

For over 14 years of developing student-centred and evidence-based academic language and learning support initiatives that empower students to succeed in their own learning journeys.

OVERVIEW: SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

My sustained contribution to academic support and student learning was initially driven by a fascination for the way in which social interaction, persistence, academic development, student satisfaction and successful learning communities are interconnected with peer support and a successful transition to higher education. I commenced work at the Cairns campus of JCU as a Learning Adviser and Academic Developer in 1998. Cairns students are over-represented in the 25+ age group, come from diverse backgrounds and are often academically under prepared as is illustrated by a campus retention rate in 2010 some 5% less than that of the JCU average and 7% less than the Townsville retention rate (Corporate Planning and Performance, 2012). These data, and Bradley's (2008) *Review of Australian Higher Education*, have informed my practice and encouraged me to develop initiatives that address the needs of under represented and underprepared groups. As a Learning Adviser and Manager within a teaching and learning unit, my work supports all faculties in the University. My role spans coordinating and teaching in preparatory programs, facilitating discipline specific study groups, managing a collaborative learning support space, overall responsibility for over 150 student mentors and leading academic support initiatives across the campus. My contribution to student learning and engagement over this period involves empowering students through a focus on the nexus of evidence-based academic language and learning support initiatives, learning spaces and peer support.

Determined to adopt a scholarly approach, I have drawn on the power of learning communities as advocated by Tinto (1995) and taken note of the work of McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) who call for individual institutions to develop their own sustainable retention and engagement strategies. Channock (2005) and Yorke (2006) both emphasise the importance of the personal and I have ensured that all of the academic language and learning initiatives I have developed reflect the principle that "students are at the heart of our university" (*JCU Teaching and Learning Assessment Policy, 2012*). I have combined peer support and action research into the provision of online resources and this resulted in a suite of online learning and writing modules that continue to ensure access to quality learning materials regardless of the student location. I have been an active member of the *Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL)* since its inception in 2005 and have published on how academic and professional staff can learn from our students and respond to their needs (Calder & Daly, 2009). My approach to the work of a Learning Adviser has always been guided by my respect for the development of students as individuals, while at the same time recognising that learning occurs through engagement with other students and staff, and through a shared repertoire of knowledge and resources embedded in a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). My research into learning spaces and the ways students, peer support programs and staff can work effectively together in purpose-built spaces clearly demonstrates these approaches to my work (Anders, Calder, Elder & Logan, 2009). I have successfully empowered students to succeed in their own learning journeys through a combination of my respect for them as individuals, an informed scholarly approach, and an ability to develop support initiatives in collaboration with academic and professional colleagues throughout the University and the sector (O'Shea, Vincent, Calder & Hanley, 2009). My commitment to students has been consistently recognised and rewarded within the University and the wider community.

CRITERION 4: RESPECT AND SUPPORT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

My personal philosophy, work goals and priorities are consistent with the Bradley (2008) reforms. My contribution is aligned with key objectives from the current University Plan (2011-2014) and demonstrates respect and support for the development of students as individuals. Specific evidence of this alignment to the University's strategic goals includes a focus on **enhancing flexibility for an inclusive student experience**. I have achieved this by influencing the academic experience through the implementation of online peer and learning resources that have increased access to learning support for both off campus and on campus students. Evidence of the impact of this strategy has been gathered from over 5000 online feedback forms received since 1999.

I often use this site when I am helping my fellow students with time management skills. I also always recommend my mentees take a look at this site and to especially utilise the planners (Online Mentor Leader, 2011).

I'm heading into second year and I have regained confidence from visiting this site. I feel better prepared for second year (First Year Student, 2010).

A second key University imperative is to **foster a culture of scholarship and innovation and an inclusive campus community for staff and students**. From 2001, I initiated a series of studies of how students use learning spaces and these studies culminated in the Cairns Library being featured as a case study following the Pedagogy-Space-Technology (PST) Design & Evaluation Framework advocated at the Next Generation Learning Spaces Symposia (2008, 2009). Interestingly, student mentors were quick to acknowledge how this space empowered their role.

Before, mentors were just a notion or a name and now there's actually a place so it actually fits in quite well to the University 'cause any area of importance in the University has got a space, so before we actually got this space, mentors I don't think, were taken too seriously until the space was given (Student Mentor, 2002).

Additionally, in line with the University's mission to foster an environment which recognises and supports the diverse cultural communities, in which the University resides, I have had an impact on learning support for Indigenous students on the Cairns campus by offering guidance to the Bama Nguma-Barra Indigenous Student Association and empowering the students to initiate an Indigenous Mentor Program alongside the existing Student Mentor Program. The students will benefit from recent improvements I have made to the Program that include online training and assessment of student mentors through a LearnJCU Community and group collaborative tools; recognition of prior learning for a TAFE Certificate IV Unit "Mentoring in the Workplace"; and implementing "Finding a Mentor" links in the LearnJCU subject sites of core first year subjects.

A further aspect of my contribution also reflects the University's intent that learning does not only take place in the classroom and that students' time spent at the University is about a whole range of experiences. The inaugural Professional College Leadership Dinner in 2011 brought community leaders, University leaders and students together to share their ideas about successful community leadership. Student recognition of the impact of this extra-curricular learning experience is noted below:

Spent a wonderful evening at JCU Boathouse with inspiring, talented, passionate leaders in Cairns and JCU community... soaked up so much about leadership, vision, influencing and much more just being at the same table as them & to hear them share their insights into leadership. Many thanks to Alan Calder (Final Year Honours Psychology student, 2011).

Collaborative and sustained institution-wide initiatives: Consistent with my collaborative approach to developing the academic skills of our students, I have invited academic staff to present discipline-specific academic writing sessions for new students during orientation. Positive student feedback and high attendances have resulted in these workshops being embedded within a dedicated day in the Cairns Orientation Week program since 2007. I present a "Learning How to Learn" workshop on this day that has also attracted consistently positive feedback over this sustained period of time.

I found it highly practical but - more importantly - motivating in its insight. You created for me a bridge between the student (me), past experience (work/industry exp) and my new start at JCU (Workshop attendee, 2006).

I thought today's discussion on learning skills was one of the best sessions I've sat through so far. I felt I learnt so much invaluable information in the time space of an hour (Workshop attendee, 2008).

Recognising that orientation and preparatory strategies form only part of a coherent institution-wide approach to transition pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005), my academic language and learning activities are embedded within the curriculum through ongoing collaboration with academic staff. The following emails from academic colleagues reflect a move towards a third generation approach to the first year experience where it is "everybody's business" (Wilson, 2009; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).

Thank you very much for doing your presentation to the students. I agree, I think it is vital for first year students in their first semester to be exposed to this information so that they can enhance their chances of a good start to university study. Thank you for the links - I have changed the study guide on LearnJCU to the 8+5 version and I have included the law referencing link on the assignment tab. Again thanks for all your efforts - it is greatly appreciated (First Year Lecturer, 2008).

Thanks so much for this! Yes, I take your point. The piece evolved...And you've picked up on that. Good point also re reflection/preparation. Study finder (uploaded last year) says '20% preparation and participation'. So I had to design an assessment for that, which evolved into reflection...I'll tighten that aspect up in the explanation. I really appreciate this feedback Alan (First Year Lecturer, 2011).

EVIDENCE OF RECOGNITION

Institutional, sector and community recognition: The impact of my teaching within preparatory courses such as Uniprep was recognised through a *Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence* in 1999. Other institutional recognition includes an *Inclusive Practice Acknowledgement Award* in 2008 and a *JCU Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning* in 2012. Sector-wide recognition has included an invitation to join the organising committee of the First Year in Higher Education Conference when it was hosted in Townsville in 2009 and peer recognition is reflected through my publications and engagement with research in academic language and learning support since 1999 (Calder, 1999; Calder, 2004; Calder, 2006; Calder & Daly, 2009; Anders, Calder, Elder and Logan, 2009).

The Mayor of Cairns Regional Council has provided recognition of my efforts to engage Cairns leaders in a program to enhance the student experience:

I was pleased to be involved in Alan Calder's leadership initiative at JCU. The students at the dinner were highly motivated, very interested in exploring the notion of leadership and keen to discover the different pathways that leaders had taken to achieve the positions they were currently in. It's something that I would be pleased to participate in again as it was a very worthwhile exercise both for the students and the leaders (Val Schier, Mayor of Cairns Regional Council, 2011).

I have taught in preparatory and transition courses since 1998 where I clarify the expectations of prospective students, provide realistic feedback in relation to existing skills and take particular care to motivate and inspire students who have little experience and knowledge of higher education. A former student and current District Educator for Queensland Health recently provided endorsement of my efforts and further evidence of how I have empowered the learning journey of a community educator:

I recently met Alan again for the first time in 13 years and told him that if I were to attribute my success as a student to any one thing it would be the generosity he displayed as an educator during the Uniprep course. I could never have imagined prior to meeting Alan that I could complete a degree or work in a profession I love. I too am an educator now, and I often reflect that it is not possible to know the ways in which we influence the lives of our students (District Educator Queensland Health, 2012).

Initiatives that have enhanced learning spaces and developed learning communities: Student interviews have been an ongoing evaluation strategy I have used to investigate the extent to which the Learning Centre is serving as an environment that empowers student learning through peer and staff interaction.

It helps people work together...it's a place where students and staff, undergraduates and graduates, can meet together and talk informally about issues affecting their course (Fourth Year Education student, 2001).

It's become part of my educational practice to make sure I'm available to other students who need my help and if it wasn't for the Learning Centre that really wouldn't be possible (Fourth Year Arts mentor, 2001).

Quantitative measures from my research into peer and staff learning spaces confirm that the Cairns Library, and in particular the Learning Centre, are functioning as effective student learning spaces.

On a campus with approximately 3000 students, the weekly Library user traffic was 6744 in the week studied, with 1421 movements into the Learning Centre, 483 enquiries at the InfoHelp Desk, 1211 library resources borrowed and a total of 3317 computer logins registered in the building's computer workstations (Anders, Calder, & Treston, 2005).

Much of this activity in the Learning Centre can be attributed to the collaborative processes that I facilitate. My personal observations and reflections from over 10 years of managing the Learning Centre, support Jamieson's (2003) argument that when support staff and students share common spaces, staff become more accessible and the learning space design removes the traditional power structure implicit in the separation of staff offices and student learning spaces. My collaboration with Cairns academic staff on this issue has enhanced the learning experience of students. A Law lecturer reports on how this collaboration resulted in successful engagement of her students with peer and staff support in the Learning Centre:

Thanks for your support. The learning centre excursion project has been successful so far, based on what I can identify as concrete student engagement: 2 students introduced to mentors, 2 students introduced to law librarian for in depth library training, observed maybe 15 students in small groups discussing assignment topics - who may otherwise not have met 30 (approx) students viewing exam scripts from semester one, discussing exam techniques which may have let some down one on one discussion with 3 mid year entry students unsure of what's going on - reassurance about subject resources + introduction to learning support facilities, engagement of uni counselling & student association welfare officer via learning centre drop in sessions...(Senior Lecturer in Law, 2007).

This initiative demonstrated how a comfortable and valued 'student space' enabled a lecturer to engage with more students than would otherwise have been possible and link them to student mentors, learning support resources, and other support staff. I have developed this learning support initiative further by encouraging other academic staff to model this practice. For example, School of Education staff involved in a First Year Literacy Initiative conducted workshops and one-on-one consultations with identified students in the Learning Centre; School of Business students are identified through a Post Enrolment Literacy Assessment and meet for group consultations in the Learning Centre; and I facilitate numeracy and chemistry study groups for Nursing students. All of these initiatives are enabled in a space that I strive to maintain as a dynamic and collaborative learning community that reflects key learning space design principles identified by Chism and

Bickford (2002). The use of the space was acknowledged through its inclusion as a case study in the Next Generation Learning Space Symposium (2009).

Empathetic guidance and assisting students from under represented groups: In terms of providing for wider participation at JCU, I have always been cognisant of the needs of specific equity groups and received an Inclusive Practice Acknowledgement Award in 2008 in recognition of this. The following is taken from a letter a student wrote to the Vice-Chancellor in relation to the support I provided:

As a second language student, with learning disability I am always grateful for his explanation with grammar rules and punctuation. I have attended all the workshops run by Mr Calder and find he shows a genuine interest and always enquires regarding students' progress. He promptly responds to my learning needs (First Year student, 2008).

I have ensured that the *Kickstart* model, a transition course facilitated by trained mentors and initiated in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences in 1997, has been progressively duplicated for each of the other three Faculties. The *Kickstart* model is now consolidated in the institution-wide project called *Connect4Success*. I have also ensured that it addresses issues identified in First Year Experience literature such as reducing anxiety levels; establishing peer and academic networks prior to the start of study; providing an insight into basic learning skills; introducing aspects of University practices, processes and terminology; informing about the culture of the University; and providing advice based on the student experience. A participant in this course provides some observations that validate how my efforts to develop a support initiative have empowered and inspired a learning journey:

The preparatory(sic) class kickstart made a great deal of difference. I felt empowered. I also identified a lady there who just "felt right" to me and I extended the hand of friendship to her. We have been pretty inseperable(sic) ever since and push and pull each other along at times. I think without her I might have caved in to the anxiety early on (First Year student, 2003).

In 2011, retention data showed that overall, 86% of all study period 1 participants continued in their courses (79% for FAESS, 100% for FLBCA, 88% for FMHMS and 100% for FSE). These data are consistent with previous years, and given many 'at risk' students generally self-select for these courses, the results provide further validation of the model. Further, the *Kickstart* model has been adopted by the University of Newcastle and University of Wollongong. This initiative powerfully impacts on the students' personal learning journey as noted below:

You have done a wonderful job creating these projects and would highly recommend them to any new student. I am looking forward to continuing my university journey (First Year student, 2007).

As part of my ongoing refinement and evaluation of both the Student Mentor Program and the provision of learning support in the Learning Centre, a team of three senior Indigenous students provided learning support for other Indigenous students throughout 2010. An Indigenous student provides the following observation on this initiative and developments since that time:

Based on the data collected over a two semester tenure, the Indigenous support learning group of which I was a member was able to compile a report suggesting an increase in the supportive measures available to Indigenous students on campus. I am pleased to learn that as a result of this report and from the formation of Bama Nguma-Barra Indigenous Student Association, that a mentorship program is underway that will instill and provide a sense of community specifically for Indigenous students and provide an avenue to combat the chronic retention issues that Indigenous students face (Anthropology Honours student, 2012).

An Indigenous Mentor Administrator has now been employed in my unit to implement the recruitment and training of the new mentors in preparation for the 2012 mid-year intake.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

I am passionate about the work I do in the field of academic language and learning and concur with Yorke (2006) when he acknowledges that as well as policy and practice clearly influencing students' achievement, it is the 'personal' that cannot be overlooked as a common theme in a successful learning experience. Embedded within a complex nexus of evidence-based academic language and learning support initiatives, it is also the 'personal' that drives my respect and support for the empowerment and overall development of students as individuals throughout their learning journeys.