

Connecting, Communicating, and Counselling Wisely: Delivering a Transformative and Ethical Community of Inquiry approach in the Guidance and Counselling Program

OVERVIEW: SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

My motivation to join academia as a lecturer in guidance and counselling education at James Cook University (JCU) (in Singapore and now Australia) reflected my commitment to respond meaningfully to social and environmental challenges and opportunities facing persons living in the tropics. In addition, through an extensive career in teaching, school counselling, and education consultancy, I observed escalating numbers of people from all backgrounds experiencing mental health issues, as well as a rising number of counsellors who were ill-equipped to respond to the diverse needs of those who needed help (see, AIHW 2010; Bannink, 2006; Kessler, et al, 2007). As a result, my guiding vision as a teaching academic is to prepare career-ready and cross-culturally astute practitioners who are empowered to work with diverse clients through values- and strengths-based teaching and learning approaches. To enact this aim, I implement a meaningful and ethical approach to blended learning, connecting staff, students, and industry professionals through technological innovations, and catering for a diverse student group across multiple international locations (18% international students, 9% students from low socio-economic backgrounds and 4% of students with additional needs—2014-2016 mean scores). Fundamental to this process is the integration of expert theory and quality practice to promote academic excellence and high levels of student engagement. This has been achieved through high quality teaching and learning programs enacted in a research-rich environment.

Since beginning my work at JCU in 2010, I continue to influence, innovate and lead dynamic learning through my teaching, consultancy and research activities (Figure 1). I have been Subject Coordinator of five subjects in the post-graduate Guidance and Counselling program, and the Course Coordinator of the Master of Education program across Cairns, Townsville and Singapore campuses. My

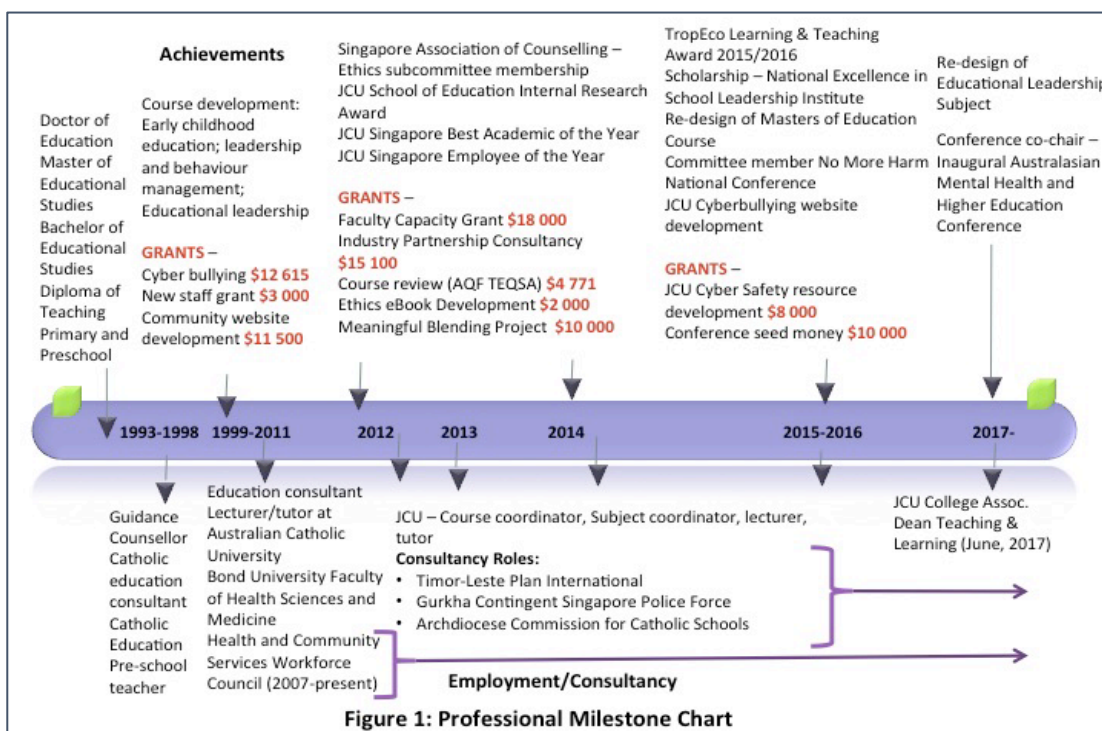


Figure 1: Professional Milestone Chart

relentless motivation and challenge has been leading and sustaining meaningful blended learning environments, inclusive of ethical communities of inquiry, across three campuses to enhance student learning and experiences. To assure quality pedagogy, I engage with cycles of action research to reflexively ensure outstanding blended learning design. The sustained impact of this approach is illustrated in projects, scholarly publications, students’ evaluations of teaching, Peer Review of Teaching (PRoT) reports, subject analytics, and professional association and institutional recognition over the years 2011 to 2017, including a 2017 JCU Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning.

CRITERION 4: INNOVATION, LEADERSHIP OR SCHOLARSHIP THAT HAS INFLUENCED AND ENHANCED LEARNING AND TEACHING AND/OR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Within blended learning environments, promoting and scaffolding autonomous and active learner engagement is vital to enhance both learning and the student experience. I have incorporated the

Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al, 2003) into my teaching repertoire to create a collaborative, supportive space where students develop both cognitive independence and conceptual mastery at a post-graduate level. This process is fostered through the inclusion of various tools that guide students’ ethical participation in a professional online community including establishing a charter for online rights and responsibilities, providing secure file sharing, creating getting to know you exercises, developing (and iteratively refining) How To Guides, and fostering individual and group practice exercises and journaling tasks. Student feedback indicates high satisfaction with the available resources: *“It seems that every detail of the subject site is thought to provide the best possible learning experience and to be inclusive of all”*

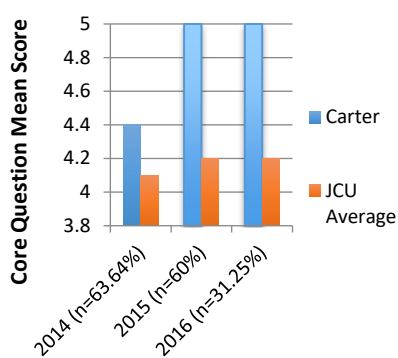


Figure 2: Overall, I was satisfied with the teaching of this staff member

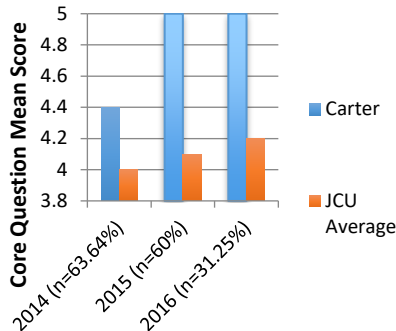


Figure 3: The staff member provided useful feedback to improve my learning

(Student Evaluation, International student, 2013); *“The outline is comprehensive, the readings and supplementary materials are expansive and encourage further reading”* (Student Feedback Survey, 2014). The effectiveness of the blended teaching approach is strongly appreciated by students as shown in formal student evaluations (see, Figures 2 and 3). Qualitative comments reiterate these results:

“I really appreciated Margaret’s clarity of explanations, her inspirational style, her dedication to helping us” (Student Feedback Survey, 2014); *“This subject was interesting and it was delivered in a way that helped me to cement my learning. The coordinator is committed and always available to talk with me when needed”* (Student Feedback Survey, 2015); *“You have been inspirational, motivating and supportive. (I feel that at times you have actually held my hand....)”* (Unsolicited student email, 2015).

To create a sustainable CoI that facilitates meaningful student engagement, I designed interactive discussion forums to support learning. These forums foster non-judgmental, open dialogue and encourage the exchange of ideas, while providing a vehicle for the development of group and individual projects. Students are encouraged to collaborate as they analyse and synthesise learning, share critical reflections of work, and seek and respond to feedback. These opportunities allow students to develop awareness of professional and ethical connections with different people from varying backgrounds: *“The Discussion Board ... provided me with such an insight into how other students perceived topics of discussion; it broadened my views and expanded my reading in wanting to understand further. The online debate gave time to reflect on what was being said before writing a considered reply”* (Unsolicited Email, International Student, 2013). This approach gained faculty recognition with Professor Nola Alloway, the Pro-Vice Chancellor, advising in writing that I had achieved in the top 10% of all subjects at JCU with a 90% student response rate (2013).

In 2015, in my evaluations of the success of the meaningful blend and with an aim to enrich the pedagogy

Table 1: Practical Inquiry Model overarching assessment

Part A Triggering Event	Review, choose and explore literature to respond
Part B Exploration	Follow model to respond in required genre requirements
Part C Integration	Publish work and review peers’ contributions
Part D Resolution	Reflect, review and develop for final submission

further, I conducted a student focus group, which identified a gap in constructive alignment (Biggs, 2014) between the teaching and learning activities and the assessment regime. Students identified the criticality of purposeful assessment: *“I think if there was a purpose to it ... even if it’s only worth, fifteen per cent, if you have that purpose for why you are talking”* (Focus group comment, 2015). Given the computer-mediated nature of learning activities, I utilised the Practical Inquiry Model (PIM) (Garrison et al, 2003, see, Table 1) as my organising framework to make improvements to the activities and the assessment tasks. Specifically designed to enhance online conferencing in higher education contexts, the PIM provides a procedural frame to support learners to make sense of their own experiences through social interaction and collaboration, both as counselling students and as career practitioners.

Using this research-based scaffold, I systematically re-designed the learning and assessment tasks to incorporate structured opportunities for students to actively develop their own knowledge in a peer- and teacher-supported environment. Student survey results indicated the revised subject delivery was effective and appreciated (see, Figure 4). Student comments confirmed this approval: *“The discussion board has helped a lot in enriching our minds ... Without the input given by the others, I wouldn't have learnt as much!”* (Unsolicited Email, International Student, 2016); *“The online discussions were very helpful as it allowed us to learn from each other in a community of learning, drawing on each other's experiences and knowledge* (Student Feedback Survey, 2016). To monitor the effectiveness of the assessment and the PIM assemblage, I invited Associate Prof. Cecily Knight (JCU), a blended learning leader, to undertake a peer review on the effectiveness of the model across three subjects: *“What you have done clearly meets best practice standards.*

Online forums like you have used are an effective way to scaffold critical thinking through deep and purposeful engagement with peers and lecturers. To me the most interesting aspect of applying this framework to your Discussion Forums, was that the responses appear to concur with the research on the model” (2016). Learning

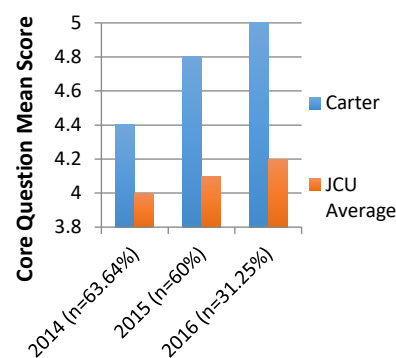


Figure 4: The staff member delivered subject material in ways that helped my learning

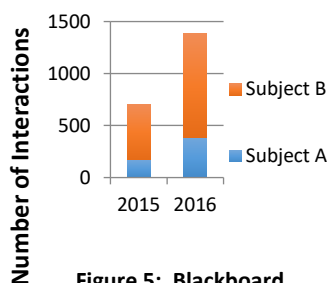


Figure 5: Blackboard Analytics interactions within LMS

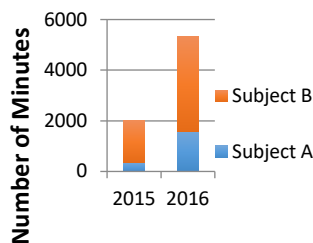


Figure 6: Blackboard Analytics minutes spent in LMS

analytics data within the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) (2015-2016) demonstrates increases in students' interactions (see, Figure 5) and time spent within the discussion board (see, Figure 6) since the PIM assessment redesign.

ETHICAL COMMUNITY INNOVATION AND SCHOLARLY LEADERSHIP

Three key projects demonstrate the scale and practical application of my work to support students, teaching academics and alumni in

Australia and Asia. These reflect my focus to broadly support community networks and strengthen evidence-based teaching in guidance in counselling. First, a passion for fostering meaningful connections in today's hyper-connected world has driven my leadership in the creation of an interactive educational website, [Prevent Cyberbullying @ JCU](#). In developing this evolving resource, an inclusive approach was taken in valuing contributions from people in diverse groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, members of the LGBTQI+ community, library and blended learning staff, persons with additional needs, and multi-disciplinary students engaging with the site as part of their courses (Journalism, Guidance and Counselling, Criminology, and Information Technologies). Consolidating research, practical resources and guidance, this initiative promotes the priorities of JCU by contributing to a sense of social consciousness, productivity and wellbeing. The site is publically available to both JCU and the wider community and in an external Peer Review the evaluation concluded that:

The prevent cyberbullying website developed as a result of Dr. Carter's research is a brilliant solution for students in a higher education setting, as it is based on sound research principles and combines evidence-based teaching pedagogies with an action-oriented approach – it involves students in a reflexive process of investigating the effects of cyberbullying

(Dr. Bhuvan Narayan, University of Technology Sydney, 2016)

Second, in 2015 I secured additional competitive internal grant funding to lead a teaching and learning project to develop the *Ethics and Meaningful Blending in our Guidance and Counselling and Career Development Programs* eBook. The published product (Carter et al, 2015) includes content to effectively assist students in making ethical decisions when faced with dilemmas as part of their work and study. In addition, this interactive eBook supports students in developing communication and critical reflection skills, providing a platform to publish their scholarly articles. This teaching and learning resource was showcased as exemplary at the 2016 Australian Counselling Association National Conference, further illustrating professional industry recognition of my work beyond JCU: *“Margaret has developed invaluable resources for*

the next frontier in guidance and counselling, the online world; through the development of the Ethics eBook" (Tom Parker, Australian Counselling Association, 2016).

Third, I take a reflexive approach in my work that is evidenced through fostering meaningful, ethical, and purposeful professional communities beyond JCU. Since 2012, I have led the Guidance, Counselling and Career Development Community site for students enrolled across the three JCU campuses as well as alumni and industry partners. This initiative brings together multifaceted aspects of the professional community in a sustained way, with the site's current membership including 300 participants (279 students, with 21 alumni and industry members). The professional and educational content provided supports students to develop authentic worldviews of counselling beyond their learnings in individual subjects: *"This hub can be a real wealth of information and there is plenty of content for the students to digest. I am impressed with the research and the effort that has gone into development thus far..."* (Tom Parker, ACA, 2016). Students appreciate having access to the site post-graduation in their careers: *"I would love to continue using the community site ... P.S. I got a guidance job with the department!!!! ... I'm so, so happy"* (Unsolicited Student Email, 2016); *"I would enjoy having access post-graduation please. Throughout my GC [Graduate Certificate] I have been particularly engrossed by all of the content that you were engaged with Margaret, and would certainly consider further studies at JCU in the future. I'm particularly interested in the prospect of articulating my GC (or even other prior studies) into the Masters"* (Unsolicited Student Email, 2016).

My evidence-based implementation of professional communities of practice is equally of benefit in professional consultancy roles, including in my leadership of a capacity building program with the Archdiocese Commission for Schools Singapore Character Education Program (2013 – 2017), developing sustainable internationalised, multicultural, and inclusive approaches to social emotional learning. The executive director commented: *"Informed by evidence and experience, Margaret Anne enthusiastically and diligently works with our educators to build communities of leaders. Her work encompasses inquiry, experimentation and innovation, directed toward the continuous improvement of student learning and achievement"* (Fr. Edward Seah, Archdiocesan Commission for Catholic Schools, 2015). In this way, my teaching informs my professional consultancy, which then reciprocally adds currency and relevance to my teaching work, as students gain awareness of authentic professional applications for their degree learning.

CONCLUSION

My teaching enacts meaningful student learning through continued engagement with professional development experiences, mentoring, and practice that is firmly grounded in evidenced-informed research. My scholarly work is widely recognised in the fields of ethical technology-enhanced learning and socially sustainable teaching and learning environments. I continue to frame the evolution and redesign of my approach for successful subject delivery to enrich the student experience. Since 2014, I have published this scholarly work in seven journal articles, five chapters, and three conference proceedings (see footnotes). This research continues to set new industry standards and secure national and international recognition from those working and learning in the field. I plan to continue inspiring excellence in higher education in order to assure a connected and caring university experience for guidance and counselling students, where they gain wisdom for their professional lives within ethical and highly effective communities of practice.

Margaret Carter is a great supporter of the industry of guidance and counselling, she is well distinguished and an invaluable resource to James Cook University. Margaret has worked tirelessly to improve the breadth and depth of knowledge within the student community and frequently engages with the relevant industry bodies to ensure that the students have the best opportunities to succeed.

(Tom Parker, Australian Counselling Association Industry Officer, 2016).

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