Collaborating on Student learning and Research: What does it look like?

By Martyn Jones, 17th July 2006

Introduction: The Field Education Unit

The School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, has a Field Education Unit. This comprises a small team that helps in the administration, educational direction and strategic development of student workplace learning and research across undergraduate – and some postgraduate – degree programs.

The Field Education Unit has been trialling the use of collaborative approaches to student learning and research with a selection of human service organisations. These include:

- a local government,
- a medium-size social welfare non-government organisation,
- a local service area of a national social welfare non-government organisation,
- a small community-based organisation, and
- a largish community health organisation.

The selection has been made in part with a view to finding out how the nature of the collaboration will differ with the different missions and cultures of those organisations. But there are some common foundations:

- there is a history of positive working relationships between the School and the organisation
- the initiative aligns with strategic goals of the organisation (for example, about developing a learning culture, or building research capacity)
- there is seen to be value in developing a more systematic approach and process for student placements in contrast to ad hoc, individual arrangements
- there is seen to be potential for collaboration around student placements to lead to other collaborative activity

Trialling the use of collaborative approaches

The programs so far have deliberately set out to include students from more than one discipline / degree program. The School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning has undergraduate degrees in, for example, social work, youth work, social science (psychology), social science (legal and dispute studies), social science (environment), and social science with an emphasis on research and policy. There are also urban
planning programs. The combinations of students have involved: social work and youth work; social work, youth work and legal and dispute studies; social work, social science and environment. The numbers of students involved in any collaboration vary at present between three and eight. All intend to work towards a ‘critical mass’ of at least five students.

Placements on these degree programs vary from 20 (environment) to 70 (social work) days. The work students take on can be ‘direct service’ (working with clients / service users, individually, in families or groups) or project based (research, policy, program evaluation, etc). The collaborations have so far involved students from undergraduate studies. There is potential to connect with postgraduate students but the infrastructure here is currently a little thin – negotiating around specific projects with particular postgraduate programs would probably be required in the first instance.

**What the collaborations involve for students, organisation and the University.**

To date, each of the collaborating organisations has designated a member of staff as their student program coordinator. The question of how to resource this has been a crucial one. The School has on occasion provided a small amount of seeding money to assist identify a sustainable model. The role itself works across their service / departmental areas to assist in identifying student placements, coordinating internally, and liaising with the School. Similarly, the School has a member of staff (presently from the Field Education Unit) who provides overall support and coordination for the collaboration, links into the academic programs involved and maintains communication with the organisation’s coordinator.

Each of the collaborations has involved determining what is it that the student program seeks to add to the traditional approach to student placements, and what it is about the program that provides a distinctive learning experience for the students. This might be found in a strengthened orientation to the nature of work in that organisation; a focus on developing multi-disciplinary approaches and practices; generating continuity in the contributions of successive student cohorts to the organisation; utilising the program to strengthen how the organisation ‘brands’ itself (for example, critical reflection, practitioner research, networked).

Generally, each of the collaborations has resulted in the students on placement at any one time participating in a collective learning activity in addition to their individually negotiated working and supervision arrangements. They might meet on a regular basis,
engage in peer review, share particular experiences they have gleaned through their bit of the organisation, and so on. These are loosely structured and allow for a good measure of student direction as the weeks unfold. From here, staff from across the organisation may be involved and students can use their collective presence to communicate back across the organisation (newsletters, forums, presentations, etc).

The organisation’s student program coordinator provides opportunities for other staff who are engaged with the students to work on issues of common concern: placement recruitment, induction / orientation, work allocation, supervision, joint learning activities, and so on.

Student projects are very varied. They need to provide opportunities that enable students to be assessed against university-based criteria whilst offering the organisation opportunity to complete worthwhile tasks that otherwise might not have been tackled. Projects can be undertaken by single students, or students working in pairs or small teams. A feature of all projects is that they are ‘client-based’ in the sense that students are working on projects that have emerged from the interests and agendas of the organisation.

Where students are involved in ‘direct service’, there is likely to be a planned way of channelling appropriate work in their direction. The work is usually a reflection of that undertaken by continuing staff. Sometimes, students undertake valuable direct service work that staff does not have time to do. Students can also provide additional capacity in the development of new services.

**Conclusion: Continuing research and development**

To date, only one collaboration has completed a full cycle. An evaluation was undertaken with staff and students. The students were overwhelmingly positive. Whilst there were some aspects they would have liked tidying up, they felt the coordinated and coherent program had provided them with a supportive and challenging learning experience. They felt they benefited from the peer aspects and also gained a much broader knowledge of the organisation as a whole. Staff reported on their own sense of professional development from participating in the student program over and above their work with individual students. The organisation (its leaders) reported that the program had resulted in significant organisational development – underscoring the importance of learning, validating practitioner knowledge and expertise, crystallising the organisation’s own sense of identity and purpose.
Other collaborations are very much works in progress. We are learning how to better coordinate between the School and organisation, how to prepare students for participating in the program, how to communicate with other academic staff what it’s all about, and so on. Organisations are learning how to identify viable projects ahead of time, how to design and refine collective learning activities that extend the students’ learning and the benefits to staff. Some underlying issues about student placements in general, of course, do not go away: for example, students being heavily committed inside and outside their studies; and, fitting the rigidities of the academic calendar to the demands of the workplace.

Varied models for resourcing the programs are being identified. One has recently integrated the student program coordinator role into a newly created post of programs manager. Another has built it into the work plans of their human resources / organisational development unit. Another is seeking funding through a philanthropic grant (outcome unknown!). Generally, it is enlarging the base of, and bringing strategic direction, to student placements that have opened up innovative ways of achieving the required staffing resource. Finding sufficient physical space and infrastructure to support the program remains a challenge for many. A dedicated student space is ideal (and a strident way of communicating the significance of the program) though for the majority of the collaborators this is a longer term goal.