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Beyond Training

Linking Academic Development to Student Learning Outcomes

Keynote for the ProLehre Conference, (March 1-4, 2011).

“Teaching Research goes Practice: Higher Education research findings and their integration into day-to-day teaching”

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Context

“Tertiary Institutions invest substantially in developing and training their academic staff in order to improve the quality of their teaching in the expectation that better teaching will improve student learning”

Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby and Zepke

Background

Impact of [Student Support Services and]
Academic Development Programmes on
Student Outcomes in Undergraduate
Tertiary Study:

A Synthesis of the Literature

www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/tertiary_education/5519

Study #1

Project focus: the effect of academic staff development on student outcomes;

- The project team contracted in August 2002 to undertake a synthesis of the research literature on the teacher/educator and learning environment influences on student outcomes in undergraduate study.
- The Research objectives were to:
 - review the literature with regard to this assumption,
 - explore the coincident relationship between academic development activities and student learning,
 - explore the challenges faced by researchers in attempting to establish a causal relationship between these two dimensions
 - put forward any recommendations that flowed from the research

Propositions

- 1: Good teaching has a positive impact on student learning outcomes (SLO's)
- 2: Teachers can be assisted to improve the quality of their teaching through a variety of academic interactions

The two step relationship

Academic development



Teacher actions and behaviours



Student learning outcomes

So...

The linkages between teaching and learning are unequivocal –

Good teaching does have a positive effect on student outcomes

But!

How does this research inform academic development practice?

AND...

Who knows about it?

Prebble et al found

Teachers can be (and are) assisted in improving the quality of their teaching through:

1. Short courses
2. In situ training
3. Consultancy and collegial support
4. Student assessment of teaching
5. Intensive staff development including SOTL

Prebble's Conclusions

- Academic development is generally a 'good thing'
- There needs to be a focus on supporting work groups
- The long term impact of academic development is promising, BUT...

Study #2

Teaching and Learning Research Initiative funded through the New Zealand Council for Educational Research

- **The project:**

- Unlocking Student Learning: The Impact of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Initiatives (TLEIs) on First Year University Students - *focusing on the provision of academic development and its impact on the success of first year student learning at all universities in New Zealand.*

www.tlri.org.nz/unlocking-student-learning-impact-teaching-and-learning-enhancement-initiatives-tleis-first-year-uni

Project details

- Led by A/P Kogi Naidoo and A/P Gordon Suddaby
- Looking for evidence that academic development has a positive impact on student learning outcomes
- A few studies in this area;
 - e.g. Trowler and Bamber (2005); *Little research which clearly links effective student learning with improvements stemming from lecturer training*

However its not clear whether it is the ineffectual nature of the interventions or the lack of research evidence

Or is it the issue of the vast range of factors that impact on teaching and learning?

- *Teaching and learning are complex and verifying relationships is very difficult (Haigh and Naidoo, 2007)*

Unlocking Student Learning

What impact do teaching and learning enhancement initiatives (TLEIs) have on students' experience and achievement in large first year classes?

3 Sub-questions:

1. How can academic developers and teachers work together to enhance/make a difference to the student learning experience and performance?
2. What impact do teaching and learning enhancement initiatives (TLEI's) developed by teachers and academic developers have on students learning experiences and achievement in large first year classes?
3. How can the impact of academic development on student learning be determined? (What indicators/measures can be used to evaluate enhancement in student experience and achievement?)

Project design

- Iterative and interventionist
- Institutionally based and flavoured case studies
- Qualitative and quantitative evaluation

School lessons

- School sector research shows;
 - Engagement between academic developer and teacher occurs best on a coherent and continuous basis over an extended time period
 - One-off or disconnected interventions are not very effective
 - Academic development is better when organised in iterative cycles
 - time for teacher learning, practice and investigation is critical
 - Follow-up support is crucial
 - Development activity is aligned with teacher needs
 - Academic development is informed by ‘best evidence’ research
 - Development initiatives are informed by student data
 - Development initiatives are aligned with the teachers work environment

Does this sound like tertiary academic development???

The Academic Developers Challenge

- How to translate the relationship between the academic developer and the teacher into enhanced student learning outcomes?

As Haigh and Naidoo (2007) say: “Its complex”

More about the USL project

- Seven universities
- Each identified own target groups and TLEI's
- Each selected own (iterative) intervention
- 6040 students involved (544 withdrew)
- Seven discipline areas (anthropology, economics, physics, hospitality management, law, computing)
- Pass rates used as an indicator (but there were many more factors in play)

Methods employed

- Surveys
- Interviews (teacher, students, AD's)
- Focus groups
- SGID's
- Reflective (e)logs
- Document analysis
- Observations
- Data analysis

Q.1 – Answers?

- How can academic developers and teachers work together to enhance/make a difference to the student learning experience and performance?
 - Facilitate
 - Advise
 - Discuss research
 - Contextualise
 - ...

Q.1 – Challenges!

- Time
- Planning
- Relationships
- Philosophy
- Research as priority (as against teaching)
- Workload
- Synergies (Academic Developer vs discipline specifics)
- “What’s in it for me?”
- Resourcing
- Systemic issues
- ...

Q.2 Answers?

- What impact do teaching and learning enhancement initiatives (TLEI's) developed by teachers and academic developers have on students learning experiences and achievement in large first year classes?

- Pass rates ?

But, if not pass rates, what?

- And how do we know?

Herein lies our problem as academic developers!!!

Q.3 Answers?

- How can the impact of academic development on student learning be determined?
- (What indicators/measures can be used to evaluate enhancement in student experience and achievement?)
 - ...
- The interventions improved pass rates, but how statistically valid is this?
 - (Lies, damned lies, and statistics!!!)

Outcome

- The TLEI's led to improved student learning outcomes as measured by pass rates
- Collaboration was useful and practical
- Project-approach better than one-off workshops
- Teachers and Academic developers were positive

BUT

- This is not conclusive evidence
- It may not even be sustainable

Academic Developers role

- How do we quantify the contribution of academic developers?
 - They contributed to TLEI's
 - They developed a common conceptual framework
 - The link between ad's and teachers was positive
 - They focused on the Hattie dictum "*What teachers do matters*"

Adding to the case

- Stes (2008), in an unpublished (as yet) thesis noted;
- *More attention should be given to studies researching behavioural outcomes, thereby drawing not only on self reports of participants, but also measuring actual changes in performance'*
 - *Van Kuelen, IJAD, 14, 2, 2009.*

Is this enough?

- The challenge of academic development (and developers) is to improve the quality of student learning outcomes, but more importantly how and how do we demonstrate that change (improvement)?

Some thoughts

- Why is it important that “academic developers know what they are doing is worthwhile [and can show this]?”
 - Brew and Peseta, IJAD, 13, 2, 2008
- Goslings recent studies in both the UK (2008 and 2009) and Australia, (2008)
 - AD is continually having to justify existence
- The “turbulent environment faced by many Centres” (Palmer, Holt, and Challis, 2010, p.160).
 - ALTC, NZ Universities, ...

What do Academic Developers need to do?

- Brew and Peseta (2008) suggest;
 - Bring our work to the attention of management
 - Maintain a strategic focus
 - Think about PR all the time
 - Maintain a ‘longitudinal archive’ (Sword, 2008)
 - Work with groups, rather than individuals
 - Don’t take our worth for granted
 - Constantly look for evidence of success
 - Identify tangible indicators of success
 - Think about what makes us ‘academic developers’

What did the 'Unlocking Student Learning' project add?

- A focus on four main areas:
 - Ways of engaging academic development
 - Specific insights and benefits
 - Challenges and obstacles in AD-Teacher relationships
 - The AD-Teacher partnership: The research dimension

So what: Implications of the project

- Academic Developers working with teachers influence teacher actions which in turn influence student learning
- There is a need for ongoing and sustained research demonstrating the value of academic development
- Partnerships and collaborations with teachers and other academic developers work best

Thank you

- If anyone is interested in exploring further work in this area, please feel free to contact me.

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