An introduction to everything a Learning Advisor needs to know about the scholarship of teaching and learning in ten easy pages: Yes way!

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Abstract

In New Zealand's modern tertiary landscape, the profession of learning support and tertiary teaching includes career academics as well as those recruited for their content knowledge and training expertise, most with little teacher education or credentials. Further complexities for new learning support and tertiary teachers lie in the sector's increasing characterisation of a highly diverse student body, incorporating first-in-family, second chance, international and other non-traditional learner groups. Preparing effective early career Learning Advisors and educators for the challenges of the twenty-first century tertiary environment requires professional development tools that deliver practical and useful guides. *Goalposts* is a newly developed resource which aims to distil the complex theories and practices that underpin the pedagogy of tertiary and higher education teaching and learning. Positioned inside New Zealand's dual heritage culture, *Goalposts* has been developed following the success of, and in a similar format to, an earlier resource, *Signposts*. It is arranged as a series of ten one-page summaries of commonly agreed principles, supported by a glossary and examples of practical implementation. Although designed for and reviewed across the tertiary sector, it is in the contexts of smaller private training establishments (PTEs) and institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) that we think this resource will have the potential to be most influential to enhance learning and teaching capability and capacity. Parts of this sector may not have specialist learning support and teacher development staff to support new tertiary teachers with this role devolved to line managers. This paper explains how using *Goalposts* will help new teachers, and those who support them, to design effective learning activities underpinned by theory; offer a resource for reflecting on and developing practice; and provide a starting point for further reading and study about learning and teaching.

Introduction: Who are our Learning Advisors?

In New Zealand, we currently have eight universities, which account for 33% of our post-secondary students. The remaining two thirds are dispersed between 18 institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), two colleges of education, three wānanga, a diverse array of private training establishments (PTEs) with 604 registered at the time of writing, and 13 Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) (Tertiary Education Commission, 2014). All of these sectors are represented in our ATLAANZ (Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand) membership, and therefore we can assume Learning Advisor presence across the correspondingly wide range of subject, level and qualification types on offer from these tertiary providers.

This diversity is further compounded by the lack of a formal qualification, accreditation or registration framework for academic support practitioners. Although primary and secondary teachers and teacher aides are required to successfully complete programmes in educational theory and practice, Tertiary Learning Advisors have no such requirement. The main preparation depends upon each employing organisation's policies and procedures. It is increasingly common, therefore, for learning support areas to be staffed by newly recruited "educational assistants" who may have achieved considerable personal study milestones, with perhaps some subject-matter expertise or industry experience, but little or no background in the pedagogy of adult learning and teaching theory. On top of this, casualisation and contracting of sessional educators is a growing phenomenon as well as ongoing restructuring of learning resourcing, both of which impact on access to professional development opportunities.

In addition, Learning Advisors are increasingly expected to deliver study skills programmes and seminars, from post-doctoral to foundation level language, literacy and numeracy courses, as individual appointments are phased out in reviews and restructures aimed at making economies in this non-income generating service area. Thus, there is growing expectation of a teaching workload as part of the Learning Advisor role. At the same time, teaching has a reputation of being one of the more stressful professions: 41% of new teachers report high levels of occupational stress compared with other professional and support management occupations (Milburn, 2011). In a recent Australian study (Richardson & Watt, as cited in Milburn, 2011) it was found that between 25 and 40% of teachers leave the profession within five years of starting, and "poor pay is not the reason they're giving for leaving the profession: it's the workplace issues of highly stressful, poor working conditions" (p. 1). If we add the considerable cost of replacing an employee to the impact of this negative experience for the individuals, clearly it is in the best interests of the entire sector to develop easily accessed, just-in-time resources to support new career learning and teaching practitioners.

Learning Advisors are rarely included in formal teacher training programmes, especially in those organisations which delineate this role as "allied", "administrative", "support services" or even "non-teaching academic". Yet, increasing role diversity and teaching activities, with both students and teaching staff, require Learning Advisors to be effective as "instructors" who know what they are talking about, and have a strong knowledge base of the principles and theories of adult learning. It was into this gap – this need for a concise, focussed and practical guide for higher education academic teachers and Learning Advisors in their first few months on the job – that the *Signposts* and *Goalposts* resources were born. This paper discusses these developments and our practices, experiences and learnings in this journey.

Developing the resource – A six year journey

Improving academic outcomes for all tertiary learners has become a high priority, both on an institutional and a national level. In 2006, New Zealand's Ministry of Education established Ako Aotearoa, The National Center for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, as a specialist body to fund and disseminate research related to improving teaching and learning. A Creative Commons licencing and publishing platform and a national register of educational research facilitates the sharing of ideas and learnings across the breadth of the sector (see http://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/).

The *Signposts* and *Goalposts* resource development projects described in this paper received three funding grants from Ako Aotearoa: first in 2008 to conduct a needs analysis for novice teachers and review existing options which led to the development of the *Signposts* resource; second, one year later, to conduct a national evaluation of the resource, assessing its usefulness and current applications, and identifying strategies for its expansion and improvement; and third, in 2012 to develop a follow-on resource, *Goalposts*, to provide an introduction to the theories and principles underpinning adult learning and education. Each phase has been subject to rigorous peer-review as well as field pilots with the target audience of new higher education professionals, including teachers, Learning Advisors, staff developers and academic advisors whose role it is to support, mentor and sponsor teaching and learning capability for students and staff.

Two key tenets for Ako Aotearoa's vision are quality outcomes for learners and collaboration. Drawing on national associations of staff developers and Learning Advisors, we began our partnership with eight team members from three institutions, but by the evaluation phase of the project, other colleagues had expressed an interest in participating, and the project team expanded to include five ITP institutions. Over the six years, further changes occurred with retirement, job loss and role change, so that the new team assembled to draft and review *Goalposts* in 2013 had just three original members among its 13 contributors, but our spread now encompassed eight organisations, with universities and PTEs represented alongside ITPs.

The first project: Signposts
The process began by project members sharing a concern about the lack of support for and preparation of the new tertiary teacher as well as entry standards. Members contributed examples of good practice from their own institutions, and the team agreed a format of information provided in simple, usable "chunks". Two separate literature reviews were conducted – one on new tertiary academics' professional development options and the other on the inter-institutional collaboration process itself. A methodology of action research enquiry was decided upon, since we wanted to be able to monitor, scrutinise and adjust our collaboration as the project was underway. The action research process is usually described as a cycle which allows practitioners to test ideas and concepts as they provide opportunity for feedback through the four phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Ellis, Armstrong, & Ground-water Smith, 2010). A useful and frequently cited description of this approach is offered by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), who explain that:

> Action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p. 5)

Alongside the literature reviews and after a number of professional discussions, both face-to-face and electronically, the team agreed on a format for the *Signposts* resource of 10 one-page topics with tips and techniques, covering:

- Planning to teach
- How to get going with your class
- Engaging your students in their learning
- Classroom management
- Delivering the goods
- The language of assessment
- Reflecting on teaching
- Knowing about and responding to difference
- Being professional
- Literacy integration

A first draft of *Signposts* was presented at the HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia) conference in July 2008, piloted, then disseminated within the three project member institutions, and then posted on the Ako Aotearoa website for national use across the tertiary sector (the resource can be viewed at https://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/project/signposts). Feedback from the site's administrator indicated that this resource was the most downloaded document of any on the site in the first three years after the launch. Informal feedback from colleagues

suggested that the resource was filling the need for immediate teaching and learning tools experienced by staff new to an education environment.

In a synchronous development with the *Signposts* resource itself, we were also interested in interrogating our own practice and growing research capability amongst the team. Accordingly, we put plans in place to track the progress of this collaborative project with the intention of developing insights to inform our on-going collaboration and resource development. In addition, we wanted our work and experience to be of value to other colleagues engaged in similar inter-institutional projects. A key tool was the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). This parallel outcome was the result of suggestions and mentoring from a very involved Ako Aotearoa oversight team, and created considerable value for the participants. This is a good example, we believe, of the constructive and hands-on relationships developed by this funding body with their recipients. A detailed description of this aspect of the research and collaboration process has been published elsewhere (Honeyfield & Fraser, 2012).

Project two: The national evaluation of Signposts
A year after the launch of *Signposts*, Ako Aotearoa was still in an early stage of development and few of the new resources available through their website had been subject to any formal evaluation process. The project team discussed ways of measuring the efficacy of the resource with Ako's Northern Regional Hub management and developed a submission which proposed a formal strategy to undertake this inquiry. Supported by a second funding round, a national online survey was developed to determine the usefulness and current applications of the *Signposts* resource, and identify strategies for its expansion and improvement. In this case, an added benefit of the project would be to provide a methodology which could be of interest to other teams involved in teaching and learning resource evaluation. Feedback from users was generally positive and showed a range of applications: *Signposts* was being included in induction packs for new teaching, teacher developer and Learner Advisor staff and it was being used in mentoring conversations, team professional development conversations and performance reviews. We also received a number of suggestions for improving accessibility and currency; many of these were incorporated in a second edition.

The third and most recent development: Goalposts
Five years after the launch of *Signposts* and its successful evaluation and updating, the team members were keen to be involved in another research and development process and were exploring various topics and avenues. A meeting with the Northern Regional Hub Manager raised the suggestion of creating a further "companion" resource to *Signposts* to take advantage of the strong professional relationship developed through the collaboration and respond to expressed needs in the sector. This time the focus would move from practical delivery strategies to an introduction of the theories and principles of adult learning and tertiary teaching. There is a large body of evidence in literature that student success is increased when educators have some exposure to, and

awareness of, the pedagogy of teaching and learning (Mane & Snelling, 2011; Prebble et al., 2005).

These authors state that part of being an effective facilitator of learning means understanding students and how they learn best in order to design more meaningful learning experiences for them. Most higher education professionals readily accept that teaching requires deliberate interventions to make sure that students achieve the best possible outcomes, but what should these interventions look like, and what is the basis for decision-making about this? This is the environment in which *Goalposts* was created, reviewed and piloted across the tertiary sector and where teaching theories, models and frameworks are presented.

The new resource, which was commissioned by Ako Aotearoa, was intended to link theory and practice to improve student outcomes. Again, the concept was to provide a resource which is easily accessible through Ako Aotearoa's website, and which is self-explanatory and unintimidating. Distilling the large and ever-increasing literature down to the 10 one-page primers, consistent with *Signposts* presentation, was quite a lengthy process. Ideas about learning are continually evolving, and further, many of the commentators in the field have developed their own taxonomies. For example, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) listed six principles; Ambrose et al. (2010), seven; Calloway (2009), eight; and Cercone (2008), thirteen. As well as principles, there are concepts, models and philosophies related to adult learning and, in particular, attempts to reflect 21st century pedagogies, such as e-technologies, blended learning delivery, and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

Following an extensive literature review, recurring themes and central concepts were identified and organised into the following ten topic groupings:

- Prior knowledge and experience
- Importance of culture and the New Zealand context
- Respectful partnerships and relationships
- Autonomy and independence
- Goals and motivation
- Relevance and practicality
- Learning styles and ways of thinking
- Critical reflection
- Environment for learning
- Change and transformative learning

Our first draft of the 10 one-page primers, along with a Glossary of terms and an Appendix of examples for practical application, was sent out for consultation to our original project team and through the various professional communities to which the project team belonged, including members of ATLAANZ. We developed a specific

feedback matrix for our reviewers to assess the resource that included our own specific areas of inquiry as the developers. In response, we received very detailed feedback and additional suggestions from 13 colleagues from a range of institutions, both national and international. The overall feedback was extremely positive, and included a level of detail about individuals' original pet theorists and models that was so extensive that the collated comments ran to more than twice the number of pages of the resource itself. (As an aside, the authors note the level of scholarship and wealth of experience and knowledge that characterises groups of learning support practitioners such as ATLAANZ and TASDEN [Tertiary Academic Staff Developers Education Network], and suggest that we need to be creating more opportunities to showcase this expertise to the wider higher education sector.)

Once we had analysed all the useful suggestions from our reviewers, we completed a series of revisions to the content including re-ordering of our 10 one-page summaries, and commenced the next phase of testing. The resource was then piloted with 10 new tertiary teachers and learning assistants from four different organisations as representatives of our target audience. Again, feedback was consistently positive, and several members of the focus groups told us that they wished they had received this on their first day in the job and how useful it would be for quick reference. Two participants reacted positively to the reading of the brief scene-setting outline about the central role of Māori culture, Te Reo and Tikanga in public education policy, and told us that, as they came from overseas, it was often very hard to know where to start in developing their own understanding how to respond to Māori student achievement. Feedback included an appreciation of theories of effective Māori cultural approaches including Te Kotahitanga and Kaupapa Māori. All agreed that the theory was important as they developed their own philosophy of practice, but that it was the examples of application and enactment in the Appendix which were the most interesting. New teaching and learning practitioners want to make learning exciting and fun for their students and our pilot captured review participants' feedback of often having no idea how to do so.

Finally, after some minor adjustments to accommodate the pilot participants' points, the first edition of *Goalposts* was submitted to the Ako Aotearoa review panel, and following sign off, was published on their website and launched at the ATLAANZ conference at the Eastern Institute of Technology in November 2013. In 2014, Ako Aotearoa is contracting the resource developers to offer a series of workshops called "Teaching Tips 2" around New Zealand, to further disseminate the resource and assist new adult and tertiary teachers and Learner Advisors in various roles, and those who support them, in their use.

Using *Goalposts* – Who, when and where

"Teaching is one of the few professions where beginners are put into the deep end, almost thoughtlessly" says Milburn (2011, p. 2), and most Learning Advisors could probably reflect this sentiment about their own introduction to the role. Of course

there are structured, systematic programmes of professional development that ease novice Learning Advisors into the complexity and diversity of their work – when recruitment and position handovers go to plan. In addition, we believe that the *Signposts* and *Goalposts* resources can fill the gap, and offer a useful addition to the toolkit available to new teaching and learner support specialists. Neither resource is designed to replace formal learning and teaching qualifications.

The two resources are designed to raise early career practitioners' awareness of first, the day-to-day practice of teaching delivery and classroom management, and second, the theoretical models and principles with different schools of thought about how best to support adult learners – and why. The intention is to help new staff build confidence, and to become more reflective practitioners as they develop personal approaches based on evidence from research reported in the literature. Each of the one-page guides is deliberately practical or applied, distilling and summarising important concepts, demystifying the language through a comprehensive glossary, and providing meaningful links and context. Yet we also appreciate that many who are new to the ideas discussed, particularly those from industry backgrounds working in PTEs and vocational training institutes, will still find this resource "text heavy". We suggest that each publication is best approached as a basis for reference and discussion, rather than as a text to be read from start to finish in one sitting.

The Creative Commons licence means that users "are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work as well as to remix, tweak, and build upon this work non-commercially, as long as you credit the author/s and license your new creations under the identical terms". We know that colleagues have added pages to cover specific technologies, activities, or techniques, and others have adapted the resource to the ethos of their organisation, for example a Bible College.

For Learning Advisors, the two resources, but particularly *Goalposts*, make an excellent starting point for team discussions about roles, tasks and responsibilities as they build communities of practice with a shared ethos and culture. In the same way, each page could form the basis of a mentoring conversation, or excerpts could be included as helpful tips in internal newsletters, with a link to the full resource. Naturally, the one-page summaries will only ever be a starting point for further reading and study about learning and teaching.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this six year journey has been to develop, disseminate and evaluate a resource for early career teaching and learning professionals in higher education to assist in improving outcomes for all learners. While the resources were developed to be as relevant as possible across the broad tertiary sector, and we have deliberately included colleagues from universities in this collaboration, it is in the contexts of smaller PTEs and ITPs that we think this resource will have the potential to be most influential to enhance learning and teaching capability and capacity.

This sector may not have specialist learning support and teacher development staff to support new tertiary teachers and this role is devolved to line managers. For this reason, we have designed quick reference guides which are brief, easily accessed and written in simple language – and which can be used by educators, managers and Learning Advisors directly and do not require a formalised delivery by a teaching and learning expert.

A national evaluation, as well as feedback from current workshops, has already established the usefulness of *Signposts* and *Goalposts* to new practitioners. Of course, determining links between any resource linked to developing effective educators and improving student outcomes is complex. There are many variables that may affect student achievement, and any intervention, such as the introduction of new tools, will take time to evolve and gain traction for capability development. Nonetheless, there is widespread recognition that academic staff development programmes can improve teaching, and good teaching contributes to good student outcomes (Prebble et al., 2005).

Beyond the actual resources themselves, another area in which this account may be of use to Learning Advisors and other adjunct staff is the process through which they were developed. There are a range of benefits to inter-institutional collaboration beyond the simple accomplishment of the task at hand. Shared resourcing keeps the costs of time and money per organisation to a realistic level; and the input from multiple and diverse people and perspectives offers synergies unavailable to those working in isolation. Opportunities to grow new relationships and to experience different approaches to the provision of professional development offer workplace satisfaction and personal gains in research capability and project management.

We close this paper by sharing some of our own learning as a result of involvement in three rounds of Ako Aotearoa funded projects. First and foremost would be the importance of a strong working relationship of trust and respect amongst collaborators and the national agency. Under the management framework of Ako Aotearoa, frequent communication and liaison with our Regional Hub manager throughout the proposal, feedback, milestone reports, submission, reviews, publication and evaluation phases of the three projects has developed unique learning opportunities and capability in all team members. Further, contributing factors to success we identify are a wide-ranging consultation and a readiness to seek feedback from colleagues across the sector; being prepared to write, and rewrite, and to keep sharing drafts to ensure accuracy – particularly around theories of effective Māori cultural approaches including Te Kotahitanga and Kaupapa Māori; thorough testing and documentation of all responses at different phases; and strategic partnerships within and external to our own organisation to ensure high visibility and interest. This six year learning journey has been a wonderful chance to collaborate with colleagues, including those from within the ATLAANZ family. We look forward to future conferences and many more similar testimonies as our members develop their own research areas to showcase our vibrant and diverse community to educators everywhere.

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