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**Investigating the engagement of 3rd year tertiary education students
in the learning and teaching of literacy**

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Abstract

This paper reports the initial stages of a study into the engagement of 3rd year students in a literacy curriculum course within a primary and middle-years education degree at an Australian regional university. Prompted by concerns about students' poor attendance at lectures and tutorials and their limited use of available support mechanisms in other aspects of their education degree, academic staff from the literacy course applied for and received funding from a university Learning and Teaching Development Grant. This allowed the collection of data and considerations relating to the redesign of the students' literacy curriculum course. With a focus on 'becoming literate' – and the multiple meanings that are encompassed within that phrase – the course focuses on critical factors for success in literacy teaching and learning and aims to enhance the students' engagement with learning about literacy and learning to teach literacy.

Introduction

In recent times, the ability of higher education institutions to produce high quality students has come under public scrutiny. The media has peddled a range of stories to explain the alleged drop in standards (e.g. Lane, 2007; Salt, 2006). At the one extreme, university 'teachers' and their teaching have been criticised and, at the other extreme, students have been blamed (Norrie, 2005). The foibles of Generation Y, for example, have been used as explanations of why today's school-leavers-come-university-students are different from the apparently career-focused students of the past (Krause, 2005; Salt, 2006). It has been said that members of Generation Y organise 'their work around their life' and are unwilling 'to be bogged down with the burden of marriage, mortgage, children ... career' or study (Salt, 2006, p.26). According to Krause (2006), 'tertiary study runs the risk of simply becoming another appointment or engagement in the daily diary, along with paid work and a range of other commitments beyond the campus' (p.3).

Stories such as these have also been evident within higher education institutions themselves. At the regional university where we work, many of our academic colleagues have expressed concerns about the effects of the massification of higher education, including the enrolment of students with low tertiary entrance scores, evidence of low literacy standards, and a general lack of engagement with university study. In particular, lack of attendance at lectures and tutorials, poor use of online study materials and an apparent disconnection from staff have been cited as evidence of students' failure to engage.

These concerns prompted us to consider student engagement in a literacy curriculum course that we teach. The third-year double credit point course is one of the core components in the Bachelor of Education in Primary and Middle Schooling that is offered by our regional university. Because it is the only literacy course that our students complete within their degree program, we had some concerns about whether students were participating in our course to a level that would enable them to become proficient literacy teachers. At the same time, we were reflecting on our university's introduction of graduate qualities, attributes and generic skills and the expectation that these would be integrated into all courses. We were particularly concerned about how

to include ‘something else’ into what we regarded as an already ‘jam-packed’ and intellectually demanding course.

We applied for and received funding through our university’s competitive Learning and Teaching Development Grant Scheme. We planned a study that would collect data retrospectively from the 2006 cohort of students, document changes to the course, and collect data from the 2007 cohort. Although the study is still in its early stages, this paper presents our initial findings from interviews with a small number of students from the 2006 cohort. It also presents some of our reflections about the literacy course, student engagement and how the course might be redesigned.

The context of the literacy curriculum course

The literacy curriculum course that is the focus of this study ran for the first time in second semester 2006, as part of the rollout of a new education degree, with an enrolment of 118 third-year students. As stated above, it was a double credit point course and the only literacy course in the students’ degree program. As a result, its delivery was intensive, with six hours of contact time per week over ten weeks with a Professional Experience (‘prac’) block of three weeks duration embedded into the course. During the ten weeks of course work, it was expected that students would spend at least another 15 hours per week of their own time engaged in directed and self-directed study activities.

The weekly delivery of the course was characterised by a two-hour lecture, a two-hour tutorial and a two-hour workshop. The students also had access to an online site – StudyDesk, a WebCT learning management tool – where course materials were uploaded. These included recorded lectures, PowerPoint slides used in the lectures, workshop and tutorial materials, additional resources and information about assignments and Professional Experience.

We offered audio recordings of our lectures so that students who were unable to attend in person could listen in their own time. While this was not our preferred option, we were aware that some students were teacher aides who were working in schools during the day; that some students were attempting to ‘fast track’ and thus had

heavy study loads; and that in three cases students were doing a 'prac' for another course for several weeks of class time.

We were also aware that our students seemed to live very busy lives. While some lived in the regional city where the university is located, a number lived with their families in locations up to two hours drive from the campus. It appeared that these students attempted to condense their classes into one or two days of on-campus time. Many students were undertaking paid employment for in excess of twenty hours per week and were trying to 'fit' their university classes around work commitments. Additionally, some students had families to support and were attempting to juggle study, work and family responsibilities and demands. In general, we tried to be as flexible and as understanding as possible, to allow students to operate in ways that allowed for the complexities of their lives as students.

Considerations of student engagement: Initial data collection

Our initial thoughts about student engagement considered the extent to which students participated in the activities we offered as part of their literacy curriculum course, even though Krause (2005) had noted that 'time spent on a particular activity is a limited indicator of engagement' (p.4). As Coates (2005) argued, student engagement is about how and to what extent students participate in 'educationally purposeful activities' (p. 26) and data on student engagement can provide information on 'what students are actually doing' (p. 32). Current measures of the quality of the university experience, such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991; Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997), tend to use students' perceptions of curriculum, teaching and assessment as indicators of learning and the quality of learning outcomes (Byrne & Flood, 2003). According to Coates (2006), however, few universities have taken up the challenge of finding out whether students are using the resources that are on offer to learn productively.

In keeping with Coates' ideas (2005, 2006), we began our data collection by looking at the resources and opportunities for learning that we provided for students. We decided to consider students' attendance at lectures, tutorials and workshops and their use of online study materials as two potential indicators of their engagement with the literacy curriculum course. For the duration of the course, student attendance at

lectures was low: approximately 50 per cent for the first six weeks (prior to ‘prac’) and around 20 per cent for the final four weeks (after ‘prac’). By comparison, however, attendance at the tutorials and workshops was high, with between 90 and 100 per cent student attendance at all sessions. The information from the second indicator, students’ use of course materials on the online StudyDesk site, was available by running a series of tracking reports which provided details about students’ access of the site and time on the site during the semester.

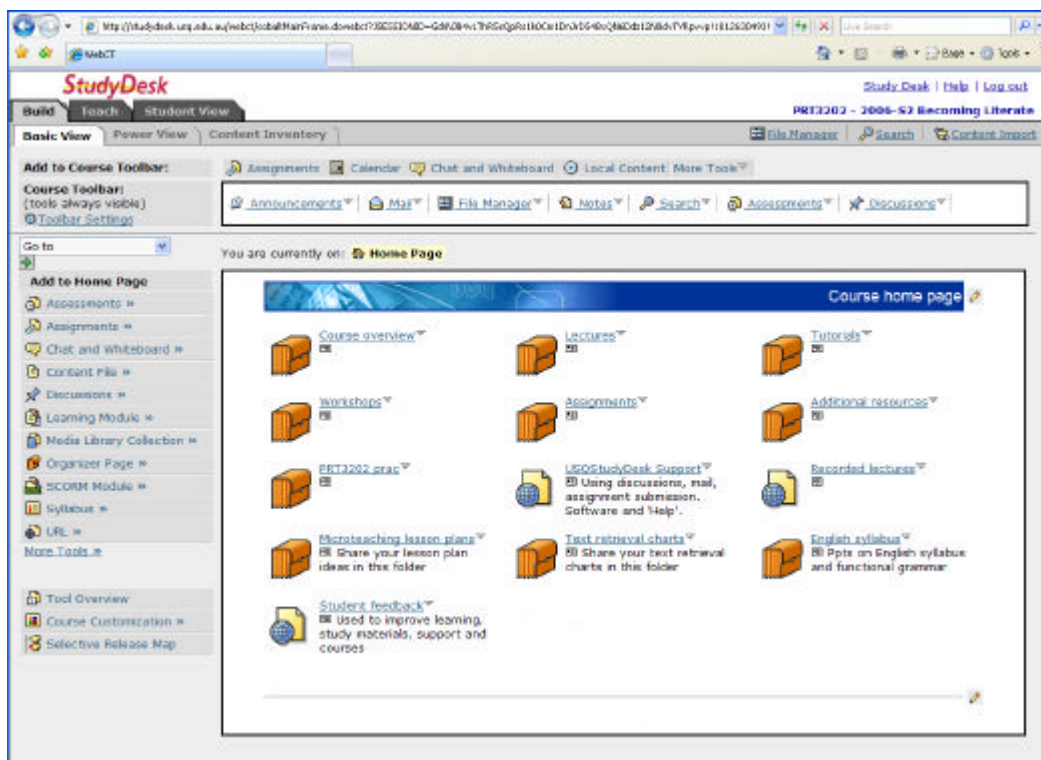
Table 1 provides a series of data about the activity that occurred on the site, including average session length, average user sessions per day, and the most active and least active days and times during the semester. This data suggested that there was considerable student access of the materials on StudyDesk. With a total of 5203 user sessions, it appeared that, on average, each student accessed the site 44 times during the semester.

Statistic	Value
Total user sessions	5203
Average user session length (in hours, minutes, seconds)	00:06:35
Average user sessions per day	42
Average user sessions per day on weekdays	51
Average user sessions per day on weekends	19
Most active day	15 August 2006
Least active day	17 November 2006
Most active hour of the day	10:00-11:00am
Least active hour of the day	2:00-3:00am

Table 1: StudyDesk activity report for Semester 2, 2006.

Figure 1 shows the layout of the home page of the course’s StudyDesk. The page provided a selection of hyperlinked headings (e.g. announcements, mail, notes) that are part of the ‘regular’ StudyDesk format, as well a customised collection of course-specific folders (e.g. course overview, lectures, tutorials) which were added to the site by us as the course progressed. In total, the folders contained 84 separate content files and the tracking report showed that these were accessed by students on 11,312 occasions.

Figure 1. The Study-Desk home page.



The available tracking data about how much time students spend on StudyDesk showed that some students logged in and remained logged in for lengthy periods of time, whilst others spent very little time there. During the semester, the 118 students were logged into StudyDesk for a total time of 691 hours, 56 minutes and 29 seconds. However, the wide variations between students – with the total time registered for individuals varying between 0 hours, 21 minutes, 9 seconds and 15 hours, 5 minutes, 39 seconds – suggested that this information was not useful unless we were able to find out exactly what students were ‘doing’ during their times on the site.

Further considerations of student engagement: Interviews with students

The data relating to attendance and access of StudyDesk is being supplemented with student interviews about their engagement with the literacy curriculum course. This component of data collection takes up Coates’ (2005, 2006) message that any understanding of engagement must consider whether students are using the available resources productively to ‘underpin high-quality learning’ (Coates, 2006, p.28). According to Coates (2005), it would be useful to identify ‘how students are interacting with their universities and with the practices that are most likely to

generate productive learning' (p.26). The interviews, then, were aimed at probing students' use of 'time, energy and resources' within the tertiary course that we taught (Krause, 2005, p.3).

Although to date interviews have been conducted with only seven students, this early data provides some insights into students' perceptions of the factors that helped or constrained their engagement and participation in the course and facilitated or hindered their development as pre-service literacy educators. As will be demonstrated in the next section of this paper, the students' interviews suggested that these were two separate – but related – components of engagement. On the one hand, students needed to engage with the content of the course in order to 'pass', but on the other hand, their study served the longer term purpose of supporting learning about how to be a literacy educator.

It is important to point out that a Research Assistant contacted and interviewed the students. As the 'teachers' of the literacy curriculum course, we wanted the students to be able to talk about the course without feeling that we would know which students had provided particular information. The identity of the interviewees remains with the Research Assistant.

Students' engagement with learning in the literacy curriculum course

All students who were interviewed discussed their study of the literacy curriculum course in terms of the resources and opportunities that were made available by us, the 'teachers' of their course. In particular, they addressed issues relating to their attendance at lectures, tutorials and workshops, the building of relationships that occurred during these times, and their use of the online StudyDesk site. The students also discussed individual efforts and organisational ability as factors that influenced engagement.

Attendance

Most of the interviewed students thought that attendance was an indicator of engagement in this course. However, attendance at tutorials and workshops was seen as more important than attendance at lectures. The students said that they were engaged for the practical components of the course – tutorials and workshops – but

not the more theoretical components – the lectures. One student said that ‘I thought it was great in that we had workshops and tutes and that it was hands on. I found that really interesting.’ Of the seven students interviewed, two females indicated that they attended lectures regularly, while others did not for a variety of reasons. Although the availability of recorded lectures was convenient for some students due to distance or work commitments, others found that the recorded lectures suited their learning styles and allowed the ‘theoretical’ components to be more easily accessed. For example, one student explained that ‘I really like being able to pause the lecture and write stuff down, then you don’t miss things when they talk.’

Time online

In general, students felt that time on StudyDesk was not an indicator of engagement, supporting our ‘theory’ that the times revealed by the tracking report were not particularly useful. The interviews suggested that some students do not have internet access at home, that some do not like checking emails each day, and that others ‘just don’t like using the computer.’ Students felt that the StudyDesk was more useful for downloading lecture notes or other course materials, rather than ‘sitting reading all the discussions.’ One male student explained that he used StudyDesk to look at the available information about assessment and to plan his semester around that: ‘And then if I’m getting up to an important part of assessment I just go and download everything and print it out.’ He regarded time on the online site as indicating something about personality or learning style rather than being an indicator of engagement.

Relationships

Relationship building was another important factor in helping students engage with the course. The interviewed students said that they enjoyed establishing relationships with the course team. As a result, they liked the rotation tasks that we organised across concurrent classes because this exposed them to ‘different tutors and different points of view.’ All of them said that we, the course team, were ‘very approachable.’ For example,

So that if you did have a problem you wouldn’t feel bad going up to them ... All the lecturers and tutors were very approachable. I think they were very friendly, wanting to do the best for us and I think that’s really nice.

Students also indicated that our enthusiasm for the subject was important to them as it helped them engage with the course at a deeper level:

I had a really good relationship with my tutor ... There was a group of us that worked together. We helped each other out without just providing the answers to each other. I had to miss one or two workshops. And she got to know who you were and she would offer you help. She knew you were there to learn ... you could tell she really loved what she was doing and that spurred me on a little bit.

I had to miss a couple (of classes). She actually went out of her way and said look come see me, and she actually went through what was covered in the workshop – wasn't like it was a big deal, pulled all this stuff out – boom boom boom – made life easy because they actually understand. They got to know you a bit and know if I wasn't going to turn up there was a good reason for it. At least they looked after you and made sure you kept up with your work load.

Students also enjoyed the opportunity to build relationships with their peers as part of their learning. They identified student participation, group effort and 'actively listening and contributing and collaborating with peers' as things that helped them engage with the course. The interview data also highlighted that students were looking for opportunities to engage in reflective practice and to participate in discussion groups, as ways of helping with understanding the theory and readings for the course.

Individual effort and organisational ability

Individual effort and organisational ability were also identified as important to many of the students and were a reflection of individual engagement with the course. Several students felt that they had received the marks that they did because they 'did the work.' One student explained that attendance at tutorials and workshops was beneficial, but 'I don't think going to them is what got me the mark I got. I think it's what I did with that when I left that gave me the mark that I got.'

Students' engagement with their futures as literacy educators

Most of the students who were interviewed indicated that they regarded the learning of how to be a literacy educator as an important component of their degree program. One student explained that pre-service teachers need to 'think a bit and try and prepare a bit. You can't just walk into a classroom.' As another student pointed out:

Things are great in theory but unless you can actually apply that situation to the classroom then there's really no point. I was very fortunate in my prac in that I was allowed to use the four resources model ... so for me it kind of cemented in.

Several of the interviewed students realised the importance of literacy as an area that underpins everything else they would do as practising teachers. This perceived need for literacy learning and teaching seemed to provide them with an impetus for attending as much of the course as they could. As one student pointed out:

You spend most of your day on building kid's literacy and numeracy and you can integrate it into other things, but you need that basis before you can integrate it into other things ... if a child's having difficulty comprehending something, for example, in science and you don't have the (literacy) skills to identify why ... that child misses out ... you want to have the (literacy) skills behind you to assist across all the KLAs.

The modeling of appropriate teaching was regarded highly by a number of students. They argued that it was important for practical ideas to be offered and that demonstrations of 'good' teaching were a necessity:

I think as lecturers and tutors in the education faculty they have to remember that they are actually modeling how to teach to pre-service teachers, which is fairly important that they do it well. And in this case I think they did it pretty well.

Role model of the teacher themselves is a really good way of engaging students. If they are telling you to teach one way and they're not doing it, then how are we expected to do it?

The building of relationships between us and the students was seen as a really important part of their learning, both to 'pass' the course and to prepare them for the future. We were given good 'raps' in relation to our role in building such relationships and giving them insights into their possible futures as literacy educators. As one student said:

I thought all the lecturers and tutors were very approachable. I think they were very friendly, wanting to do the best for us ... and they were definitely knowledgeable and passionate about it, and had obviously had experience working in it. I really liked when they gave examples from when they were teaching because it really puts things into context.

Nevertheless, not all students felt the need for participation in all aspects of the course. In talking about this, one student commented that:

I think there is mainly two types of students – the student who wants to get a pass and really doesn't care what they learn. There is the other student who is there to learn as much as they can to increase their knowledge and skills.

In fact, one of the interviewed students identified with the former 'type' of student and he said:

Is it 320 hours we're supposed to do for this course? Would have been lucky to do a quarter of that ... My motivation is definitely to get the degree. I want to finish the course and get to be a teacher.

Several of the students expressed disappointment that their learning about literacy teaching was undertaken in one semester only. For example, students bemoaned that 'literacy is the main part of teaching and we learn about it in six months' and commented that they felt that there was a lot 'packed' into the course and that we were trying to fit too much learning into a short amount of time. This was evident from comments such as:

They had to cover way too much.

To give literacy two units is ridiculous. That's the problem. I think it's why they were so rushed, for literacy, my opinion – need to have it broken up over the four years.

Conclusion

The data collected by the interviews with students provided insights into their perceptions about the types of behaviours that constituted engagement within a literacy curriculum course. From their perspectives, engagement in learning was evidenced through attendance at lectures, tutorials and workshops and the use of StudyDesk. However, the students suggested that attendance in itself was not enough, and that it was their participation in the classes that ensured that learning occurred. Other factors – such as relationship building with the course team and with other students, and individual effort and organisational ability – were also regarded as important to learning. Findings like these, which suggest the value of developing learning communities within universities, support the findings of earlier research

about student engagement with learning in tertiary institutions (e.g. Krause, 2005, 2006).

As was pointed out by several of the students, not all attendance at classes needed to be face-to-face. Indeed, they highlighted the importance of flexibility in the delivery of courses, to cater for their diverse circumstances and for their desire to maximise and manage efficiently their time spent on campus. Yet, it was clear that the practical activities that we offered in tutorials and workshops did encourage students to attend and to participate. Indeed, we would argue strongly that we could not offer the same types of learning experiences in non face-to-face formats. For lectures, however, we have now moved to online recorded lectures, to provide the flexibility that seems to suit our student cohort.

The student interviews highlighted the importance of a range of relational factors in helping students engage with learning. In particular, factors such as tutor knowledge and passion for the subject area, support for students to get the best out of the course, tutor approachability and empathy, and experience in the field were seen by students as making a difference to their learning, thus paralleling the findings of other studies (George, 2006; Krause, 2005, 2006). In light of interview comments and other feedback from the students we teach, we are considering utilising the lecture timeslot for face-to-face professional conversations on the readings and the lecture content.

It appeared to us that much of the students' discussion was about what the course would provide for them as university students and as future literacy educators. The students only said a little about their responsibilities in engagement. However, we believe that engagement is a two-fold process and that our efforts alone will not necessarily be effective in ensuring learning. As George (2006) argued, 'student engagement encourages a shared responsibility for learning between students and staff, and, therefore, for students *not* to see themselves as passive consumers of tertiary education' (p.1). In the next round of interviews, we plan to find out more about students' perceptions of how they might more actively engage with learning.

Although our study into the engagement of students in a literacy curriculum course in an education degree is still in its initial stages, interviews with just seven students

have provided us with useful information about their perceptions of engagement in learning. In investigating student engagement in a course that attempts to achieve the dual purposes of learning about literacy and learning to teach literacy, we have come to know more about our students and their views about what constitutes effective learning opportunities. As the study progresses, we expect that we will continue to learn about student engagement and how it might be maximised.

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