Student Centred Teaching and Learning Workshop.

On Wednesday 30 March, 2005, some thirty people gathered on the eleventh floor of building 108 to explore what student centred teaching and learning meant to them.

The purpose of the discussion was three-fold:

1. to promote the development of collegial support networks for academic staff exploring diverse teaching and learning practices;
2. To offer assistance to academic staff who have been nominated for, or are considering applying for, a teaching award (particularly in the student centred teaching and learning categories).
3. To highlight how staff may document their teaching and learning initiatives in ways that will support their academic careers.

The panel members, Elizabeth Creese (Management), Rodney Noble (Business TAFE School, Management Cluster), Margaret Stewart Business TAFE School (Management Cluster), Warren McKeown (Economics and Finance); Costa Englezos (Accounting and Law), were all recent recipients of teaching awards. The discussion focused upon key questions. These were:

- What does student-centred teaching mean in your classroom?
- Is it feasible in large classes with limited resources?
- How do you recognize it?
- How can you tell you are doing it?

The workshop was organized by Associate Professor Kate Patrick (ADU), and facilitated by Dr. Louise Bricknell (ADU).

The following points summarise some of the key issues that panel members suggested were crucial to developing effective student centred teaching and learning practices. The voices of participants have been used to encapsulate these points.

1. Before you can connect to where students are you must be able to connect to where you are - as a learner and as a teacher. What do you feel when you approach a new learning situation? How do you react to “not knowing”? How do you learn? Do you embrace the “burden of learning” – the challenge of deep rather than surface learning?

They [students] wanted to do less. I gave in to them. They did less, and they learnt less. Not what I wanted. I found that for students to engage in deep learning I have to do it as well: I have to reflect on my own practice, connect feeling and thought, acknowledge my emotions and my anxieties. I had to reflect on how I learnt, how I felt about ‘not knowing’. This reflection didn’t make me feel comfortable; learning didn’t always make me feel comfortable. I was often challenged by learning situations, felt vulnerable, awkward and fearful.

2. How do you support your practice in ways that will assist you to reflect on what you bring to a teaching and learning situation?

Some people are charismatic and lend themselves to teaching with flair and humour, but not everyone has that kind of personality. It doesn’t work for everyone, which is why it is important to understand yourself and your teaching, and learning, style. It is really important to ask yourself some questions. For example, what does student centred learning mean to you? How do you connect to students? How do you connect to your peers? These questions are important, because before you can improve you need to know where you are starting from. Reflection is such an important part of teaching and learning; reflecting on your
practices, and reflecting on the relationship between these and teaching and learning theories is important.

3. What do you do when you start to know your own starting point? You move that point towards that of your students, because one reflects the other. For example, why are teaching staff passionate about their discipline areas? Why? Because they see the relevance of these discipline areas to their lives, to the lives of their families, their communities and globally. Being aware of this information allows teachers to transfer this passion to their students. How? By relating course content material to students’ daily activities. This can be done through stories, action learning exercises, peer assessment, reflective work.

I use stories to encapsulate principles. Time left on the parking meter is an asset. Putting aside a slice of pizza to eat for lunch tomorrow means supper cost less today. A sunk cost is the return bus ticket that you bought but didn’t need because now you have been offered a ride home!

I try to connect to students through using examples that are pertinent to them. For example, most 18-year-old males connect with you when you start to talk about how difficult it is for them to get car insurance. I use narratives that they can relate to. It’s just a way to get them hooked, and from that small hook I try and take them into the whole tapestry – try to get them to connect to the whole picture, but you need a hook first.

4. Connecting to students, and to ourselves, was, suggested every panel member, a key aspect of student centred teaching and learning.

There is a thin line between anxiety against learning and motivation to learn. Teachers need to be aware of this line and support students to move towards the motivation end of it. But you can’t do this if you are unaware of your anxieties, your blocks to learning. It’s no good just knowing where you want students to go if you don’t know where you are coming from. Peer assessment of your teaching – in an informal way, is an important aspect of finding your starting point in teaching and learning situations.

5. Connecting to students is multi-faceted, and includes:
   • content level - the teacher needs to connect their content to the students’ experiences – make it relevant to their learners.
   • Personal level – the teacher needs to connect their humanity to students. That is, they are a teacher that is genuinely interested in their students’ learning.
   • Professional level – this level signifies to students what the teacher’s expectations of the teaching and learning situation are. For example, they understand the difficulties that students face – personal, content, professional. They are supportive of their students’ learning, but expect the student to wrestle with their learning demons. They will support the wrestling, but they will not support spoon feeding.

I use the acronym RUSH to explore what student centred teaching and learning means to me. Firstly, just teaching it should give me a RUSH!

Relevance [R] – the material should be made relevant to their life.
Understanding [U] – you should connect to, and support, their learning experiences.
Simplicity [S] – they need life-based examples that they can relate to.
Humour [H] – humour is a great ice-breaker, anxiety reducer, and concentration improver!

6. Central to effective student centred teaching and learning practices is FEEDBACK, because it offers valuable insights into where your students are with their learning, and often their lives, where your teaching is, and whether the two align. Moreover, feedback offers both the learner and the teacher profound opportunities to negotiate their teaching and learning responsibilities.

   It’s important to know where you and your students are, because student centred teaching and learning isn’t just about doing what students want. You can’t let them lead you around by the nose. Rather you have to offer them something and let them get back to you. They must take responsibility for their learning – it is not all up to you. You do have responsibilities though and getting back to students is a key one. We use the “f” word all the time – FEEDBACK. It has to be prompt, plentiful, and effective. That is, you have to do something with it – negotiate with students, work with them, discuss feedback with them.

7. Aligning learning outcomes, assessment, capabilities, and learning activities within and between courses within programs is a salient aspect of quality teaching and learning practices. What is the evidence of this alignment? Examples include: topic maps, capability matrixes, and assessment maps – all of which outline these areas for the program as a whole.

   Our team, and let me stress that it was the PROGRAM TEAM that won the award, used the high touch strategy. This involved working with staff and students in a partnership. Students around a table develop a collective learning needs analysis. Grouping night class students for mutual support (“if someone in your group can’t come one evening, organise to pass on the notes”). Staff discuss the overlaps between their topics and develop topic maps, remind students about what they’ve learnt in other classes. Staff met briefly but often. Keep using the F- word (“Let me give you some Feedback about this”).

Key and current issues of student centred teaching and learning in the Portfolio of Business.

A number of issues came out of the discussion, but perhaps the most pertinent were:

1. Developing a program based approach to teaching and learning – rather than an individual approach.
2. The above point was of particular importance to the issue of assessment. That is, poor program team communication can lead to: over assessment, overloading students at particular times of the semester, a lack of development in relation to capabilities within a program, no or little alignment between learning outcomes, assessment, and capabilities; repetition of program content; and inappropriate assessment.
3. Supporting academics to develop evidence based teaching and learning portfolios. That is, portfolios that highlight not simply what someone has done but rather how this “doing” has been evaluated and monitored, and who has done this evaluation and monitoring. Evidence based teaching and learning practices are crucial for academics seeking promotion on the basis of their effective teaching and learning practices, including teaching awards.

Teaching Award Criteria – Important points to note

- Make sure you have evidence to support your claims – e.g, peer reviews, student evaluations.
- You do not have to address all of the teaching awards criteria?
- Seek out support with your application – approach peers who have gone through the nomination process before.
- Treat the nomination and selection process as a research project – be thorough and creative, too.