

‘Best practice’ and ‘challenges’ in university teaching and learning: An editorial introduction and a contextual framework

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Abstract

This paper presents an editorial introduction to the refereed and edited papers arising from the Central Queensland University 2nd annual Teaching and Learning Showcase in February 2004. In doing so, the paper depicts some of the principal landmarks in the national and institutional policy landscapes that influence the contributing authors’ several engagements with ‘best practice’ in university teaching and learning, as well as with the ‘challenges’ to that ‘best practice’. The guest editors trace the multiple elements of those engagements, and link them to the national and international significance of the papers appearing in this special theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*.

Introduction

This paper presents the editorial introduction to the refereed and edited papers arising from the Central Queensland University (CQU) Teaching and Learning Showcase, held from 16 to 20 February 2004. This is the second time that the Showcase has been conducted and is the first time that the proceedings have been published.

The theme of the 2004 Showcase was ‘Best Practice in Learning and Teaching: Learning from Our Challenges’, which encapsulates some of the ‘challenges’ associated with working in universities in the early 21st century. This means that the theme was predicated on the educational truism that teaching and learning are ‘inexact sciences’, and that we are constantly striving to achieve our ‘best’ in situations that are sometimes less than ‘ideal’. In such situations, we are prone to make (usually well-intentioned) mistakes and, for some, learning from such ‘mistakes’ or ‘challenges’ is actually the foundation of education.

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At the same time, it became clear quickly to us as guest editors of this special theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* that the formalisation of striving to achieve one's 'best' into 'best practice' reflects the appropriation of education into the discourses of late capitalism. Like many in contemporary universities, we believe that our educational processes can benefit from being accountable and transparent. On the other hand, and again like many of our colleagues, we contend that much of value can be lost if a reductionist and totalising application of such accountability and transparency occurs. Here we find useful Bailey's (1999) distinction between 'the liberal tradition' of education and 'the business case' for education (pp. 10-11), which also resonates with Boardman's (2003) delineation between 'the civil case' and 'the economic case' (p. 2) for enhancing the transition of tertiary education students with disabilities into their careers. (See also Giroux's (2003) timely articulation of 'the need to challenge the ever-growing discourse and influence of neo-liberalism, corporate power, and corporate politics' (p. 179).)

With these concepts in mind, our goal in this editorial introduction is threefold:

- to present a brief overview of the national policy landscape influencing Australian university teaching and learning today
- to provide an equally selective account of CQU's policy landscape around teaching and learning
- to link the major landmarks in these policy landscapes to the multiple constructions of 'best practice' and 'challenges' making up this special theme issue.

The national policy landscape

On the national landscape, the major contemporary policy document is the current Federal Government's *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002), often referred to as the 'Nelson Report' after the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, Brendan Nelson. This document is underpinned by four principles:

- sustainability
- quality
- equity
- diversity.

In keeping with the document's renewed emphasis on teaching and learning, the foreword to one of its discussion papers, *Striving for Quality: Learning, Teaching and Scholarship*, poses a question that exercises many of the contributors to these proceedings: "Can we not reward and celebrate teaching and scholarship excellence with the same enthusiasm we do that of research?" (p. 11).

With regard to quality, a second prominent landmark on the national policy landscape is the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). AUQA was established in March 2000; it is 'an independent, not-for-profit national agency that will promote, audit, and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education'; and one of its core responsibilities is 'conducting quality audits of self-accrediting Australian higher education institutions and State and Territory Government higher education accreditation on a five yearly cycle' (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2003, n.p.). CQU's audit will take place in 2005.

The third landmark on the national policy landscape to be considered here is the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, which is being

established as part of the Federal Government's *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (2002) initiatives. Its establishment is intended 'to provide a national focus for the enhancement of learning and teaching in Australian higher education institutions and...[to] be a flagship for acknowledging excellence in learning and teaching' (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004, n.p.).

From a number of perspectives, these three landmarks are very welcome developments in Australian university teaching and learning policy development, because they recognise the centrality of teaching and learning to universities' missions and visions and to universities' responsibilities for community service. At the same time, if the argument above about the discursive tensions between 'the liberal tradition' of education and 'the business case' for education (Bailey, 1999, pp. 10-11), or between 'the civil case' and 'the economic case' for particular access and equity initiatives (Boardman, 2003, p. 2), is accepted, a degree of caution is warranted about the potential of one or more of these policy landmarks to be coopted by 'the business case' or 'the economic case'. 'Best practice' and 'challenges' in CQU's teaching and learning need to be analysed against the backdrop of these kinds of debates.

The institutional policy landscape

Within CQU, we have again selected three key policy documents as framing and encapsulating the environment in which 'best practice' and 'challenges' in teaching and learning are located. The University's *Strategic Plan 2003-2007* (Central Queensland University, 2003) articulates that "Our vision is to be:...

- acknowledged universally as a leader in flexible teaching and learning and well focused research" (p. 2)

and its fourth expressed 'Goal' is that "CQU will respect the diversity of its student population by responding flexibly to the learning needs of students" (p. 9).

Within that context, the introduction to the University's *Management Plan for Teaching and Learning 2004-2008* (Central Queensland University, 2004) contained a number of points that reflected the institution's current diversity as well as its historical development. For example:

...the major goals of the University's Strategic Plan...refer to CQU's ability to cater for the tertiary education needs of prospective students, its ability to be a successful provider of educational programs to international students, its commitment to the encouragement and support of flexible learning, and its commitment to the development of effective systems to facilitate excellent teaching and learning throughout the University. (p. 1).

According to its *Strategic Plan 2003-2007*, the Division of Teaching and Learning Services (2003) at CQU has the following mission:

The Division will provide services and products to staff and students to support CQU's vision to be a leading, flexible teaching and learning and research institution. This will be achieved through high quality support for teaching and learning, well focussed research and an increased focus on profitable commercial activities. A collaborative

learning workplace culture will be established through the efforts of a highly skilled and motivated team of staff. (p. ii)

Here is articulated a recognition of the centrality to the institution's mission of 'high quality...teaching and learning', situated in a competitive and 'user pays' commercial environment with considerable pressure for universities to develop non-government funding sources. As in the national policy landscape, so too in the landscape delimiting CQU: 'best practice' and 'challenges' in teaching and learning are contextualised within and among these kinds of discursive flows and tensions.

'Best practice' and 'challenges' in University teaching and learning

We regard the two preceding sections of this editorial introduction as a 'contextual framework' rather than a 'conceptual framework'. As with many of the authors of the papers to follow, we have eschewed presenting a single, all-encompassing definition of either 'best practice' or 'challenges'. Indeed, we follow the lead of Jo Luck, David Jones, Jeanne McConachie and P. A. Danaher, in their paper in this special theme issue, in contending that both these phenomena are contextualised and situated, rather than constituting fixed essences. Accordingly, we are particularly attentive to the diversity of understandings of 'best practice' and 'challenges' manifested in the papers to follow, as well as to the rich array of curriculum, pedagogical and assessment strategies that they contain.

That diversity and that array are reflected in the many ways in which we could have listed and grouped the 15 papers in this special theme issue. Some are discipline specific, while others are more generic; some focus on aspects of pedagogy and others on elements of technology. As was to be expected, the papers exhibit a variety of conceptual and methodological resources, as well as a range of assumptions and assertions (sometimes explicit, often implicit) about teaching and learning. Given these features, we have elected to describe each paper briefly in the order in which it appears in the table of contents of this theme issue: alphabetically based on the first listed author's surname.

Firstly, Jenny Anastasi looks at the sometimes difficult return-to-work pathways of previously registered and enrolled nurses. She argues for an explicit focus on students and for providing students 'with an emancipatory experience'.

Judith Brown reports on a holistic pedagogical framework devised by staff members at the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music to facilitate their students' learning in its physical, cognitive and psychological dimensions. This framework draws on theory and research derived from education and performance training in music and sport, suggesting some perhaps unexpected resonances between these fields.

Antony Dekkers evaluates the effectiveness of compact disc- and web-based background mathematics materials developed to assist undergraduate engineering students. His evaluation encompasses an interrogation of the utility of the micro- and macro-typographical variables underpinning the design of the materials.

Karen Gallie and Darren Joubert reflect on their shared journeys as educators moving from 'traditional' to 'online' education, a move that they analyse in terms of 'teacher-centred' to 'student-centred' pedagogy. They also recount issues in

shifting from WebCT to Blackboard as the course management system underpinning their online teaching.

Leone Hinton engages with the crucial issue of student plagiarism, which she conceptualises in terms of academic integrity. She argues that promoting academic integrity, and hence reducing instances of plagiarism, are shared responsibilities of staff members, students and the University.

David Jones applies the work systems framework to support a shortened conceptualisation of 'e-learning'. He illustrates this application by means of several elements, including course management systems in relation to claims and assumptions about 'best practice'. He asserts a fundamental link between improvements to such practice and (re)conceptualisations of phenomena such as e-learning.

Jo Kehoe, Beth Tennent and Karen Windeknecht interrogate the experiences of students in three large introductory courses, in accounting, law and management, clustered around the three comparative foci of material delivery, student assessment, and student interaction and engagement. Their conclusions reflect many of the complexities attending decisions about such issues, particularly (in their case) for courses with large student enrolments.

Ingrid Kennedy (like Leone Hinton) is exercised by the 'challenges' of student plagiarism. Her paper, which also links plagiarism with the broader issue of student integrity, lists some possible strategies to consider, including an assignment to be trialled in 2004 by every student studying the pre-undergraduate preparatory Skills for Tertiary Education and Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program.

Jenny Kofoed is concerned with the importance of engaging students 'in an active learning environment', and particularly with the potential of online delivery of materials and assessment to promote students' engagement and to boost their summative examination performance. Her conclusion is that 'students do become engaged through online delivery of materials which resulted in improved performance'.

Jo Luck, David Jones, Jeanne McConachie and P. A. Danaher use the results of a survey completed in 2003 by 91 staff members and students about CQU's course management systems to portray some of the finely grained differences in attitude towards 'best practice' around such systems. They argue that, when these differences are linked with occupational subcultures, the result can easily become fault lines between those subcultures and the enterprise system of which they form a part. This has important implications for achieving the potential of 'best practice' around course management systems.

Ken Purnell, Jim Callan, Greg Whymark and Anna Gralton report ongoing work with the Zing Team Learning System, which presents an electronic environment in which learning can be scaffolded and cooperation among learners can be enhanced. In working with teachers at five Central Queensland schools, the authors assert that the management of learner interactivity is a precursor to knowledge exchange.

Teresa Sander and Sonja Cleary write about an unexpectedly high level of deficiency in mathematical skills among first year undergraduate nursing students, affecting their capacity to complete accurately the crucial competency of medication mathematics. They report a lack of correlation between students' pre-

entry mathematical experiences and their capacity to achieve this competency. They canvass a number of possible strategies to address this situation.

Phillipa Sturgess and Mark Kennedy review 'DE Mentor', a peer mentoring program for CQU's distance education students. The program uses a variety of elements, including an online site, to help students to feel comfortable in their studies and to facilitate their learning. The program has grown steadily in popularity among distance education students, and the authors contend that it has proven successful in achieving its goals.

Finally, Greg Whymark, Jim Callan and Ken Purnell investigate the use of an online Group Support System, focused on facilitation skills, 'to engage learners in authentic learning'. Their account links elements of the psychology of learning with the technologies of the Zing Team Learning System, the collaborative online learning environment described also by Ken Purnell, Jim Callan, Greg Whymark and Anna Gralton. They argue that this system has distinct benefits for both learners and educators.

Conclusion

One possible limitation of papers relating to a single institution is that they might have little to say beyond the immediate confines of that institution. That is certainly not the case here. On the contrary, the issues of defining, identifying, applying and evaluating 'best practice' and 'challenges' in university teaching and learning canvassed by the papers in this special theme issue are of local, regional, national and international significance. This is so partly because CQU is itself a regional university with metropolitan campuses and overseas centres. It is so also because the policy landscapes portrayed at the beginning of this editorial introduction are at once local and global in their origins and their effects.

As guest editors, we feel cheered and encouraged after reading the papers making up this special theme issue. We feel cheered by the rich diversity that makes up university teaching and learning. We feel encouraged by the contributors' very different, yet equally professionally committed, efforts to engage with that diversity and to place it at the cornerstone of meeting the 'challenges', and thereby of enacting 'best practice' (however that might be understood), in that teaching and learning. We wish them, and all of us, well in that crucial endeavour.

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