Many and varied roles: An inter-institutional project to evidence the impact of Learning Advisors on student achievement

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Abstract

At the end of 2008, a number of Learning Advisors from different member institutions of ATLAANZ were successful in a bid for funding to run a two day 'Writing Hui'. The funding body, Ako Aotearoa, is the Ministry of Education's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, and sponsors projects that strategically improve tertiary teaching and learning. The particular purpose of this successful application was to identify and report on student learning support programmes that demonstrate a tangible impact on student retention, pass rates, and/or completion. By collating success stories of programmes and initiatives from around the country that produce desirable results, information about best practice can be accessed and shared effectively, enabling academic support staff to incorporate appropriate elements to enhance student performance and address areas of concern.

The project team extended invitations to Learning Advisor colleagues from institutions in the upper half of the North Island, the area administered by Ako Aotearoa's Northern Hub, to which we reported. Sixteen ATLAANZ members attended, and over 30 programme summaries and case studies of success were produced, including accounts of one-to-one student support, study skills workshops, working with specific programmes and staff in interdisciplinary collaborations, and initiatives that have raised achievement among Māori and Pasifika students, international students, and foundation learners. This paper draws on the literature of writing retreats, communities of practice, and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations which provided the theoretical foundations for this successful and productive professional initiative. It incorporates reflections by the organisers on the implications and opportunities that the project raises – for those in the Tertiary Learning Advisor profession, for managers and decision makers in the tertiary education sector, and for the learners in the learning environments that they provide. It is the authors' hope that

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by examining some of these issues in this paper, colleagues will be encouraged to take the necessary steps not only in demonstrating the impact of their work on student achievement, but also in more widely disseminating the impact and value of that work.

Introduction

On 30th April and 1st May 2009, 16 Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) met at an Ako Aotearoa-supported hui in Tauranga. The TLAs were from the following institutions: the University of Auckland, AUT University, Unitec, Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec), Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, and Eastern Institute of Technology. During the two-day hui we wrote, and supported each other in writing summations of some of the instruction and support programmes we provide for students that clearly achieve tangible results. The guiding intention was fourfold: firstly, to share learning about successful ways of operating with colleagues; secondly, to demonstrate to those in our own profession and to others in the tertiary education sector that the work of TLAs makes a significant contribution to better retention and completion rates for students; thirdly, to enhance the standing of learning advising as a profession; and finally, to contribute to the development of the tertiary education sector and to be counted as a key stakeholder group in national planning and future initiatives.

This paper describes the way in which the writing hui project came about, establishing firstly the context and the work of the key protagonists, the TLAs and the centres in which they are based, and the lamentably low profile their work has typically received. Next the paper outlines background information about the formation of, and activities coordinated by, our national body, the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ), and how the successful application for a grant from Ako Aotearoa to run the hui came about. A brief description is then provided of the conduct and proceedings of the two-day hui, followed by an exploration of three strands of commentary identified in the literature which are particularly pertinent in accounting for the writing hui's success in achieving its immediate objectives. These strands are: writing retreats; communities of practice; and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations. The paper then considers some of the implications of the hui and the work it produced for practitioners, institutions, the profession, and the wider tertiary education sector. We hope that examining these issues relating to the writing hui will provide helpful pointers and encouragement for others involved in supporting student academic success to likewise find appropriate ways to highlight the impact and value of their work.

The modern tertiary environment

In order to contextualise the hui and its initiatives, the sector setting for its implementation is described briefly here. In the past couple of decades, higher education has become increasingly driven by the political imperatives of "massification" (Harris, 2005, p. 421) and accountability for student retention and achievement. When educational institutions are under pressure to operate as profit-

making business enterprises, there is a real concern that the process of earning higher qualifications is becoming a form of "transactional deals between traders", and the providers little more than "a learning factory" (Keenan, n.d., Slide 3). Linked to this sort of financial platform for modern tertiary delivery, and also driven by the ideology of a knowledge economy (Madden, 2009) and almost open entry to university study, is the advent of large numbers of non-traditional students. Mature students, students from ethnic and cultural minorities, 'second-chance learners' who did not achieve well in their secondary schooling, international students and students with disabilities, including learning difficulties – all have the potential to challenge an institution's statistics of successful graduations.

The cost of non-completion is high: the institution cannot resell the place on the programme; the government, and therefore taxpayers have funded a qualification that was not achieved; the student suffers a financial loss and is likely to feel some loss of confidence, and may never repeat the experience. In response to this challenge, most tertiary institutions have put in place a number of different strategies, including efforts at enhancing 'teaching and learning quality' and the provision of student support services, which usually incorporates academic skills assistance as one of the core components. The exact means of delivery of academic skills assistance varies between institutions: sometimes staff responsible for this work are part of a teaching and learning, or academic development unit; sometimes they are part of a library 'learning hub' or 'information commons'; sometimes they work as part of a faculty; but mostly these TLAs are situated in a separate team, or Learning Centre.

The role of Learning Centres and the work of Learning Advisors

The primary function of Learning Centres, as summarised by Morris (2008), is to "bridge the gap between the skills students bring to tertiary education and the skills required for successful participation" (p. 87). Work is typically either one-to-one or group work within the Centre or, increasingly, online. TLAs frequently collaborate with subject discipline instructors in the provision of class support and guidance, and embedded learning skills development. Pre-semester delivery of learning/study skills workshops, often as part of a transition/preparation for study programme, is another common role. TLA practice then is wide-ranging and varied; it is also a very reflective discipline, constantly questioning philosophy and pedagogy. Wilkinson, Bowker, Deane-Freeman and Rullan (2008) observe that there can be a tension between providing the assignment-focused assistance students request to address their immediate needs, and an appreciation of a wider culture of inquiry and knowledge generation. They note that where a decade ago, a core function of Learning Centres was to teach generic study skills, today it is possible to identify three co-existing student learning-related constructs addressed by TLAs. First, and for many students, foremost, remains the reactive response – what they need to do, or know, to pass. Then there is the developmental practice of academic socialisation - the culture and the expectations of the tertiary environment. The third construct, say Wilkinson et al. (2008), is academic literacies, an extension of both the former practices: it is about communication, relationships and dialogue, and above all, developing and

empowering the student voice. And as if this was not enough, Manalo (2008) argues that it is essential TLAs and Learning Centres are active researchers within their field in order to be truly effective.

Seen, but not counted

As TLAs, conducting our own research is also important if our practice and contribution is to be fully appreciated. An education sector which focuses on accountability and economic sustainability has led to numerous studies to identify challenges and tipping points for student success and retention, and suggest strategies to limit and mitigate the impact of the negative aspects of the contemporary tertiary environment. In 2002, the Ministry of Education commissioned a best evidence synthesis of 146 research studies which looked at two key influences on student achievement: academic development programmes and the provision of student support services (Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Zepke, 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Their findings were summarised as 13 "propositions for practice" (p. x), ten to do with students adapting to the institution, and 3 about the institution adapting to the students (Middleton, 2005). Almost hidden within both these strands is the work of TLAs: in a reference to "relationships between students and…support staff" and advice that "all staff must understand the support services and act as a reference point to them" (Prebble et al., 2005, p. 3). The authors note the "paucity of New Zealand studies" (p. 7) and do not directly comment on Learning Centre work, except to say, "Yet the idea of providing students with extra academic support to improve outcomes does not seem so alien" (p. 7).

We know that the uptake of TLA services is consistently high at around 15-20% of the student population in universities and often over 50% in polytechnics (based on student use figures reported in annual reports from Learning Centres at Auckland University of Technology, the University of Auckland (including the Faculty of Education programme at NorthTec in Whangarei), the University of New South Wales, and Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki. Thus, TLAs work with significant proportions of the tertiary student population (Manalo, Marshall, & Fraser, 2009). So how do we best identify, document, and promulgate the difference we make to the academic performance of the students we teach and support? While we are well aware of the fact that 'use' does not necessarily equate to 'effectiveness', we (and TLAs in general) are also cognisant of the *real*, tangible, positive differences that our day-to-day work makes to student academic performance. But knowledge about the impact of the services we provide appears to be mostly limited to our own ranks and to 'the converted few' within our institutions. Clearly, addressing this knowledge gap challenge is a priority for those in the TLA profession.

The ATLAANZ movement

The questions of how to effectively demonstrate the impact of the work we do with students, and how to more convincingly demonstrate the alignment of this work with institutional and national aspirations in tertiary education achievement, have been discussed and debated quite extensively during the past decade in the TLA national

association in New Zealand, ATLAANZ. The Association was established at the end of 1999 when an earlier national grouping of TLAs took steps to formally establish ATLAANZ with its own constitution, later incorporated in 2003. The three key articulated functions of the association are: to facilitate communication and sharing of best practice amongst TLAs, to support the professional development and promote the professional status of members, and to disseminate relevant research findings (ATLAANZ, n.d.). The principal instruments utilised to facilitate the achievement of these functions have been an email discussion forum, an annual conference and, since 2006, a refereed publication of the proceedings.

As noted, a recurring thread of discussion within ATLAANZ has been to explore ways to evidence the value of our work and ensure our voice is heard at an institutional and national level – particularly in these days of 'shifting sands', reviews and re-structuring. TLAs are aware and wary of the fact that claims of student academic performance improvements following the provision of learning support programmes are subject to 'criticisms' about not being able to rule out the possibility that other factors (e.g., student self-selection, motivation, other learning experiences) could have caused the improvements. These difficulties with establishing concrete links between interventions and outcomes exist, certainly, but should not be taken as a reason to avoid exploring how what we do impacts on student retention, pass rates, and completion. It is outside the scope of the current paper to explore these issues in detail (for a more detailed discussion – and possible solutions – see, e.g., Manalo, 2009), but the *need* within the TLA profession to demonstrate what they know to be the day-to-day positive impact of their work with students was in large part the motivation behind the 'writing hui' that was conducted.

The Ako Aotearoa sponsored 'writing hui'

The 'writing hui' was supported by Ako Aotearoa, which is the Ministry of Education's National Centre for Teaching Excellence, charged with achieving the best possible educational outcomes for all learners by enhancing the effectiveness of tertiary teaching and learning practices. Ako Aotearoa allocates funding, by region, to specific projects, with a preference for inter-institutional collaboration and outcomes which will identify and share good practice. Accordingly, a small group from within the ATLAANZ Executive Committee submitted a proposal to Ako Aotearoa's Northern Hub, to run a writing hui to collect tangible evidence of the impact TLAs have on student achievement. In late 2008, we were notified that our application had been successful and that we had received a grant of $10,000 to complete the project.

The two-day hui in Tauranga took place in a conference centre with sufficient table space to accommodate all 16 participants, who mostly wrote in the shared space, although withdrawal to private rooms was available for those who preferred a quieter writing environment. A facilitated introductory session ensured all participants were cognisant of the hui's aims and objectives, and all were adequately prepared for the exercise. Listening to one another's proposed outlines of what we would write

exposed a number of synergies which were utilised during peer feedback and reflection sessions.

The hui concept required participants to write programme summations which described a range of initiatives and interventions to improve student outcomes. A template ensured all shared common foci, while allowing each summation its own voice. Twenty-two summations and 12 case studies described the value of one-to-one work with students, skills development workshops, and programmes that are integrated within specific subject disciplines (health, statistics, nursing, business, foundation learning, biology, electrical engineering). Peer tutoring and foundation skills programmes, and programmes to support Māori and Pasifika students were also profiled. Each provided not only tangible evidence of efficacy, but also critical success factors and action plans to facilitate replication and/or adaptation where the strategies employed in the programmes may be deemed helpful for other student groups.

On conclusion of the hui, the organizing team followed up with participants to collect and collate the programme summations into a report which will be presented to Ako Aotearoa and posted on their website for public access. It is anticipated that this document will facilitate shared learning amongst tertiary educators, to enhance understanding of strategies that make a difference to student learning, and to promote the use of methods that have been shown to effect better retention and completion rates for students in tertiary education.

Factors contributing to success, and discourse from the literature

We considered the factors that contributed to the success of the writing hui, and identified three strands of commentary from the research literature that appeared to be pertinent: writing retreats, communities of practice, and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations. Each of these is briefly discussed in the following subsections.

Writing retreats

The word ‘retreat’ has historic connotations of monasteries and hermit dwellings, but simply means “the act of retiring or withdrawing one's self”, or “a special season of solitude and silence” (Thinkexist.com, n.d., para. 1). In the academic context, writing retreats offer participants the time and space not easily found in day to day job performance (Bellacero, 2009), to focus on writing and overcome a raft of challenges: lack of momentum, self-censorship, low confidence, lack of external motivation, and a lack of specific writing-related skills (Moore, 2003). This last issue is particularly relevant to TLAs, whose profiles and backgrounds can be extremely diverse, since there is no formal qualification or pathway into the profession of learning advising. Yet, as academics, we are automatically assumed to be able to write at a scholarly level, although there may have been no previous requirement or opportunity to

develop these skills. Belcher (2009) adds confusion of focus, a relaxed sense of timelines and insufficient feedback to the barriers of solo writing efforts which can be redressed by attending writing retreats.

Barbara Grant (2006) has been running residential writing retreats for a group of academic women from around New Zealand twice a year since 1997 and writes about the ways in which this practice can be "transgressive" (p. 483), allowing participants to go beyond generally accepted boundaries. Although our two-day hui differed considerably from Grant's week-long, women-only retreats, a number of her observations are applicable. Like her model, the Tauranga hui was inter-institutional and collegial: Grant notes the importance of cutting across a national ethos of competition between higher education providers. It also attracted a range of participants not delineated by seniority or discipline, so that novice TLAs mixed with associate professors and career educationalists, able to share experiences and tips, and occasional "serendipitous cross-fertilisations of ideas" (Grant, 2006, p. 486). Two final areas in which our hui was transgressive were firstly, that it allowed us all to break from the dominant culture of writing in isolation, and secondly, that by simply making the commitment to attend, we were all putting ourselves first for the two days – ahead of demands from students, managers, and administrators.

Therefore, the act of 16 TLAs assembling in a single meeting place conducive to writing, to document some success stories from our practice, bore out many of the benefits noted in the literature. Whereas most writing retreats allow participants to select their own projects (e.g., a thesis or dissertation for higher qualifications, writing for scholarly journals or industry publications, creative writing pursuits; Grant, 2008), there are some studies which relate to more structured retreats with a shared purpose. Many are organised for teachers and consultants (Bellacero, 2009; Peterson, 2002) to develop resources or apply for grants; and there is some thought that a structured, or directed writing retreat increases learning through participation in a community of practice approach (Murray & Newton, 2009).

Communities of practice

In 1991, theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger wrote about the social learning that occurs when practitioners with a common interest or domain meet and collaborate regularly to share ideas, resources, solutions and support (Smith, 2009). One of their most significant contributions was to point out that learning is not just something individuals do, with a measurable beginning and end. Rather it comes from participation and interaction with like-minded others, as the pursuit of a shared enterprise enables us to learn how to do things better (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009). This type of community is something that ATLAANZ members are already fortunate enough to have, and over several years of annual conferences and online discussion, many of our participants have shared both relationship and trust, significant factors in cooperating to achieve successful resolutions to more complex projects than an individual might wish to undertake on their own.

From this established platform, the writing hui facilitators were easily able to draw in newer TLAs and offer any necessary direction to underscore the purpose of the gathering and the use of the supplied writing templates over and above the pre-hui communications that had been sent. In this way, the hui clearly demonstrated the way in which communities of practice can assist newer members to develop competence and move from "legitimate peripheral participation … into full participation" (Smith, 2009, p. 4). With the successful completion of more programme summations than had originally been forecast, the approach of working together in a shared endeavour, also evidenced the "intimate connection between knowledge and activity" (Smith, 2009, p. 7).

Interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations

People, groups and organisations work together in one of five ways, according to Honeyfield et al. (2008), with an increasing level of formality: networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. Collaboration is a mutually beneficial process which occurs when autonomous stakeholders engage interactively to achieve a common goal (Huxham, 1996). In an educational context, Czajkowski (2006) suggests collaborative partnerships may well be designed to address accountability and cost control pressures due to the current social and political environment. This was certainly a contributing factor in the writing hui discussed in this paper: mindful of the economics of student retention and success, not only did we wish to produce a document that provided tangible evidence of effective TLA practice to demonstrate value to our own institutions, we also saw the merit of establishing a professional stake in the future direction of our sector.

Rigby, Donovan, and Searle (2006) discuss six strategies for managing collaborative processes, all of which can be identified in the writing hui experience. The strategies are: shared understanding and trust, communication with participants, project team communication, time management, collaborative decision-making, and fun. Czajkowski (2006) adds three more, equally evident in the Tauranga hui: a common and unique purpose, clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, and adequate financial and human resources. With the funding from Ako Aotearoa, and a clear outwards-looking and stakeholder focus developed through the proposal and submission process, the writing hui was a planned and deliberate implementation utilising "self-interest" (Honeyfield et al., 2008, para. 3) which became a productive and satisfying experience.

According to Moran (1990), there are educational, fiscal, social and political advantages to inter-institutional and interdisciplinary collaborations. There is the potential for greater depth and breadth in the inquiry, more choice of pedagogical and technological strategies, and a greater range of quality learning and teaching materials. The focus becomes, "Discovery first, institution second" (Rigby et al., 2006, p. 17). This is certainly so in the programme summations report, where the summations are

grouped according to content, and the organisation to which the contributing writer is affiliated receives a much lower importance.

The collaboration involved in this project provided opportunities for identifying new and innovative approaches – not just in the actual summations reported, but also in the act of writing together. Rigby et al. (2006) note further benefits in benchmarking, professional development, and an expanded profile. The measurement of these as an outcome of the Ako Aotearoa-supported writing hui requires further investigation and follow up, and may be the subject of future research by members of the project team.

Implications and opportunities

In recent years, ATLAANZ members have recognised that in a tertiary climate of continued restructuring and review, we not only need a strong sense of our own discipline, learning community, roles and identity, but we must also equip ourselves to "defend, justify and legitimize our practices" (Carter & Bartlett-Trafford, 2008, p. 39). A number of publications by our members have discussed strategies for proving effectiveness (see, for instance, Acheson, 2006; Manalo, 2008, 2009; Morris, 2008). The writing hui represents one initiative by a sub-group of TLAs to take a first step in a strategic shift from simply providing services for Learning Centres, to establishing a strong national profile for our profession. The hui project has a range of implications and opportunities for several interested parties. These are outlined below.

For practitioners

While no formal evaluations were collected relating to individual participants' experiences of attending the hui, informal feedback attested to the sense of satisfaction and contribution experienced by all who attended. Comments made to different members of the project team referred to enhanced confidence in writing skills and a wider appreciation of the work, resources and purpose of the community of which they are a part. For participant TLAs, the final report can provide their line managers and institutions with evidence of their academic input to a national initiative that directly addresses the question of what can be done at the institutional level to improve tertiary student retention and completion. For colleagues who were not able to participate, the report can serve as a first introduction to a raft of proven programmes to assist learners, many of which will be transferable to their own Learning Centre or workplace.

For institutions

Work on the project has allowed insight into other organisations' practices, and made it possible to identify new and innovative approaches that go beyond the boundaries and experience of each institution involved. Collaboration at a practitioner level is not only relatively low-risk for institutions, it is also a low-cost opportunity to rationalise resourcing and explore synergies (Moran, 1990). The resource created in the report of programme summations therefore offers Learning Centres and managers

from across the tertiary sector, a blueprint for adopting and adapting tried and true programmes which have proved effective in improving student achievement outcomes.

In light of the effectiveness evidenced by the student-focused programmes described in the report, institutional management may also wish to consider investigating the presence or provision of similar programmes within their own institution, and whether it may be possible to likewise discern the beneficial effects of such programmes on student academic performance. If similar benefits are discernible, it may then be prudent for such managers to reconsider resource allocation/prioritisation linked to such programmes and their development.

For the profession

As noted in this paper and others by ATLAANZ colleagues, it is critical that our profession develop and promote criteria to measure Learning Centre effectiveness. We cannot talk about "quality standards" or "valuing excellence" (Sell, 1975, para. 1) unless we are first able to identify criteria and indicators of effectiveness. The programme summations which were the outcome of the writing hui detail ways in which different centres and institutions measure a raft of items: accessibility, relevancy, quality, learner outcomes, cost-effectiveness, impact and contribution to knowledge. Shared examples of good practice, such as these, directly reflect the vision of our association, of "communication, networking [and] exchange of ideas … amongst professionals working in learning advisory roles within tertiary institutions" (ATLAANZ, n.d., para. 1).

For the sector

The awarding of funding by a government body in itself sends a clear vote of confidence in the ability of TLAs to form effective professional partnerships to further the knowledge of strategies which can address student success and retention positively. The writing hui and its successful compilation of over 30 evidence-supported testimonies to the contribution made by TLAs demonstrates that universities, polytechnics, institutes of technology, and other tertiary institutions can overcome traditional inhibitions about competition and defense of their academic standards (Moran, 1990) in collaborative activity and division of labour. This type of good practice is not limited to the work of Learning Centres; the challenge for the Ministry is to identify other areas of tertiary delivery that can benefit from a similar fostered approach and follow the lead taken by TLAs!

Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined the context of tertiary learning advising in New Zealand, and the background that led to an Ako Aotearoa-sponsored project that we feel privileged to have been a part of. We also provided some details about the way in which the two-day writing hui was organised and conducted, our experiences as participants in the hui, and our reflections and views about the factors that likely contributed to the successful outcomes of that hui. Finally, we considered some of the

implications of the writing hui and the resulting report on key stakeholders – tertiary learning support practitioners, tertiary institutions and their management, the profession of tertiary learning advising, and the wider tertiary education sector. Our hope is that, by sharing what we have learned through the project, other TLAs will be encouraged to take the necessary steps to document and evidence the impact of their own teaching and support work on student achievement. Wider knowledge about, and appreciation of, the impact of tertiary learning advising on student retention and success is important on a number of different levels. It is crucial to the longer term survival and development of the tertiary learning advising profession. It is vital towards enabling tertiary institutions to more effectively and reliably meet their student retention and completion 'requirements'. It is one significant factor in the attainment of national agendas on tertiary education outcomes. And – perhaps most importantly – it can play a pivotal role in the achievement or otherwise of many students' aspirations in tertiary education.

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