As a newcomer to the field of academia, I have always been looking for opportunities to improve my teaching skills to provide 'quality' teaching. When the prospects of the Review of Management and HRM undergraduate units within our School – with the broad aims to contribute positively to improving the quality of teaching – were discussed formally, I was excited and grabbed this opportunity to be a part of this review. At that time, as part of my probationary requirements, I had enrolled in one of the units of the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (GCHE) which is required of all new level A–D academic staff appointed to continuing teaching positions. 'The Strategic Academic' unit mainly talked about the greater need for academics to be strategic by developing their career in a way that best advanced both their individual career and the institution's goals. While going through the unit outline and the assessment requirements, I thought of being 'strategic' and negotiated with the unit chair about undertaking the Review as part of my assessment for the unit as the review offered an opportunity to integrate both my individual needs and institutional demands. As a result, I ended up being one of the reviewers and assisted in the writing of the formal report and in the presentation made to the Teaching and Learning conference.

The Review has been instrumental in promoting my objectives of improving my teaching skills and at the same time has also helped in promoting the university's strategic plan that focuses on improving the quality of teaching and providing students a satisfying learning experience. Speaking with the unit chairs, accessing their DSO site, and going through their unit/study guides provided me an invaluable insight into: the best practices of teaching across a variety of units; the importance of student evaluations; and the use of technology in improving the quality of teaching. The Review has also indirectly promoted my research objectives. I along with my other colleagues involved in this process made a presentation to the university's Teaching and Learning Conference in July, 2008 and we are submitting this paper to the HERDSA conference! Finally, the Review also served to fulfill the assessment requirements for the GCHE unit!

This second project illustrates, in particular, Wenger's (2000) concept of alignment where successful communities must have a capacity for recruiting and inducting new members and ensuring alignment of individual and group goals through a process of mutual coordination. It also recognises the reality of the multiple demands on academics and the nature of their work. A vibrant community not only requires new members, but needs distributed leadership if it is to survive. Project 3, described next, also demonstrates the value to group learning of distributed leadership.

Project 3: The benchmarking project

I found myself leading the benchmarking project more by accident than by design. I was approached by a colleague to become involved in one of the teaching and learning projects which emanated from the HRM and Management Review conducted in early 2008. We discussed the different foci of each project as well as the complementarities between these. There seemed to be a range of synergies to be gained through both an independent and collaborative inquiry process across

the proposed projects. It was during one of these preliminary discussions about how I could best contribute that I suggested that those of us attending overseas conferences during the year could use this opportunity to meet with colleagues at different overseas Universities to establish networks and begin a conversation about their teaching practices and what they saw as innovative developments within their discipline area. As I was going to the UK in September 2008 to attend the British Academy of Management conference, I willingly put up my hand to get in touch with colleagues at different British universities, tell them about our benchmarking project and invite them to participate.

In my own teaching, I am continually reviewing teaching content, mode of delivery and forms of assessment, looking at ways to enhance student learning and engagement. I therefore recognised the opportunities the benchmarking project offered to work collaboratively with other universities and document experiences of good teaching practices and learning.

Subsequently, the project brief was ‘fleshed out’ in consultation with a group of colleagues in my school. We decided to focus on five key areas. These were curriculum, pedagogy, delivery methods, students and engagement, and teaching/research nexus. Ethics approval was sought and obtained and some funding became available to support the benchmarking exercise with overseas universities.

As an outcome of the initial interviews and facilitated by a Faculty grant for teaching and learning projects, we decided to extend the benchmarking exercise in Australian universities. The funding available also provided the opportunity to extend the benchmarking project to include the Marketing discipline within the School. The project brief has been through various iterations with a change in focus from face-to-face interviews to online. Currently we are designing an online survey that encompasses five main areas of inquiry: curriculum, pedagogy, delivery methods, students and engagement, and teaching/research nexus. In addition, a key advantage to compiling an online survey was the opportunity this now provides to repeat the survey as the project expands to encompass other universities, domestic and international. While yet to be completed, I see the main benefits of the benchmarking project to be the opportunities it provides to open up dialogue with colleagues at other universities who all share a common interest in enhancing student learning and engagement; to work collaboratively with them to document experiences of good teaching and learning practices; and to set up a dynamic database of innovative teaching practices that can be shared with participating institutions.

Project 3 is an inquiry in process. This type of project is important for collaborative inquiry and communities of practice as it provides a boundary experience (Wenger, 2000). Here the boundary is with other institutions and ways of teaching. Benchmarking exercises themselves are forms of collaborative inquiry as their aim is to improve performance by identifying and adopting the best practices of others (Kyro, 2004). Learning is at the core of the process and it will be maximised when the community is exposed to ‘foreign competence’ which must be confronted, considered and perhaps incorporated into the community’s repertoire of behaviours or knowledge (Wenger, 2000: 233). This is the challenge for us in our endeavour

– to use the exercise to extend and challenge our current practices and understanding of our role as educators.

Project 4: Workplace expectations of final year Management and Human Resource Management students

We had lost count of how many conversations we had had in the corridor following our various classes about just how ill-prepared for the day-to-day realities of the workplace our students (and in particular our final-year students) seemed to be. We often lamented the fact that we could teach them all the Human Resource Management (HRM) and Management theories in the world, and we could pass on our own organisational experiences through the “war stories” we told, but the conversations we had with our students and recent graduates suggested that there was still a disconnect in what these theories and organisational experiences would mean for them as new employees.

However, it wasn’t until two separate events aligned that we decided we needed to do more than talk (and whinge to each other!). First, Kerrie had a visit from one female HRM graduate. This young woman, who had successfully juggled three part-time jobs and full-time study, was still genuinely surprised how ‘working in an organisation is much different from what I thought’. She shared – in an incredulous tone – how she kept getting “told off” by the PA for walking directly into her manager’s office without having first sought an appointment. She was even more astounded that the same PA would do multiple drafts of emails before hitting the send button!

Second, we were being interviewed for the Management/HRM review described earlier. As part of our discussion, both of us suggested that we had been “toying” with the idea of a research project looking at students’ perceptions of work. We were encouraged to think of our project as fitting very snugly under the “critical reflection umbrella” alongside a number of other small projects being conducted within the School, and that funding might be available through this connection.

Prompted by these events, we have planned a pilot study to develop a better understanding of our final-year students’ perceptions of what they will encounter in their graduate employment. In order to do this, we are conducting a series of focus groups across our various student cohorts. These focus groups will explore such themes as: job content; career and personal development prospects; nature of workplace interactions; and the implications for social relations both within and outside the workplace.

We hope our findings will directly inform teaching within the HRM and Management disciplines. Learning about final year students’ expectations (and how realistic they are) can enable these issues to be incorporated into units of study throughout undergraduate degree courses. In addition, the findings should aid university career services in supporting and preparing students for a smoother transition into graduate employment. Graduate employers are also likely to find themselves better informed by the study’s findings. Insight into the ‘pre-graduate mind’ will not only assist them in creating a recruitment process which is less daunting for graduates and more informative in shaping their workplace

expectations, but the findings can inform the induction programs of graduate employers to demystify the graduate experience.

This final project also requires learning at the boundaries. Here the boundaries are two-fold: between the student and graduate experience, and the teacher and student experience. In particular, this project calls for more effective partnerships with students and employees and, indeed, challenges the existing boundaries of our present inquiry.

Final reflections

Our purpose in writing the paper is to capture and reflect on what we have achieved so far, to encourage further alignment between the individual projects and our broader collaborative effort, and to sustain the momentum and energy of our collaboration. This paper is also an artefact of our collaboration that opens our activities and scholarship to wider evaluation and scrutiny by our colleagues.

We stated at the outset that the broad aim of our inquiry was to develop and sustain an ongoing conversation with the ultimate aim of enhancing our teaching and contribution to student learning. In addition to the specific outcomes of each learning project, coming together to discuss these projects has allowed this conversation to unfold. The personal learning - and implications for our teaching - has come not only from the learning projects but from the space this inquiry has provided for us to discuss an array of teaching and learning issues.

We acknowledge that our collaborative inquiry is in its infancy and that sustaining momentum and interest is not easy in the busy lives of academics. However, our experience indicates that the use of learning projects is a valuable way of making progress, albeit small, on some of the important issues facing us in our teaching practice and in enhancing the student experience. The advantages of small projects are many. They generally have a defined life-cycle that avoids member fatigue. They allow multiple engagement points for colleagues. They encourage and allow for shared leadership and spread the effort and responsibility to maintain momentum. They are responsive to individual interests while serving the collective. Finally, they allow us to achieve small 'wins' that sustain our enthusiasm.

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