

Carry on Student Learning: Shifting what we do, how we do it and where we do it

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Abstract

Delivering effective student learning support for the increasing numbers of university students continues to be a challenge. This paper argues that a centralised learning support unit cannot afford to work in isolation. Collaborative methods of delivery are necessary both to ensure organisational survival and to meet the ever more diverse and increasing student demand. By collaborating with university staff and forming campus wide collegial relationships with people who lecture to students, write the assessments or provide other academic resources (such as the librarians) or student services, Learning Centres have a greater opportunity to seamlessly deliver to a wider range of audiences. This paper shares some of the collaborative experiences of the Student Learning Support Service at Victoria University of Wellington to highlight the importance of developing firm foundations to ensure this student centred approach mitigates the shifting sands within the university. The collaborative efforts have been designed so those involved in higher education work more effectively together for the benefit of the students.

Introduction

The management structure of university student learning support units throughout Australasia varies within each institution. The most common structure is to have a centralised unit, often referred to as a Learning Centre. This is usually aligned with other support services within the university, as a way of coordinating similar groups who have a common goal. The primary function of the Learning Advisory staff is to work with students in lectures, workshops and individual appointments to develop their academic writing and study skills for university study. Within our university, the Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) forms part of the Student Support Services and the management structure is closely aligned with seven other support units (Health, Counselling, Disability, Student Finance, Te Putahi Atawhai and Careers). This structure provides many opportunities for staff in these units to collaborate and support students through a well established referral system, transition programmes and fortnightly meetings. Over time, staff from these services have become well versed in the learning and performance requirements of students. They have found the relationship in this closer 'family' group helpful for providing effective support for

¹ Pocock, A. (2010). Carry on Student Learning: Shifting what we do, how we do it and where we do it. In V. Van der Ham, L. Sevillano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 1-8). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

making the student learning experience positive. As Gadjia (2004) argues, “collaboration is a powerful strategy to achieve a vision otherwise not possible to obtain when independent entities work alone” (p. 76). The SLSS has utilised its firm foundations and cross-institutional collaboration to develop broader representation and enrich student learning.

Initially the SLSS only provided individual consultations and a handful of generic study skill and academic writing skill workshops. However, there has been dramatic growth over the past decade in the range of services and programmes that the SLSS provides to all postgraduate and undergraduate students, and staff. Growth in the service has only evolved with careful and proactive management and university support. The SLSS now has funding for 15 staff, teaching facilities and resources. While the academic support for individuals and academic skill development workshops are still core to its service, it now has well established online resources, programmes and support for international and postgraduate students and for equity groups such as Māori, Pasifika, Disability and Distance students. Through transition programmes such as Smart Start, New Start, UniPrep, International orientation, NZAid, postgraduate orientation, mature student orientation, Halls Head Start, Māori and Pasifika orientation and Campus Coaches, SLSS staff are in contact with up to 5000 students during the first few weeks of the semester. This ‘integrated transition’ (Kift, 2008) spans the whole university and involves support staff and academics. During this period, academic teaching staff can request subject specific resources and Faculty/School workshops. Obviously, this extensive range of services can only be delivered and maintained with well qualified, professional staff. At each programme or initiative step, staff need to have an integrated approach in ways which encourage team work. We see this as being essential for the effectiveness of the SLSS and as a way of encouraging awareness of our service.

Building a collaborative culture is beneficial for a professional learning community. The integrated approach becomes a systematic process whereby staff can work together through purposeful conversation to promote and develop a healthy work and learning environment. Collaboration enables the group “to address the specificity of the challenges that face our students”, and encourages “better understanding and collaboration between the writing centre, [other support staff] and discipline teachers” (Chanock, 2006, Abstract). Similarly, Krause (2003, p. 5) argues that the opportunity to work together to propose and plan initiatives “is a very important way to integrate different areas of expertise to achieve positive outcomes.” At the same time, the broader representation of diverse groups provides multiple perspectives and allows staff to “usefully challenge assumptions and long standing practices” (Shushok, Henry, Blalock, & Sriam, 2009, p. 12). Invariably, Learning Centre staff have found they share similar and common concerns for particular students or student groups. As well as having input into the decision making, staff can learn from other people how they are managing the issues they are trying to solve and “share ideas for new programmes and practices” (University of California, Los Angeles, 2009, p. 27). There are times when this requires some compromise and negotiation, but experience has shown this is

a powerful way of working together that affects our practices. In the long term, this use of staff expertise can help reduce the duplication of services, resources and personnel and thus help the Centre to be economically sustainable.

On the other hand, developing a coordinated effort to work together requires effort, time and hard work. First, the SLSS needs to have clear strategic goals which support the university Learning and Teaching Plan (Victoria University of Wellington, 2009b), the Equity plan (Victoria University of Wellington, 2009a) and the university's mission (Victoria University of Wellington, 2004). From these documents the aim is to "identify and professionally fulfil the various roles essential to student learning" (Arminio, Roberts, & Bonfiglio, 2009, p. 16). However, it has taken time to build trust and respect within our working environment. First, it was important to build a highly functional and well supported SLSS using sound adult learning practice and effective management practices. In addition, the internal relationships within the 'family' need to be highly operational and well utilised by the students. Each SLSS staff member also needs to play an active role in helping the SLSS to achieve its strategic goals but this is more achievable if they feel empowered and confident about their own work responsibilities. Within our support service, staff have some autonomy to manage responsibilities to negotiate, plan, prepare and facilitate workshops, for example. During this process they often work with their immediate colleagues and academic staff. Over time as their confidence grows, they develop wider relationships throughout the University with people who share a common goal. The initial communication is often simply through phone and email, but as their working relationships develop more face to face communication takes place. By having similar staff groups working together, the SLSS has fostered a more effective student referral system with other support services (such as Health, Counselling and Disability) and this provides a more seamless delivery. We believe the shared approach helps staff to work more effectively in the best interests of the student.

No Learning Centre can afford to be marginalised and work in isolation: "We need to move beyond the exclusionism philosophy to generate more opportunities to collaborate, jointly lobby on issues and identify ways in which we can mutually promote more effective tertiary outcomes" (Debowski, 2008, p. 45). Student learning lies at the heart of our institution's mission so this creates a foundation for academic and support staff to build on. The manager is responsible for the work of the staff with targeted groups throughout the university to promote "stronger collaboration across discipline and organisational boundaries" (Debowski, 2008, p. 42). With any holistic and 'walk the talk approach' everyone needs to gain ownership to make the initiatives work, but we are mindful that initiating and sustaining them also takes commitment, dedication and persistence (DuFour, 2004). Having said that, collaborating with a larger group of colleagues with differing views has allowed us time to share a greater variety of approaches we can use to enrich the student learning experience. Arminio et al. (2009) argue that "In order to create effective learning environments, all educators must be able to take advantage of the gifts and contributions of others" (p. 20). Professional advice from colleagues has helped us achieve more positive outcomes

through shared knowledge and the exchange of ideas. Fortunately, we have a big unit so staff can regularly share and develop ideas; however, this way of working requires “concerted, respectful and positive involvement” (Arminio et al., 2009, p. 17). With a wide range of skills and experience, we also have more opportunities to prove our skills to a wider audience and to be proactive in how we operate. The greater the collaboration the easier it is to show that the Learning Centre plays a valuable role across the university in student success. Networking therefore enhances recognition for what we do.

The SLSS now works in diverse ways to liaise with a wide range of people throughout the university. One important way of collaborating is by embedding academic writing skills into lectures. This is now well established in a first year Commerce course (FCom110) and Faculty academics view this as an essential component of their programme. In line with the course objectives of students researching, planning and producing written assignments to meet academic standards, academic staff and the SLSS work together to design a programme so that “the writing course supports these objectives by providing students the basic skills needed to write at tertiary level” (Mabin, 2010, p. i). Students learn and practise their writing skills throughout their course. Academic study skill and writing support operate in other programmes but on a smaller scale. In one case, a course specific academic writing and study skill booklet has reduced the need for SLSS time and resourcing. In another case, a close liaison has been developed with library staff. Through this link a SLSS Academic Writing and Study helpdesk was established in the main campus library. Staffed by SLSS advisors for four hours per day during the semesters, these quick (15 minute) drop-in sessions provide timely advice which is easily accessible students. Due to its popularity (12 to 15 students for each four hour session), further developments are planned for similar support in libraries on other campuses. A ‘one stop shop’ is envisaged – largely utilising the skills of the librarians and technology to disseminate SLSS information. In the longer term “this new library development could act as a prototype for two other libraries at Victoria” (J. Stewart, personal communication, February 8, 2010). Our integration of the SLSS with the library has helped to expand our range of service delivery. However, these objectives have only been possible because SLSS staff formed a close relationship with library staff who wanted to achieve a similar outcome. The success of these initiatives shows how collaboration is beneficial both in supporting academic teaching staff with their programmes and in supporting student learning.

The scope and influence of the SLSS can also be increased by widening our focus to other areas within the university. One way is through senior students. Student leadership is a core attribute for Victoria University students (Victoria University of Wellington, 2004) and opportunities are fostered in the SLSS. SLSS staff train Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) leaders, Campus Coaches, Conversation leaders and Peer Writers. These activities contribute to the ‘Vic Plus Award’ so the students’ service to the university and the community is recognised when they graduate. Whether these leadership roles are paid or voluntary, we always celebrate the students’

contribution and their work as these all play an important role in expanding our ability to support more students. Other relationships have been established with people who have a shared goal. They include central service units such as enrolments, course advice, teaching and development as well as Outreach programmes and staff mentoring sessions. Our marketing and publications are also important collaborative efforts. For first year students, “A systematic approach is needed that draws together different elements of FYE [First Year Experience] to enhance both the students’ academic and personal life at university” (Brown & Adam, 2009, p. 47). At Victoria, the university-wide publication *Campus Connections* is generously funded and provides a useful way of coordinating all of the workshops and activities on campus. This twice yearly publication results from extensive collaboration, is well established and is a popular resource for staff and students. High demand necessitates frequent reprinting to top up the first print of 9000 copies.

Collaboration, while not without its problems, has benefits for the SLSS. The integrated approach provides a healthy work environment in which “there is more knowledge sharing, a broader representation of ideas from more diverse groups” (Arminio et al., 2009, p. 16) and it has proved to be a powerful way of working together. The diverse input contributes to the decision making and there is satisfaction in knowing that multiple perspectives have been listened to and considered. At times that means having to make compromises and requires some tough negotiating but this is all in an effort to reach a common goal. It has also been cost effective. The library, for example, funded the helpdesk, telephone and the computer in a high profile spot in the library entrance. Our helpdesk staff-member, rather than working with one individual per hour, works with four students in the same time period. This method of practice, although busy, raises the SLSS profile and increases awareness of our other services. Any student needing more complex support makes a longer subsequent appointment with a Learning Advisor at the SLSS, so the system is also supporting students who might not have sought out SLSS help if it had not been so obviously accessible. Increased rapport is a further benefit of having the library staff working alongside the SLSS helpdesk staff. SLSS staff utilise the skills of the library staff to create new resources or work together to facilitate database and library skill sessions. This way of working, as well as collaborative meetings, has raised our profile with library staff.

To increase awareness of our collaboration and its potential, as part of the ongoing SLSS reflective practice, the manager (Jan Stewart) facilitated a recent staff development exercise to review how well we operate as community partners within our own small community. This provided an opportunity to “reflect, review and redesign ... [and helped] identify different mechanisms by which groups and individuals may share knowledge and generate social community” (Blackwell & Blackmore, 2003, p. 7). To do this, we identified which groups had the closest working relationship with SLSS and those which were only spasmodic. The people and groups who have a close working relationship with SLSS seemed to be either aligned within the management structure or where the staff had identified a common

need to work together. Several other people or groups were identified as having a spasmodic or distant working relationship. While it is very important to sustain our closest partners, the manager's exercise allowed staff to question the reasons for the evident distance of the groups. For the distant groups, we were able to determine whether it would be important to develop those relationships, how we might do this and for what benefit (J. Stewart, personal communication, November 19, 2009). However it soon became evident that part of the reason the relationships had not been developed was due to a range of factors such as "it being easier to develop individual relationships than with the whole faculty, the resistance of some staff and the time it takes to establish the relationships" (Student Learning Support Service, 2009). These factors are barriers and can prevent the collaboration process.

The obstacles to building closer relationships with some other groups within the university need to be overcome by using a systematic approach. Once the targeted group has been identified it is then time "to progress from the level of passionate and innovative ... to informing or driving ideas ... to decision making (Krause, 2003, p. 5). We believe that if all staff share responsibility for student learning it spreads "a pervasive attitude that the campus is a learning organisation ... and [has] a widespread willingness to adapt to changing conditions" (Arminio et al., 2009, p. 17). There is no doubt that the university staff seek positive student outcomes for an increasingly diverse range of students, but to achieve this requires organisation, planning and a high level of teamwork. We also have to make sure it does not compromise our current services. With a throughput of 18,000 student visits per year in the SLSS, staff members have to be realistic about how much time and energy and how many resources are invested in the process. The process is completed when the staff can "coordinate (within the institution), communicate (with the stakeholders) and connect (with the students)" (Krause, 2003, p. 5). These processes and some success stories help make us believe the SLSS has gone some way to showing the service is central to tertiary learning and it is a joint responsibility with academic and support staff.

Our reasons for across-institutional collaboration are therefore many and varied. It is putting collaboration into practice (being able to 'walk the talk') and sustaining and enhancing our partnerships that will always be the true measure of how well collaboration works in reality. It has been vital for the SLSS to move beyond the walls of just our 'family' but this requires time, energy and persistence. Our experience has shown it is necessary to use a coordinated and cooperative approach to build a stronger community with our 'friends' and 'acquaintances'. It has taken time to build firm foundations and strength within SLSS programmes and services but strong leadership, professional staff and university support has enabled the unit to shift its focus and spread its services. While there has been more success with building relationships with some staff than with others, a decade of this practice has also shown that the positive working relationships can enrich the outcomes for students. While time, energy and costs are factors influencing this process, if there is vision and a willingness to drive the ideas to get a stronger learning and teaching community we can create seamless and diverse learning environments. In the same spirit, interaction

with a wide range of people requires hard work but that is part of keeping the Learning Centre on everyone's horizons.

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