KIFT ALTC SENIOR FELLOWSHIP:
ARTICULATING A TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

COMMENTARY ON FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM CASE STUDIES:
STAFF DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Noel Meyers and Yoni Ryan

Authors:
From early 2009, Professor Noel Meyers will be Head of the School of Science and Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His work has won international, national, and institutional awards for creating engaging learning environments.

Professor Yoni Ryan is Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the Australian Catholic University.
Authors

01. Professor Noel Meyers1, Faculty of Business, University of Tasmania, in early 2009 will become the Head of the School of Science and Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast, a three-campus institution centred on Sippy Downs, 100 kilometres north of Brisbane.

02. Noel’s career embraces two disciplines: science and education. His work has won international, national, and institutional awards for creating engaging learning environments. His research interests include landscape ecology and using communications and multimedia technologies to guide science students’ learning. Noel’s recent work focuses on using presentation software (for example, PowerPoint and Keynote) to actively engage learners in lecture environments.

03. He is a co-author of two editions of the textbook innovatively named Biology, used by the majority of Australia’s first year science students. Noel regularly presents his work in national and international fora, with a particular focus on the first year in higher education.

04. Professor Yoni Ryan2 is Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the Australian Catholic University, a six campus national university spread over the eastern states.

05. She has extensive experience in staff development as promoting ‘student-centredness’, hence her strong interest in the first year experience. Since Yoni has a long-term interest in the use of innovative educational technologies, she has also researched and published on Web 2.0 as an emerging platform for student learning in the 21st century. She has also contributed to staff development in the area of curriculum design and development in a number of universities in Australia and the Pacific, as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa.

06. Yoni’s publications span these areas: ‘Teaching and learning in the global era’, in King (2004), The university in the global era; ‘Borderless education and business prospects’, in Evans, Haughey, Murphy (2008), International handbook of distance education; with Fitzgerald (in press), ‘Exploring the role of social software in higher education’. She has also presented at a number of the FYE Forums organised mainly through Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and associated staff.

The first year curriculum perspective

Staff development in the FYE context

07. The case studies were not written to report on the professional development requirements of staff engaged with the transition of students to their first year in higher education, the First Year Experience (FYE). Yet staff development represents an implied contributor to the success of each discipline case. To provide commentary on the staff development needs of educators contributing to students’ FYE requires us to draw inferences from the case studies themselves, combined with institutional investigations outside the case studies.

08. The case studies provided for this ALTC fellowship provide exemplars of first year curricula and teaching. Irrespective of the institutional context and discipline, each case illustrates an array of commendable achievements and practices. Cases illustrate learning environments with the potential to engage and support students’ experience of their first year of higher education. Case study authors exhibit a diverse array of personalities, discipline expertise, gender, age, and experience. What separates the cases is less significant than what unites them. While each case is different, the common thread that links the case studies is intent: intent to create strongly student-focused curricula.

09. Each author exhibits attributes and approaches we can associate with best practices. To achieve what they do, case
study authors possess a range of diverse and complementary skills. Perhaps it remains a moot point whether the authors developed these attributes on the job, whether their innate skills, capabilities, and life experience predispose them to success in these areas, or whether they had engaged with the scholarship of higher education via professional development activities to create an intentionally student-centred pedagogy. Irrespective of the stimulus for their approaches, there appears to be an alignment between authors’ capabilities and their curricular decisions for first year student experiences.

10. What is clear is the sheer breadth and depth of responsibilities that these, and other, first year coordinators carry. Their roles require leadership and management of staff expertise in: curriculum reform, change management, advocacy, mediation, mentoring, coaching, administration, and management. Case study authors combine these skills to teach and run their (usually) large first year classes.

11. These cases illustrate a number of best practice principles. We can infer the developmental needs of staff contributing to these programs through an evaluation of roles and responsibilities in best practice programs. Formal, informal, and new staff development programs are required to systematically, systemically, and strategically develop the capability and capacity of staff to fulfil diverse roles. The degree to which formal programs facilitate the development of these skills varies significantly between the institutions from which the case studies are derived. We draw this conclusion following a brief examination of each institution’s professional development activities.

12. Institutions demonstrate their support for first year coordinators to various degrees, by virtue of their commitment to and engagement with formal staff development activities. Based on the cases and information available from institutions themselves, this commentary identifies: staff for whom development in FYE would prove useful; a framework around which to focus development activities; and suggestions on future directions in staff development to support a strongly, student-focused curriculum.

Scope and context of this commentary

13. This commentary refers to staff development programs designed to enhance traditional face-to-face or online-supplemented delivery. For fully online, or distance education FYE, additional expertise and capabilities would be required as a component of development.

14. We infer aspects of how, and in what ways, staff development activities support FYE initiatives. In broad terms, this commentary focuses on the developmental needs of several categories of academic and professional staff:

- Tutors and sessional staff
- Academics
- Academic enablers — librarians, laboratory, and other support staff
- Student Services — university and faculty-based administrators.

15. The roles and responsibilities of such staff vary according to institution and learning context. However, we can identify commonalities among the skills these staff require to contribute effectively to a first year program.
Commentary on first year curriculum case studies: Staff development perspective

Staff Development Context, Roles, and Responsibilities

16. Using Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) framework for good practice in undergraduate education, it is possible to deconstruct the development required for staff contributing to first year programs. Chickering and Gamson’s work recognises a series of good practice principles in undergraduate education, including:

1. Encourage contact between students and faculty
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Encourage active learning
4. Give prompt feedback
5. Emphasise time on task
6. Communicate high expectations
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

17. We can broadly ascribe responsibility for enacting all of the principles, and particularly principles 1–4, to tutors, sessional staff, academics, and professional staff (principles 1 and 2). The last category comprises both academic enablers and administrative staff. Table 1 (at the end of this commentary) allocates responsibilities for enacting aspects of these principles among staff groupings. In addition, Table 1 contains generalisations about how various staff groups might enact these principles. This commentary focuses particularly on principles 1–4 in terms of staff development. We have adopted this approach because programs that address these issues will likely produce the immediate outcomes for learners and require relatively small changes to the practices of staff.

Administrative and Academic Enabling Staff

18. Student services staff often represent a critical interface between an institution and newly inducted first year students. While outside the scope of this commentary, this group of staff in particular may benefit from a strategic and systemic program to enhance awareness and understanding of the academic and personal challenges faced by first year learners. The second group, academic enablers, offer more than services to students. Take, for example, the role of reference librarians, who may address students’ queries about assignments. In addition to such mentoring, these staff members guide learners to find, integrate, synthesise, store, and retrieve relevant information, introducing students to the rudiments of information literacy and lifelong learning skills. In particular, these skills represent cornerstones of the graduate attributes of most university programs. Additionally, these staff members may teach into first and later year classes.

19. Communication amongst academics, sessional teaching staff, and academic enablers — such as librarians — is critical in providing an integrated and coherent approach to both assessment and aligned learning tasks. Yet examination of institutional websites of universities from which cases were drawn provide little, if any, reference to such communications. It remains likely these communications occur informally, if at all. Developing and implementing procedures and plans to communicate learning and teaching strategies amongst discipline-diverse staff represent a promising area for a new development program.

20. **Recommendation**: That foundation programs and professional development for teaching and learning focus to develop the entire ‘teaching team’ involved in FYE. Such approaches would acknowledge the expertise of each group of staff, developing and enriching those skills, while providing explicit opportunities for communication between groups (Chickering and Gamson’s principle 1).
**Tutoring/sessional staff**

21. Little attention was paid to the role of sessional/casual academic staff (‘sessional’ staff) in universities in Australia or North America until the last decade of the 20th century. Changed industrial relations regimes and financial pressures forced a dramatic increase in the proportion of sessional teaching staff in university workforces.

22. A 2008 ALTC study, *The RED Report*, estimates that between 40 and 70 per cent of first year teaching is undertaken by sessional staff, indicating the crucial role sessional and tutoring staff play in shaping and structuring the way new university learners perceive the academic environment. Examination of these case studies’ subject outlines (where available) demonstrates that sessional and tutoring staff may provide between half and three times as much contact with students as do the full-time academics.

23. Commitment to the development of sessional staff appears to vary markedly between the institutions from which the case studies have been drawn. With one exception, sessional staff development programs focus on developing skills in block mode workshops. Information available on institutional websites suggests these events represent one-off activities; that is, little follow-up or ongoing development appears to occur. Given the relatively high turnover among sessional staff (*The RED Report, 2008*) such one-off training regimes are likely to remain evaporative in effect.

24. As with professional development programs, case study authors reported great variation in whether sessional staff members were paid to undertake training. The majority of case study authors with whom we spoke reported providing training to staff on a voluntary basis. This training, like the formal university-wide programs, frequently occurred in a single block. Rarely were case study authors provided with the resources and/or support to focus on creating ongoing programs designed to be cumulative in effect, aside from weekly briefings and explanations of activities for their teaching contact, while not even all sessional staff received this type of regular support and guidance.

25. Equally, in those cases where tutoring or sessional staff undertake the majority of marking for assessment tasks, little additional funding supports these activities. Case study authors and sessional staff representatives reported circumstances where institutions provided between one and two hours of pay in return for marking, typically, the essays of 25–30 students. Procedures and protocols for the provision of this feedback varied significantly amongst case study authors. An approach to provide training and the provision of mechanisms to provide high quality feedback to students — within resource constraints — represents a high priority for the quality of first year in higher education.

26. Achieving the high-quality learning outcomes described in several cases requires training of sessional staff that goes beyond an understanding of the administrative, assessment, and content of the subject. We take this as given. The defining characteristic of a great tutor is the capacity to guide students to construct their own understandings of the core knowledge base. Highly successful tutors, such as those implicitly or explicitly acknowledged in the cases, possess a sound knowledge of the learning process. Outstanding tutors also possess the skills and capabilities to guide individuals to construct their own meaning of the materials and content. Such detailed understandings accrue from experience, intuitive understandings, and engagement with focussed professional development.

27. A systemic and systematic program to train sessional staff to guide learners would ideally occur in short duration workshops that would be spread over several weeks prior to and ongoing during the course of the semester. These workshops could usefully include development of sessional staff members’ ability to construct guiding questions in ways that allow the students to develop their own answers. Emphases in these programs would focus on mentoring and coaching students to learn about their discipline through practising the methods of thinking like experts in that particular field.
28. Feedback represents one of the primary ways that sessional staff influence the quality of students’ learning and in shaping students’ understanding. While feedback can focus students’ learning in many ways, three principal areas for development of procedures and processes for providing feedback relate to the formative, summative and overall effects feedback has on the quality of students’ learning. These represent critical components for sessional staff development programs. See, for example, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) regarding formative feedback principles and discussion of the challenges of offering summative feedback on written work; see Careless (2006) for consideration of students’ engagement with written summative feedback; and Poulos and Mahony (2008) provide a study of some of the perceptions students have developed in response to feedback. Critically, sessional and tutor training and support frequently focuses on tutorial content in place of developing the procedures and skills to ensure sessionals have the capacity to create engaging, high quality feedback.

29. Sessionals’ ongoing responsibilities include facilitating the formation and development of student groups. With increasing emphasis on group work as a necessary graduate attribute for knowledge creation and workforce participation (Haggar et al., 2002), many sessional and tutoring staff remain poorly equipped for their role in group formation, their capacity to cater for the diversity and different learning styles and strategies of group members, their ability to mediate dysfunctional groups, oversee and offer constructive feedback on group function, and to provide academic and strategic advice to assist group work.

30. A notable feature, either implicitly or explicitly noted in each case study, is the varying degrees of success with which the sessional staff achieve these outcomes. Where group work forms a substantive component of the assessment for a first year subject, training and development to create and maintain effective group function would provide a central component of the development program. Academics, on whom the responsibility for sessional staff development largely falls, require expertise and capabilities in these same areas so that they can guide sessional staff to develop these skills.

31. Recommendation: That staff be explicitly trained in techniques that stimulate effective feedback practices, and productive team skills (Chickering and Gamson’s principles 2, 3 and 4).

FULL-TIME ACADEMIC STAFF

32. Full-time academic staff carry the broadest range of roles and responsibilities. Case study authors allude to the range of skills they use to coordinate first year transition subjects. Coordinators of these subjects need to exhibit:

- leadership
- administrative proficiency and capabilities to enrich the expertise of sessional, professional, and enabling staff
- management know-how
- teaching expertise
- curriculum design experience
- the capability to create authentic assessment.

33. Each case study author demonstrated expertise in several, if not all, of these areas.

34. Examination of the staff development activities currently available at the...
institutions from which the case studies were drawn identifies a significant gap in training for one or more of the skills successful first year coordinators need to exhibit.

35. In particular, formal and advertised development programs appeared rarely, if at all, in the following areas: leadership; change management; management; and administrative responsibilities more broadly. Development of academic staff members’ capabilities in these areas represents an important element for continued reform and refinement of the first year learning environment.

36. Examination of the staff development activities at each institution emphasises the absence of a formal program designed to guide, develop, and enhance the expertise of all staff involved in the first year transition experience. The majority of activities, where they occur, focus on workshops of short duration. In the majority of cases, staff will find the benefits of programs delivered in a short space of time to be evaporative in effect. While graduate certificates of higher education in university teaching occur at each of the institutions from which case studies have been drawn, formal and ongoing development programs specifically targeted to enrich the expertise of staff contributing to the first year program remain rare.

37. Discussions with case study authors suggest informal networks may represent the predominant means of coaching and mentoring new initiates into the role of FYE coordinators for subjects of study. Such developmental activities remain largely invisible outside an institution, and without formal awareness of this by all staff, such programs may remain invisible to some staff within institutions.

38. The development of formal programs that strategically, systemically, and systematically address issues of the development of the staff contributing to the first year program require priority and engaged institutional support. Preliminary steps could include formal identification of the roles and responsibilities of first year coordinators. Such training would emphasise issues of leadership, administrative expertise, management, curriculum and assessment design, and teaching expertise. Once the needs of individuals and groups of individuals have been identified, programs tailored to address those needs could be developed to enhance the capacity of academics, professionals, academic enablers, and administrative staff.

39. Ten years’ of FYE data (Krause et al., 2005) demonstrate that perhaps the single most important defining characteristic of students’ experience of higher education is the degree to which they believe the institution and its staff care about and contribute to the quality of their learning and well-being. It remains likely that the capacity to increase the expertise of staff involved with first year transitioning students confers a flow-on benefit; namely, students’ enhanced perceptions of the quality of their learning and university experience. As university funding is increasingly contingent on performance measures derived from student evaluations of teaching quality, students’ perceptions of quality have become as important as their actual learning outcomes.

40. The creation of tailored staff development programs represents an investment in student retention, engagement, and institutional reputation among alumni and the broader community.
Table 1: Training activities designed to facilitate the expertise of staff to enact Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) principles of good practice in undergraduate education amongst sessional, academic, academic enablers, and administrative staff. Completed cells represent areas of responsibility and expertise required to emulate the exemplary practice of case study authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Sessional</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Academic enablers</th>
<th>Administrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourages contact between students and faculty*</td>
<td>Engage students in academic dialogue in ways that support and nurture interest and enthusiasm for the discipline and academic endeavours more broadly.</td>
<td>Design, develop, and contribute to academic and social interactions between students and staff. Techniques: Role models, approachability and engagement with learners. Facilitates opportunities for social engagement.</td>
<td>Refer student queries to appropriate academic staff. Identify and recommend activities to facilitate formal and informal contact between staff and students.</td>
<td>Refer student queries to appropriate academic staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students</td>
<td>Effective team building, mediation and performance enhancement capabilities.</td>
<td>Design and implementation of programs to facilitate the formation and development of cohorts of learners. Facilitates the development and maintenance of Tinto’s ‘learning cohorts’ – comprising small groups of mutually supportive learners.</td>
<td>Social support. Academic support. Contributing to the identification of ‘learning cohorts’ with similar interests or facing similar challenges.</td>
<td>Creates processes that facilitate the development of Tinto’s ‘learning cohorts’ of mutually supportive students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages active learning</td>
<td>Questioning techniques to guide and scaffold students’ construction of understanding.</td>
<td>Design curricula, assessment and teaching strategies that are authentic, engaging, and require students to apply, analyse, evaluate and create new understandings. Model discipline-based modes of thinking, identifying problems and solving those problems. Models approaches and skills necessary to complete assessment tasks and achieve unit learning outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives prompt feedback</td>
<td>Provide constructive and timely feedback to guide learners and learning.</td>
<td>Develop processes and procedures to provide effective feedback to learners. Provide multiple sources of feedback to learners, including in class, in tutorials, face-to-face, online, and one-on-one in order to shape students’ understandings.</td>
<td>Develop systems to facilitate the delivery of timely and detailed feedback to learners and academics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Chickering and Gamson’s term ‘faculty’ remains synonymous with academic and sessional staff.
Table 1: Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Sessional</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Academic enablers</th>
<th>Administrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasises time on task</td>
<td>Reinforce messages of academics — emphasise relevance of information for learners</td>
<td>Through the development of curriculum resources, teaching practices, assessment tasks and curriculum designs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses criteria, performance standards and exemplars to demonstrate outcomes required to achieve particular outcomes</td>
<td>Creates criteria, performance standards, and exemplars to demonstrate approaches and skills learners can enact to achieve particular outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasises linkage between lecture content, tutorial activities, and requirements to achieve particular learning outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates high expectations</td>
<td>Focus on communicating academic standards and expectations</td>
<td>Focus on articulating and describing academic standards to learners, sessional staff members, academics, support, and administrative staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand, target and encourage student motivation</td>
<td>Creating shared understandings with learners of academic standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understand, target and encourage student motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respects diverse talents and ways of learning</td>
<td>Understands, caters for, and supports students' diverse learning approaches, strategies and styles</td>
<td>Creates curricula and assessment tasks that allow students the opportunity to express their creativity, capacity for synthesis and analysis in multiple ways</td>
<td>Provides services and guidance in ways that allow students to focus their diverse talents</td>
<td>Collaborates with academics to identify students' diverse learning needs and capabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Further resources developed under this ALTC Senior Fellowship, Articulating a Transition Pedagogy, are available at http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design