



Embracing the "swamp": A reflective pedagogical approach for interdisciplinary practitioners

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An informal curriculum review conducted as collaborative reflection, produced an innovative unit which addresses perceived short-comings in the professional skills of graduating development practitioners. The success of the new unit offers lessons on the value of embodied experiential and student-centred learning for community development and interdisciplinary students. Introducing students to complexity of contested subject areas increases their appreciation of ambiguity in the real-world context of future work. Learning settings which enable students to experience complexity and ambiguity of community or interdisciplinary work increase capacity for tacit learning, and capacity of practitioners to sit with messy, confusing problems that defy technical solution. Alignment of unit objectives with learning activities, materials and assessment enables teacher and students to gauge the extent to which the objectives have been achieved.

Introduction

Murdoch University has for many years been one of only two universities in Western Australia to offer tertiary courses covering development studies[1]. The School of Social Sciences and Humanities offers BA courses in Asian Studies and Community Development and the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy (ISTP) a BA and BSc in Sustainable Development, with a minor in Issues in Global Development. At postgraduate level an MA in Development Studies and a suite of Masters courses in the area of sustainable development are offered which articulate with Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas. All of these courses have attracted students who express their desire to do some element of overseas development work.

In 2004, as a result of discussions about careers in international development, teaching staff and postgraduate students with some overseas or cross-cultural development experience in the ISTP reviewed the Sustainable Development and related programs at Murdoch University, with particular focus on the capacity of the curriculum to equip graduates for work in international development settings. The curriculum overview identified a common gap in these programs, namely a unit that linked current discourse and theories in development studies with basic methods and practice: a unit that would give students a good understanding of what it means to commence work as a critically reflective development practitioner.

Murdoch University's MA in Development Studies "enables students to approach the complex issues related to contemporary processes of globalisation, economic and social development from an interdisciplinary perspective" (Murdoch University, 2005). Similarly the Master of Arts in Ecologically Sustainable Development explores "the policies, issues and processes of ecologically sustainable development (ESD)" through study of "the current status, the history and the value bases of sustainable development, together with the policy approaches that are emerging for sustainability" (Murdoch University, 2005). In common with similar programs in Flinders and LaTrobe Universities (which similarly to Murdoch are also members of Innovative Research Universities Australia) and Curtin University, Development Studies have been offered in the liberal education tradition of providing a general theoretical

framework and equipping graduates with generic attributes, but not necessarily acquainting students with the particular skills used by development practitioners. In fact, in Australia only Deakin University offers a substantial skills component in Development Studies (in this case in an MA).

The lack of some of the practical professional skills required by development professionals is exacerbated by a gap between theories of development and what actually happens on the ground. This gap between theory and practice has been widely recognised in the development studies literature over the past two decades following Michael Edwards' influential articles "The irrelevance of development studies" (Edwards, 1989) and "Does the doormat influence the boot?" (Edwards, 1993). He describes it in the following way:

Generalisations produced by researchers may seem hopelessly abstract when compared to the mess of life "on the ground", yet so much of what is practiced on the ground may fail because it is de-linked from the broader economic and political forces which macro-level research can illuminate (Edwards, 1997, p.4)

This gap between development studies and practice was also a common observation of experienced staff and postgraduate development or sustainability practitioners in ISTP. For example, lecturer Brad Pettitt, despite recently completing his PhD in international development, found much of his research lacking relevance to the problems and challenges he faced working in the field with Oxfam in Cambodia and later at a policy level for the Australian government's overseas aid agency AusAID in Canberra. Similarly, PhD candidates John Davis and Peter Devereux (with over 30 years combined experience in many developing countries), could see that lessons they had learnt through practical experience could be introduced and linked to theoretical concepts and discourses in at university, but rarely found a propitious environment to do so. Natalie McGrath's experience with indigenous communities suggested that community participatory approaches need greater emphasis in these courses (McGrath, Marinova and Anda, 2005).

To improve the curriculum at Murdoch University, a Special Topic unit was developed to improve the capacity of graduates to both find and succeed in a range of opportunities in the international development field. The unit was designed so that graduates who sought work or other involvement in international development would have the benefit of at least some exposure to key dilemmas in development, and learn essential basic skills related to project management or development intervention. Its objective is to build the professional capacity of graduates by challenging assumptions about development using contact with development practitioners, and workshops where students have to grapple with practical and philosophical constraints while completing work or plans as would be required of development practitioners.

This unit had very high level of enrolment, was regarded very highly by the students, but there were intense reactions to some of the activities. Subsequently from 2006 it has become a regular unit. This paper discusses how the unit came into existence through a collaborative reflective process, embodied experiential student-centred learning and what are the lessons for interdisciplinary learning.

Unit philosophy

The unit was designed by collaborators who shared a similar background, with a mix of knowledge, experience and a genuine passion and enthusiasm for cross cultural issues, participatory processes and overseas development issues. We met regularly to plan how this vision for a practical yet critical development studies unit might be put into practice. The unit was approved for Semester 1, 2005 and was named *Special Topics in Sustainable Development: Overseas Aid and International Development*. We liaised with Program Chairs from the University's Development Studies and Politics programs who wholeheartedly endorsed filling the niche available for a more applied course as proposed and saw the complementary value of this unit for their programs.

Unit design

The unit aimed to be innovative in its design. According to Biggs (1999, p.27), the following three factors:

good curriculum design; clear graduate outcomes; student-centred and facilitating deep learning, are essential and they were adopted in order to achieve this.

Good curriculum design

Central to good curricular design for the unit is the effort to clearly align Murdoch University's graduate outcomes, and in particular the development of professional skills, with the unit's learning objectives, assessment activities, teaching and learning activities and the contents of unit materials. The over-arching vision is to build the capacity of students to become critically reflective practitioners, well informed and engaged in contemporary thinking about development issues in a manner that is relevant to development practice.

One aspect common to similar units at LaTrobe and Deakin Universities is exposing and engaging students in key debates in current development thinking and at the same time providing contact and engagement with development practitioners who have recently worked in developing communities[2].

An innovative element in the unit design is to enable students to immediately use the tools with which they were being acquainted, and to do so in a critical way (see for example Win, 2004), grappling experientially with their importance and limitations. We wanted to engage students with the genuine practical difficulties and compromises required when working in overseas development. Students in Perth cannot experience the physical realities of the work location, but as Gilbert (2005) comments in relation to encouraging self-awareness in aid workers:

For [experiential learning] tasks to be effective for aid workers they would have to simulate relevant psychological issues and their interactions with practical responses. Tasks given in a lecture or training form are very limited in their capacity ... because they do not necessarily challenge... preconceptions, established structures of meaning, underlying assumptions and values (Gilbert, 2005, p.65)

Participatory workshops are used to place the students in situations where they are asked in groups to identify a development project which they will design, plan a project evaluation and write a development project proposal. While recognising the limitations of a training context, the exercise tries to simulate some of the emotional and intellectual challenges faced in aid and development consultancies.

The unit materials introduce students to contemporary approaches to development and the debates surrounding aid and development assistance. They also include an introduction to projects and the project management cycle. The aim of materials is to provide a conceptual framework on which students will build their own knowledge, skills and values. A unit reader is comprised of diverse materials such as newspaper articles, journal articles, book chapters, institutional reports and program documents.

The assessment for this unit is closely aligned to its objectives and the primary assessment is based on a major learning activity. Participatory workshops help students prepare material for an assignment (worth 40% of unit assessment) that is integral to the learning process and attempted to elicit from the students a meld of the ideas and practices learnt in the unit (see Box 1).

Box 1: Major assessment instructions

A wealthy philanthropist has just contacted you and is willing to spend up to \$1 million on any international development intervention that you recommend. S/he has asked that you provide a 2500 word project proposal to be considered. You will need to:

- Show the country and region where the project will take place and show why such an intervention is necessary in this area.
- Outline the aims of the project and show the expected inputs, outputs, outcomes and

impacts.

- Show how you will build participation into the intervention and reflect upon the complexities and tensions inherent in this process.
- Provide a break-down of key expenditure.
- Explain how you will evaluate the success of the intervention and assess its impact
- Define the timeframe for this intervention to be successful how you will make the project financially sustainable after funding ceases.

Work on the project described in Box 1 begins with the class (61 students in the inaugural class) having to form into groups, agree on a place or problem to research, a development project idea, and how to proceed. By working in groups the students were challenged to capitalise on or be divided by difference: in opinions, experience or discipline of study. Prior to the first workshop session, students have an introductory lecture on community participation. This provides a learning scaffold from which they need to explore how participatory practice needs to be written into their project, and also how they will manage their groups so that everyone has space to participate. For students, this closely resembles the "swamp" described by Schon (1987):

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant... while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. (Schon, 1987 cited in Chambers, 1997, p.190)

This major workshop task aims to increase student-centred or problem-based learning through which they develop their own learning goals and a stronger focus on what they are able to do, rather than on the content being covered (O'Neill and McMahan 2005, p.30).

Student-centred and deep learning

The second feature of the unit design is its student-centred and deep learning approach. International Development occupies highly contested space in both academic discourse and policy making (Escobar, 1995; Dichter, 2003). For this reason the unit aims to open up the discourse relating to development theory and practice and enable students to independently draw their conclusions. As teachers we seek to position ourselves as facilitators of learning and explicitly avoid suggesting we have resolved this complex and contested area. The students are encouraged to trust their own capacity to think and learn for themselves (O'Neill and McMahan 2005, p.28). Grappling with these contested ideas also represents a facet of the "swamp" into which students are encouraged to enter.

The result is that the learning process becomes the combined responsibility of students and staff. It is intended that this increased responsibility on students for their own learning will increase the students' involvement and effort in the unit and therefore the likelihood of educational and personal returns (Cannon and Newble, 2000, p.16). A key strategy is a problem based learning approach that according to Cannon and Newble (2000, p.19) is "a way of seeing the curriculum as being focused on key problems that arise in professional practice and which requires students actively - independently or in groups - to learn from the problems".

This approach also draws on what Biggs calls deep learning (Biggs, 1999). In particular, the deep learning approach deployed in this unit presents problems and questions "rather than expound information" (Biggs, 1999, p.17). Assessment is focussed on "structure rather than independent facts" and the unit "uses teaching and assessment methods that support the explicit aims and objectives of the course" (Biggs, 1999, p.17). Graduates need not only to carry out tasks and perform in roles, but to be able to relate these to the wider significance of what is happening in a particular society and the world.

Clear graduate outcomes

Murdoch University has a policy that curricula are aligned with graduate attributes; the latter being well documented (Murdoch University, 2004). The Strategic Plan for Education at Murdoch University for 2003-2007 has a strategy to: "Develop clear discipline specific interpretations of Graduate Attributes" (Murdoch University, 2003, p.10). Since Development Studies and Sustainable Development are interdisciplinary programs, the University's formal quality assurance process is unlikely to address the need for its graduates to have particular skills. Indeed it is difficult to know how to equip graduates to function as interdisciplinary generalists in the particular context of international development. What are the key skills? At the time of writing similar and more robust discussions are taking place within the newly emerging community of Sustainability Practitioners[3]. Whilst the value of interdisciplinary generalists is advocated in forums such as *Ecological Economics*, employment for new graduates who have no dominant "expertise" is problematic. In the past, interdisciplinary generalists expanded their knowledge and competence from a particular base discipline in response to challenges and opportunities in their working life. In Development Studies and Sustainable Development courses we are attempting to "purpose build" practitioners of interdisciplinary coordination and innovation (Marinova and McGrath, 2004, 2005; Marinova et al., 2005). The professional knowledge and skills international development practitioners require include project cycle management (broad criticism of project-based development notwithstanding) that is included in the unit.

The experience of teaching and learning

When designing the unit we expected enrolments of 25 to 40 students in the first year. Based on this assumption we estimated that the unit would be best run in a three-hour block. This would offer flexibility if practitioners came as guest lectures some weeks and there were more in-depth two-hour workshops other weeks. However the enrolments were finally much higher: jumping up to over 90 including external students. A contributing factor for the increased interest was the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which also proved the timely need for this unit. Consequently we ended up with the difficult situation of trying to run workshops with up to 60 students present.

There was an atmosphere of excitement and enthusiasm from the students enrolled in the units. At least two thirds of the teaching time each week was dedicated to discussion and/or case studies and problems in international development.

The student-centred and deep learning approach adopted in the unit design caused some concern among students more used to a predominantly linear approach. Instead of prescriptive tasks and specified outputs, they were faced with a situation in which they had to find appropriate ways to facilitate participation of diverse team members and achieve the outcome they decided.

The most difficult learning experience for the students occurred in the first workshop where they had to form groups and decide what project and how to work towards the requirements of the project described in Box 1. The learning scaffolding for this phase was a one-page set of key questions to be considered. By the end of the session the tension and anxiety caused by this workshop was palpable as students experienced first hand the difficulties of gaining consensus around group tasks, process and outcomes. Presentations in the second week concluded the planning exercise. During the final session there was a sense of catharsis as students expressed their feelings about the process and their sense of achievement as they acknowledged they had embraced and endured the initial uncertainty of not knowing how they would proceed or whether they would succeed. Their relief was accompanied by a sense that the struggle had been worthwhile. A short de-briefing discussion after the presentations and another in the final class assist students to assess their experiences and examine what they learn. Of course learning is interactive, involving also staff. The de-briefing session highlights the fact that working in community development requires similar vulnerability and initial confusion to that faced in this workshop. In the debriefing session Schon's (1987) swamp was again cited.

Student feedback

Mid-semester, a formal Student Unit Survey and a Survey of Teaching for the Unit Coordinator were conducted through the Teaching and Learning Centre at Murdoch University (see Table 1).

Table 1: Results from Student Unit Survey

Indicator	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Overall I'm satisfied with the quality of teaching in this unit	28	68
Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit	31	66
Activities in this unit enhanced my knowledge and/or skills in the subject area	28	68
Assessment task tested my understanding of the subject area rather than just their memory	28	68
The teachers encourage me to be responsible for my own learning	56	43

The Student Unit Survey was very positive and showed that the unit was successful in implementing many of the innovative, student-centred approaches outlined earlier in article. Some of the 97% of students who agreed that they were satisfied with the unit quality added comments such as:

This course [sic] is a great idea and much needed compliment to other ISTP (and non ISTP!) units

A splendid unit combining the academic with the practical.

Students feel more knowledgeable and/or skilful from the unit and informal feedback suggests that basing learning around problem-solving activities enhanced that learning. The goal of developing critical discussion together with introducing specific tools met with both approval, and more nuanced responses. Some students wanted to learn more about project cycle management and other practical tools while others wanted less, preferring to have more "BIG PICTURE examination of trade/ finance/ aid/ debt".

Several students wanted more guidance, clarification of the task and more structure in the participatory workshop process. Similarly the main assignment was considered by some to be too open ended. However there was general recognition that real world development situations are messy and even ambiguous with some similarity to the workshop experience.

Challenges and lessons learnt from the unit

Since the activities and assessment tasks were aligned to the objectives of the unit and the teaching activities, what can we learn from student performance in assessment?

We assumed (perhaps beyond reasonable warrant) that students had already sufficient background in sustainable development and/or development studies to support the deep learning approach of the unit. Biggs (1999, 19) comments that students who have "little prior knowledge of the topic will" most likely not be able to use a deep approach to learning. Some student work in the final examination indicated the approach in this inaugural class was biased towards those students with a greater prior exposure and knowledge of the issues, and less suitable to those who entered the unit with high interest and motivation, but less experience. This could be addressed by more clearly setting the context in the first weeks, as well as appropriately grouping participants during the workshops.

From student surveys, debriefing sessions and informal discussion we have learned that we need to ensure more structure and smaller groups for the "tutorial" discussions. For the workshops some additional guidance may be required, but we see value in retaining a simulation experience where, in a safe environment, students experience the raw edge of self doubt and their inability to offer glib answers to

profound questions. Debriefing activities need to be a part of these sessions to enable students to deal with the emotional side of the experience. The swampy land analogy quoted from Schon (1987) as part of the introduction to the participation exercise still inspires us to take students beyond linear exposition of theory or stepwise building of skills into difficult learning experiences.

Conclusion

The experience of the initial offering of the Unit suggests that students are capable of entering the swamp of "messy, confusing problems [that] defy [quick] technical solution" (Schon, 1987) and that their learning experience is all the richer for it. In providing a genuine "swamp" experience, we interrupt the tendency of professionalism to normalise technique and approaches (Chambers, 1999, p.191) by not focussing on methods (see also Henkel and Stirrat, 2001) which are tools of normalisation.

Many students commented that they had a greater understanding of the complexity of the subject of international aid and development. Although a couple are now less inclined to look for future involvement, many others expressed heightened interest and a desire to become personally involved in the field. By these statements we consider the unit to have achieved its aim. It can be improved by providing more "scaffolding" for students to get their own hands on the context and theories of development at the beginning, and to help them scope the major assessment project so that their efforts are commensurate with the value of this task in their overall workload. We will continue to find ways to lead them to the swamp of issues of greatest concern to humanity while equipping them with the best survival aids available.

Endnotes

1. Curtin University offers a BA with a Development Studies major based in Anthropology and Geography.
2. Indigenous Australia, Mongolia, Fiji, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Laos and South Africa. Speakers included men and women.
3. This issue was discussed with keen undergraduate concern in a forum on strategic directions for ISTP held on 28 July 2005.

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