Ensuring student success—the role of support services in improving the quality of the student learning experience

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Abstract

This paper is based on the premise that universities have an obligation to provide adequate student support services, such as learning assistance (that is, assistance with academic writing and other study skills) and that in order to be effective such services must be responsive to the wider policy and social implications of student attrition and retention. The paper outlines briefly some of the factors that have influenced the development of learning assistance practices in Australia and America. This is followed by an account of experiences at one Australian metropolitan university where learning assistance service provision shifted from a decentralised, faculty-based model to a centralised model of service delivery.

This shift was in response to concerns about lack of quality and consistency in a support model dependent upon faculty resources yet a follow up study identified other problems in the centralised delivery of learning assistance services. These problems, clustered under the heading contextualised *versus* decontextualised learning assistance, include the relevance of generic learning assistance services to students struggling with specific course related demands; the apparent tensions between challenging students and assisting students at risk of failure; and variations in the level of collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff in supporting students in the learning environment. These problems are analysed using the theoretical modelling derived from the tools made available through cultural historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

Introduction

Increased concern about the purpose and value of university education has forced institutions to re-examine all aspects of their operation, to reshape mission statements, and to produce public evidence such as quality portfolios and organisational performance indicators (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003; Australian Parliament, 2001). Evident in such reports is reference to equity and social justice as key institutional concerns. Yet, universities preoccupied with cost-efficiency and competitive advantage are finding it difficult

to strike a balance between the pressures of a consumerist society and social justice issues (Australian Parliament, 2001; Bottery, 1992; Burke, 1997; Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995; Lashway 1997; Lingard, 1993).

Funding cuts to Australian institutions create conflict between economic concerns and the need to respond to questions such as those about student access, retention rates, completion rates, and overall student satisfaction levels. On the one hand there is acknowledgment of the role that student support services play in improving the quality of student learning experiences. In most Australian universities these services include personal and career counselling, health and welfare services, chaplaincy, and learning assistance. Although not always organisationally aligned, there is often a strong link amongst these services because of a shared commitment to the motives of quality, equity, concern for individual development and student retention. These services are increasingly seen as having the potential to help institutions respond to the major strategic and pedagogical issues confronting higher education. These issues, about equity, social justice, and student retention are expressed as student access, retention rates, completion rates and overall student satisfaction levels (Ramsay, Elphinstone & Vivekananda, 2003; Australian Parliament, 2001; McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000; Burke, 1997; Lashway 1997; Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995; Lingard, 1993; Bottery, 1992). However, it is argued here that inadequate budget and policy decision-making over long periods of time have restricted the development of some services (Australian Parliament, 2001; Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993).

What follows is a brief overview the development of learning assistance practices in Australia and America. This is followed by an account of experiences at one Australian metropolitan university where service provision shifted from a decentralised, faculty-based model to a centralised model and the problems that have emerged from this change. Theoretical modelling derived from the tools made available through cultural historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999) are used to first, analyse the problems clustered under contextualised *versus* decontextualised learning assistance and second, to identify ways of improving service delivery in order to reduce obstacles to student completion and hopefully ensure student success.

Learning assistance practices in Australia and America

Unfortunately the Australian literature in the learning assistance area, such as it is, is restricted largely to studies on the employment conditions of learning advisers (Marshall & Johnston, 1995; McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone & Devlin, 1995; Murphy, Crosling, & Webb, 1995; Parra[1], 1995) and practical issues to do with service delivery for diverse student groups (Hoffman, 1998; Muldoon, 1998; Parra, 1996; Parra, 1998; Parra, 1999; Taylor, Peters, & Parra, 1998).
[[1]Parra is Peach's previous name.]

One exception is the 1994 government-funded report on developing lifelong learners (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994). This report emphasises the strategic and pedagogical importance of learning assistance services and highlights that these services make a significant contribution to enabling students to realise academic potential and to become self-directed learners.

American research in the area of learning assistance is more comprehensive and includes research into broader issues of quality and accountability in the higher education system as well more specific research into the development, implementation and evaluation of effective learning assistance services (Bogue & Hall 2003; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2001; Komives & Woodard, 2003; Maxwell, 1996). Professional standards and guidelines developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2001) reflect a profession-wide perspective on what constitutes good practice in learning assistance services and describe the essential elements of a successful learning assistance centre (Maxwell, 1996).

In the Australian context, learning assistance services often appear to be marginalised; excluded from ongoing budget planning and policy development related to issues such as student retention. In contrast, efforts to promote student retention in American institutions are often located in the domain of student affairs or student support services (Tinto, 1997). In many Australian institutions services appear to suffer from a poor public image, the result of limited understanding within the learning community of what these services offer and the contribution they make to the university and the student learning experience (Candy *et al*., 1994; McLean *et al*., 1995; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1987; Peach, 2003; Parra, 1995). Yet as early as 1992 the Australian Higher Education Council pointed out that if,:

> the environment in which students learn is one in which there is adequate counselling, career guidance and learning assistance, more students will be able to perform to their potential. If the environment encourages as many students as possible to exceed their own expectations, it will have done well by Australia. (Higher Education Council, 1992, p. 45)

Gardner (2002) agrees that Australian universities must find ways of reducing the effects of inequalities on student outcomes. She reminds us that there are many reasons that students do not complete their degrees and universities have an obligation to provide a range of student support services (including learning assistance) that reduce obstacles to completion.

Later in this issue Simpson (2005) suggests that institutions forced to look at the financial consequences of student retention are likely to pay increased attention to student support policies and services. According to Simpson these services may be one way of maximising student retention without compromising academic standards. Government criticism (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995) of the quality of one Australian, metropolitan university's learning assistance services prompted increased attention to learning assistance service policies and services and this resulted in a shift from a decentralised faculty-based model to a centralised service. This shift is discussed in the next section.

Decentralised to centralised service provision

A major criticism of the university's decentralised, faculty-based model of learning assistance provision was the tension caused by lack of clarity and understanding amongst staff and students about access to services and the role of faculty staff employed to provide services. For example, students described problems in

accessing faculty staff during peak times in semester. They complained about the level and type of service available. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds also expressed reluctance at disclosing perceived academic shortcomings to faculty-based staff who may also be responsible for grading their assessment. Some academic staff questioned the degree to which learning assistance services developed a reliance-on-help mentality rather than helping students to develop as independent learners. Faculty-based learning assistance staff described a role that was isolated, tenuous, and lacking in professional identity. In all but one of the faculties that employed learning assistance staff, the appointments were fractional or short, part-time contract positions. Faculty-based staff described how, even though they were technically part of the faculty, the division of labour in the faculty meant that they were rarely consulted about the learning needs of students or the design of new programs or courses. All agreed that their employment and career prospects were limited, with few professional development opportunities (Parra, 1995).

When asked about the prospect of a centralised learning assistance service, some staff and students expressed the view that decontextualised skills programs were unlikely to help students develop deep approaches to learning. Others pointed out that a centrally coordinated model of service delivery could resolve some of the problems associated with the faculty-based model, that is, division of labour problems such as high levels of duplication, lack of consistency, variations in levels of access, and *ad hoc* coordination across services. Senior management accepted the view that a centralised model would improve the quality, access, and coordination of services.

However, a follow up study found that the centralisation of learning assistance services (located in the library) did not resolve all of the tensions associated with the previous faculty-based model.

As part of my doctoral research (Peach, 2003), I used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to ask stakeholders for feedback on the role of centralised learning assistance services, problems and tensions in service provision, and ways of improving work practices so that the student learning experience is enhanced. I identified academics, librarians, students and learning advisers as the key stakeholders in the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. My judgement was based on experience and prior knowledge of the work setting (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). I selected these stakeholders because they are bound together through their common institutional affiliation and mission. They are also bound together through their work with students, through the physical location of learning assistance services in the library, and through a shared concern for the academic progress of students.

Stakeholder feedback indicated that the apparent separation of learning assistance services from the faculty and the location of learning assistance services in the library had created other problems. To illustrate, problems and tensions to do with the problem cluster of contextualised *versus* decontextualised assistance can be understood in terms of the separation of learning assistance from the faculty and the separation between content and generic skill development. Tensions have emerged in relation to student expectations that the service will provide help with specific assessment tasks but a consequence of the location of the service outside the faculty and discipline context is that the learning adviser is not the best person to clarify the academic expectations of a specific task.

To identify and analyse these matters I used the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory. Cultural-historical activity theory provides a framework for understanding change and transformation in human activity. In this study it was used to show how learning assistance services have changed over time and appear to have separated from the overall activity system of the university. An activity system is understood to comprise components such as the subject or person engaged in the activity, the object or motive for the activity, community, rules, divisions of labour, and the instruments (including tools). Central to understanding activity theory is the notion of the object or motive, that is, the objective or motive towards which collective activity is directed. Daniels (2004, p. 190) explains that the object is the 'constantly reproduced purpose of a collective activity system that motivates and defines the horizon of possible goals and action'. The 'constantly reproduced purpose' or object of the activity system has been identified in this study as what everyone is working on, that is, students' success with assessment tasks. This is a common object, even though tensions may develop in the object over time, tensions related to differences in the subjective sense of what different stakeholders are trying to do. That is, different stakeholders are different subjects, and appear to have developed different subjective objects through their histories and involvements in other activity systems. These differences in objects are sources of tensions.

In the next section excerpts from the data and the mapping tools of cultural-historical activity theory are used to analyse and make visible the problems clustered as contextualised *versus* decontextualised assistance.

# Contextualised versus decontextualised learning assistance

From the data it appears that the problem cluster, referred to as contextualised *versus* decontextualised assistance, manifests in tensions related to generic services, different understandings of the role of the learning adviser, and variations in the level of collaboration between learning advisers and academics.

Tensions related to generic services

At the time of the study the main tools used by the learning assistance service were workshops and consultations focussed on generic skills development. Popular topics included academic writing, oral presentations, exam preparation, literature reviews, report writing, time management, and reading effectively. Despite the popularity of these services, literature in the field of teaching and learning suggests that learners benefit most when learning assistance and generic skills development are contextualised (Cottrell, 2001; Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1997; Hounsell, 1997; Laurillard, 1996). That is, assistance provided in the context of the faculty or discipline is more effective than generic programs offered in isolation.

This study highlights tensions related to the use of tools such as generic workshops and consultations offered by learning advisers located outside the context of the program of study. For example Figure 1, based on the data, depicts tensions between student expectations that learning advisers will provide assistance with specific assessment tasks and the learning advisers' generic approach to meta-cognitive skill development.

Figure 1 Generic services: tensions related to contextualised versus decontextualised assistance
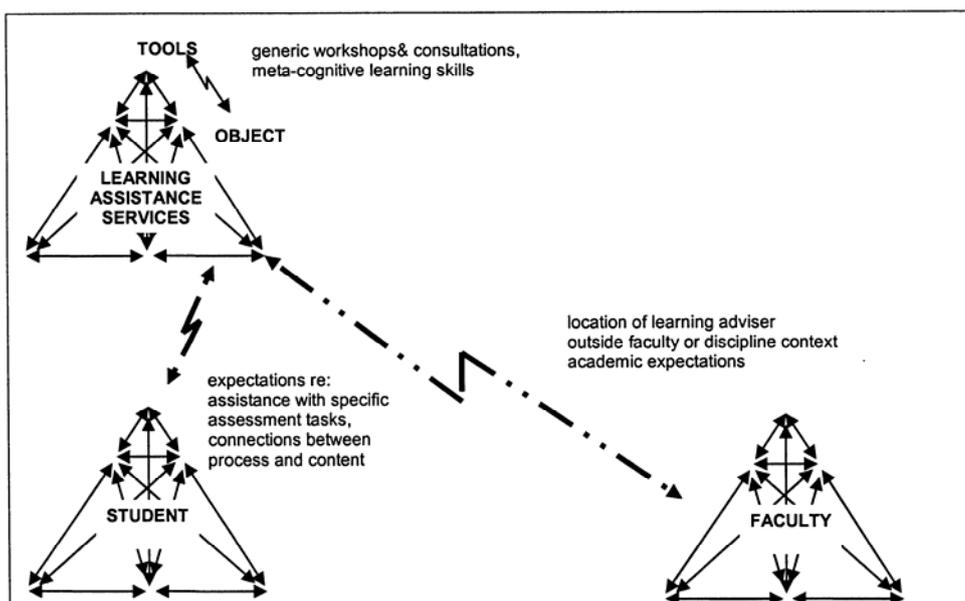
NOTE: This basic triangular model originates with Vygotsky's idea of culturally mediated actions, that is, the idea that human activity is a process of shared practice and interaction with common tools and common language (Engeström, 1999). Tensions are depicted as double-headed arrows or lightning bolts. Solid lines are used for tensions between elements within an activity system and dashed lines for tensions between activity systems as a whole.

Figure 1 points to a tension between student expectations that the learning adviser will provide assistance with specific assessment tasks and the tools used by the learning adviser (such as workshops and consultations) that focus on generic skills.

The dilemma, according to Librarian B, is that taking too generic an approach with students often means barely skimming the surface of important issues.

> You try and talk at a level which is generic to both, but in doing so I think you lose both in the end because they're really wanting to deal with their specific discipline and their issues.

Another problem was identified by Learning Adviser A:

> Students come in and the first thing we ask them for is their assessment but we've got to keep reminding ourselves its about process and to be meta-cognitive.

Learning Adviser D pointed out that it is possible to be sensitive to content and to help students to make the connections between process and content by emphasising:

> …the rounded context. Help them [students] learn the skills for solving their own problems and the principles behind not only where they're going, why they're going and how they can extend that.

This view is supported by a study of Victorian learning assistance services (McLean *et al*., 1995) that found that the skills taught by learning advisers outside a discipline or program of study do not necessarily lack contextualisation. Learning advisers help students to find out about the nature of the broader university

learning environment and assist students to develop strategies to negotiate the meaning of signs and symbols within the university context. Lawrence (2005) describes this as the 'multiplicity of discourses' that students must master and demonstrate in order to succeed in the university culture. Moreover, van Oers (1998) contends that context should be conceived of dynamically. That is, context is never universally given nor objectively determined and what counts as context depends on how a situation is interpreted in terms of the activity to be carried out. Learning Adviser B explains:

> …I know that there are academics who are hostile to the notion of generic skills. They imagine that they can't be taught. They perhaps imagine that we teach them in a pristine environment. That's got no relation to their content. Whereas in fact we are sensitive to the content. That's what the students are bringing to us and we're merely trying to assist the students to know what these skills are and how they can apply them specifically to their content areas.

Helping students to develop meta-cognitive learning skills should, according to Biggs (1999), be the ultimate aim of university teaching. These skills are developed in situations where students are encouraged to question or solve problems independently as well as theorise and hypothesise. Student A described how the workshops offered by the learning assistance service provided an opportunity to develop generic skills that can be applied in different contexts.

> …I think the workshops are kind of informative. They tell you, like in the writing one, they tell you how to write, what skills to use, how to apply it in different contexts. The same with everything. They make you aware of what it is and show you all that you can do. Then it's up to you to decide what you do and how to apply it to your own studies.

Nevertheless, Hounsell (1997) and Cottrell (2001) argue that lecturers and tutors have chief responsibility for guiding students on how to learn, and skill development should be anchored in the discipline or course. The dilemma is, as Biggs (1999) points out, that traditional university teaching has not been directly concerned with the development of generic skills. Instead it is either left to the interventionist (such as the learning adviser), or the student learns it by osmosis! This dilemma impacts on the work practices of the learning advisers and creates tensions related to different understandings of generic services (as summarised in Table 1).

Table 1: Problems and tensions related to generic services—a summary from the interview transcripts

Librarian	• Taking a generic approach just skims the surface of real issues
Student	• Generic workshops are informative but individual consultations are more useful
Learning Adviser	• The assessment task drives the interaction despite the learning advisers intention to focus on meta cognitive skills • Despite resistance from some academics it is possible to help students make connections between process and content

Tensions between challenging students and assisting students

Lawrence (2005) argues that university teachers have an important role to play in clarifying academic expectations and helping students to develop strategies that will assist them to succeed in the university learning environment. According to Lawrence (2005) this includes assistance to develop reflective and critical skills as well as socio-cultural competencies. I agree that since the assessment task originates from the faculty it follows that the best person to clarify the academic expectations of the specific task is the lecturer or tutor. However, I contend that the lecturer or tutor is not always available or willing to provide this type of assistance, and as a consequence the role of the learning adviser comes in to play. According to Librarian C the role of the learning adviser is to focus on process not content:

> …I think, the [service] is much more focused on process and learning skills and will very rarely drop into the content side of things. Whereas academic staff are teaching in that context of lecturing, it's all content.

Academic E claimed that assistance provided by learning advisers has the potential to subvert an academic process that aims to encourage and challenge students to become self-directed learners. Academic E also argued that providing help to some students and not to others could be seen as inequitable and artificial.

> Maybe that student only passed because they were given an artificial level of assistance that, once it's withdrawn, doesn't do them any service—that's one question. One that you hear students talk about is the role that of social justice and equity in intervention. Student A didn't get help, Student B did—Student B does better.

Figure 2 models some of the tensions among the learning assistance service, faculty and students related to the dilemma of challenging students to become self-directed learners and assisting students to understand the academic process.

Figure 2: Challenging students and assisting students: tensions related to contextualised versus decontextualised assistance
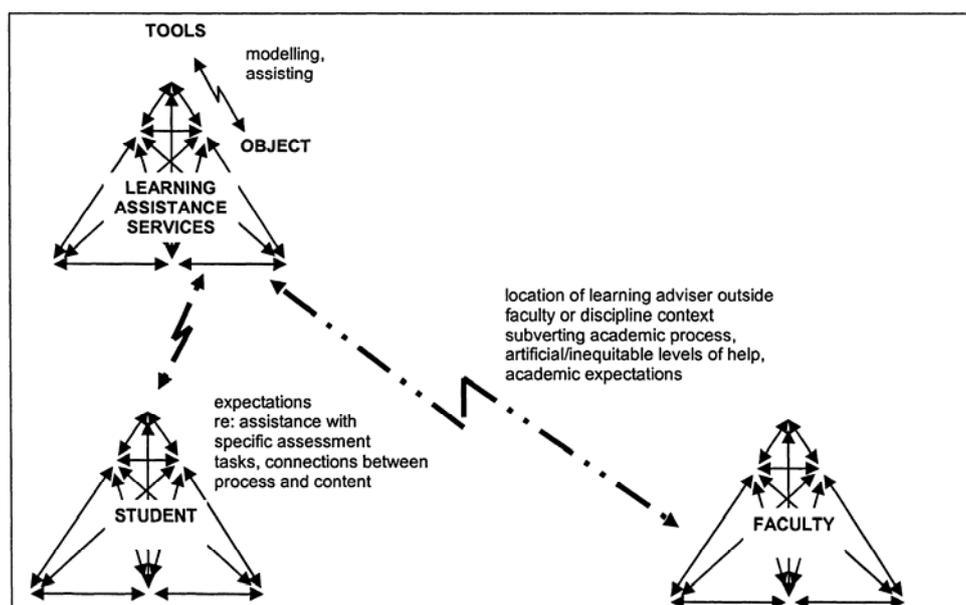
Student D provided support for the view that the learning adviser could be subverting the academic process.

> The grade I got on that assignment, I'm convinced, went up substantially because of the help I got here. Because I was floundering around I got no direction and no sense of purpose. I'd done a load of work, but it was all "messy". It had no form of cohesion to it. And I was helped just to go back and unpack the question and say, right, which information is relevant, discard the rest and file it down this way. Very, very helpful.

However, Student D went on to explain that the learning adviser's intervention was only part of the task involved in completing the assessment task.

> I would use pretty much what they'd discussed as a frame work and used that as an aid or a crutch if you like. Come up with a rough draft content wise and that is then what I would take to the tutor. Because the LAU [Learning Assistance Unit] don't look at the actual filling in the sandwich, if you like, they'll tell you this is the bread, off you go and put the filling in it.

Learning Adviser D agreed that the intervention of the learning adviser is not about subverting the academic process but rather providing a model for students.

> I think ours is a modelling responsibility. That's how I would use it. How do I use the tools that have been provided by the academic or the faculty, usefully? When do I use them? Where do I use them? So having modelled once, hopefully, for their other subjects [courses] at a later date, begin to realise which is the first point of call.

These excerpts (summarised in Table 2) highlight tensions related to different understandings of the purpose of learning assistance services and the role of the learning adviser.

Table 2: Problems and tensions related to challenging students and assisting students—a summary from the interview transcripts

Academic	• The provision of learning assistance could be perceived as inequitable and artificial and subverting the academic process
Librarian	• The learning advisers' role is to assist with skill development not content
Student	• Intervention by the learning adviser can improve grades • The learning adviser only provides the framework for the assessment task
Learning Adviser	• Learning Advisers have a responsibility to model skills in self directed learning

It appears that on the one hand the learning adviser is understood to assist students to understand the academic process by modelling the development of generic skills, but on the other hand there is concern that intervention by the learning adviser (who is located outside the context of the faculty or discipline) may serve to subvert the rules of the academic process by providing artificial levels of support.

Tensions related to levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics

Several authors in this journal highlight the importance of the relationship between the academic and the student in improving student retention (Grainger & Ferguson, 2005; Lawrence, 2005). I support this view but also argue that enhancing the quality of the student learning experience and improving student retention is dependent on strong, collaborative links between all key stakeholders including academics, librarians, students, and learning advisers. My research shows significant variation in: the levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff, the learning advisers' understanding of academic processes, and the learning advisers' capacity to fully engage with the academic context (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Collaboration between learning adviser and academic: tensions related to contextualised versus decontextualised assistance
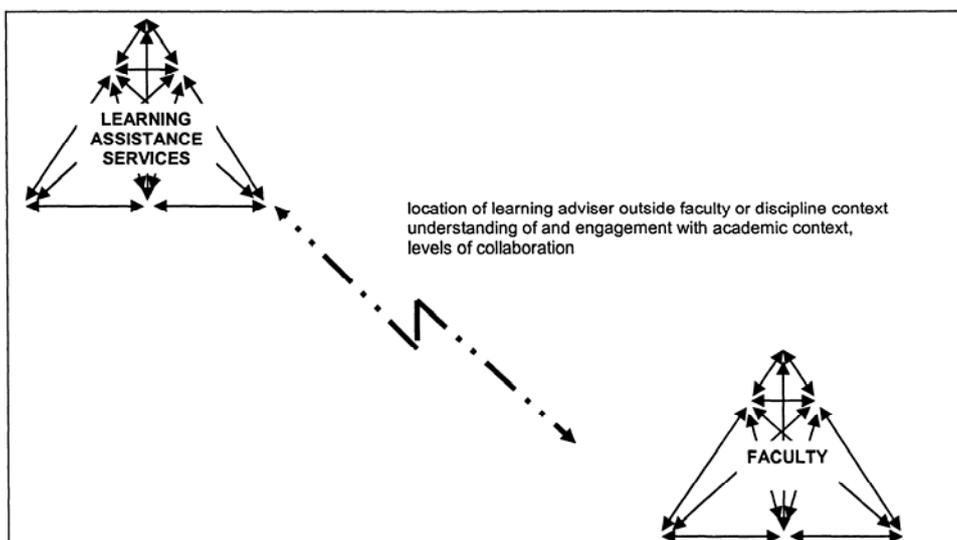
The data depicted in Figure 3 are supported by evidence from the interview transcripts that suggests that levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics range from academic staff advertising learning assistance services in course outlines, to academic staff who agree to make time in class for learning advisers to conduct workshops. According to Learning Adviser D some academics also actively seek out the learning adviser for help with embedding generic skills in programs and courses.

> …those lecturers who do think similarly treat us as a valuable part, and as part of the team. I feel very much a part of the team. They'll actually ask advice, they'll float assessment criteria past us, they'll phone up. More and more are they asking for resources. They phone up for a coffee and talk – "Will you have a look at this?".

Librarian A stressed the importance of close collaboration with academic staff.

> I think with the faculty we're never quite sure. We refer our students back to the lecturer or the tutor to clarify some points where we feel we don't want to you know wade in and give them the wrong sort of information and advice and I think probably your unit may find the same; you're not quite sure unless there's some kind of very close collaboration.

Academic B suggested that learning advisers should be part of the faculty teaching team.

> I've looked at some of the [course] evaluations that have come through and the negative ones in relationship to the workshop have been, "Oh we wanted more content; we wanted it contextualised." And I've resisted that in the past but I've thought no, if we're going to be asking all the students to go and run this workshop, we can make it contextualised. We just need to open our doors to whoever's running the workshop and say, "Hey look, be a part of the planning and the thinking," so you can…you can say to them, "Look, this is what you're writing about".

These different approaches highlight the importance of learning advisers understanding the academic context and the value of collaboration between learning advisers and academics. Academic B warned that without this collaboration the value of the service will diminish.

> I think they [learning advisers] are then in the danger of being wishy-washy by saying, "Well, I don't want to advise you here, go back to the lecturer!" So what good are you doing if you are not in the position to say, "I think that this is what you should do." And if you're not convinced that that is right, well then you need to. I think you still need to be able to give some feedback to them in some way.

Table 3 summarises responses from stakeholders in relation to levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics.

Table 3 Problems and tensions related to levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics—a summary from the interview transcripts

Academic	• Learning Advisers should be part of teaching teams • Learning Advisers should be able to provide students with meaningful feedback
Librarian	• Collaboration with academic staff is important but not always clear
Learning Adviser	• Some academics actively collaborate with learning advisers on generic skills development

Candy *et al*. (1994) identify some of the ways that learning advisers and academic staff can develop better understanding. These include collaborating with academic staff by working inside the classroom, through staff development programs, and in special research projects that promote a greater understanding of the teaching-learning process. Komives and Woodward (2003) caution however that creating collaborative partnerships presents challenges that require new forms of educational and conceptual leadership in higher education. They argue that institutions should aim to create linked, aligned and integrated learning communities where people continually learn together. It is these learning communities that Tinto (1997, p. 613) argues brings an 'intellectual richness' to the student learning experience.

Conclusions

I have argued that student support services, including learning assistance services, are pedagogically and strategically important in relation to university access,

retention, and student satisfaction. Furthermore, universities have an obligation to provide quality services that contribute to a learning environment focussed on reducing obstacles to success. This paper highlights how the historical development of learning assistance services in Australian universities has been affected by variables such as the political setting and the structural positioning of services. The efforts of one university to address quality issues by centralising services are acknowledged. However, the shift from a faculty-based to a centralised model of service provision has not resolved all of the problems identified. On the contrary, my research shows that other problems have emerged between the different components of the activity system, including problems to do with the object and divisions of labour (summarised in Figure 4).

Figure 4 Problem Cluster—Contextualised versus decontextualised assistance: tensions arising in the activity system
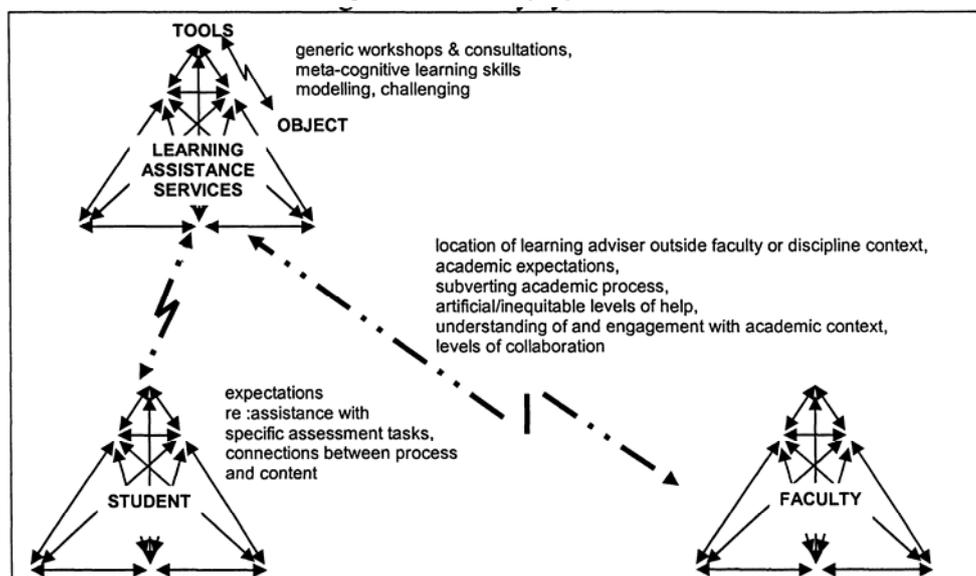

Figure 4 helps to depict tensions that seem to have developed because of the way that the role of the learning adviser, located outside the faculty or discipline context, is involved in teaching generic skills, encouraging the development of metacognitive skills and clarifying academic expectations. The data suggest that there are tensions related to rules that students meet certain academic requirements, and the view that intervention by the learning adviser provides artificial levels of support that may subvert these requirements. Figure 4 also reflects tensions between the learning adviser and the student. Evidence in the data suggests that although the learning adviser may try to focus on the development of generic skills and processes most students seek help with a specific assessment task. In order to promote self-directed learning and generic skill development, the learning adviser must demonstrate sensitivity toward content, based on a good understanding of the academic context, and strong links between the activity systems. The data presented suggest however, that these links are often weak.

Problems and tensions to do with the problem cluster of contextualised *versus* decontextualised assistance can now be understood in terms of the separation of learning assistance from the faculty and the separation between content and generic skill development. There are tensions related to student expectations that the learning assistance service will provide help with specific assessment tasks. However, a consequence of the location of the service outside the faculty or discipline context is that the learning adviser is not the best person to clarify the academic expectations of a specific task.

Finally, at the level of practice it appears that the best the learning adviser can do is to model generic skills and be sensitive to content, however this is dependent on a good understanding of the academic process and strong links between the activity systems. At the institutional level there is an urgent need for institutions to continually evaluate the effectiveness of support services such as learning assistance and, as this discussion highlights, enable collaboration between different stakeholders so that the quality of the student learning experience improves, attrition rates are reduced, and student success is ensured.

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