

Students as Researchers: Breaking the Binds

James W. Bell and Annette Patterson

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James W Bell, School of Education, Murdoch University, Perth, WA.

Annette Patterson, School of Education, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld.

Abstract

Education students in foundations units at Australian universities are in a double bind. Currently these students must understand a broad range of theoretical materials relating to issues of philosophy, sociology and social justice in macro and micro educational settings. This information is complex, often abstract and has sometimes been criticised by students as "interesting but irrelevant" to their future work as teachers. Additionally the learning processes of these students are being constrained by increasingly limited teaching periods with increasing demands for the development of practical skills.

This paper explores the development and implementation of two undergraduate foundation units from two Australian Universities which integrate the theoretical material of previous units with grounded research based assignment work. These units are informed by the view that teaching professionals are researching professionals. This paper investigates the challenges involved in developing research based units for undergraduate students and evaluates the effectiveness of these units in breaking this double bind.

The Board of Examiners

At the end of a lengthy Board of Examiners meeting at Murdoch University the Divisional Executive Officer for the division of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education spoke saying that the Divisional Executive Dean wanted to know why there was a unusually high percentage of Distinctions and High Distinctions for the unit *Schools in Context*. As one of the coordinators for the unit, and the only one in attendance at this meeting, it was up to me (James Bell) to respond. "Yes, there is a real problem with this unit. It seems that students are able to understand and work with the conceptual material of the unit in ways which students in the old Sociology of Education never were. It seems as if students are learning in ways they previously did not."

The sarcastic tone of my response signalled a number of issues. Beyond my general irritation at a normalised approach to devising grade distributions and my concern that overly

bureaucratic and centralised management structures are attempting to micro manage university teaching in trivial and even dangerous ways, the executive officer's challenge from the dean underscored my own concern at the high proportion of Distinctions and High Distinctions. Was it possible that over forty percent of students merited these high marks?

I have never been known as someone who inflates their grades, this is likewise not the reputation of the other unit tutors. During marking meetings we wondered ourselves whether we had been involved in grade inflation when we assessed the distribution of marks, particularly the final marks which were being questioned. Upon re-reading student work from a variety of levels, however, we were satisfied that the marks were merited and we made the collective choice not to normalise these marks.

If high marks for unit work are a sign of good teaching and unit design then it looked as if the development of this unit was something of a success. High marks for unit work may also signal the failure of the unit to fit within the normalising structures of university work and, thus, may indicate faulty practice. I argue that both of these perspectives are flawed because they are based on a primarily technical approach to unit evaluation which relies on an "outer dialectic" of evaluation, an approach criticised by Willis (1988) as viewing human learning potential in fundamentally rationalistic ways - ways which overlook the complex potential of learning processes.

This paper moves between investigating the theoretical framework for redesigning two sociology of education units and subjects for deeper professional relevance and understanding and presenting the practical problems and opportunities involved in this work. By using an outcomes driven approach we have 'revised' our students as researchers from the initial stages of their programs.

The Educational Context

We are living in fractured times, times in which dependably "making sense of the world" seems increasingly beyond the abilities of politicians, social theorists, economists, let alone 'average' citizens. Yet this is the world which our children are inheriting and educational sites are one of the significant places (settings positioned to develop these critical abilities) in which children can develop the skills for reading this world. While the outlook for an increasingly democratic global community appears bleak there can be no movement toward greater social justice without a critical commitment to this possibility. In teacher education it is often the one or two mandatory units in sociology of education which bear the major part of the program's responsibility for helping future teachers prepare for this challenging work.

Since the Dawkins White Paper (Dawkins, 1988) pressures to "rationalise" university offerings has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of sociological and philosophical offerings for students, particularly in professional schools in Australian Universities (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1995). At the same time the need for critically competent and aware teachers has never been greater given the challenges of market globalisation in end-of-century advanced capitalism. Connell (1997, 1) has put the challenge to educators in this way:

This [period] compels us to consider a[n] agenda which involves the quest for social justice in ways that transcend the distributive paradigm in favour of putting the quality of social relationships at the fore. In a period of such profound and unsettling social and educational change, it is important to keep under scrutiny the role of intellectual workers in the field of education, including those in faculties of education. Documentation, reticulation, pioneering and critique can be counted as among their most fundamental tasks and opportunities.

Such challenges have been stated by a variety of educational workers over a number of decades (the work of Lather, McLaren, Apple, Giroux often set such challenges). By accepting such challenges in our university teaching practices we invite a host of problems and possibilities. This is the position from which the following evaluation of unit development begins.

Problems with Theoretical Sociology for Professionals

Students in professional areas have different sorts of needs from students who are in primarily theoretical programs. Students in professional programs must be able to make explicit connections between theoretical understandings and their professional work at local sites. Further, universities are increasingly aware of the necessity of tailoring their offerings to the needs of their students. These moves, initially prompted by the Dawkins' White Paper, have become no less insistent in the recent initiatives designed to increase competition, accompanied by an insistence on the need for public accountability, evident in attempts to 'rank' universities and to detail the responses of their clientele in publications such as 'The Good Universities Guide' (Ashenden & Milligan, 1997).

The criteria for employment in sociologically grounded professional work demands that prospective employees understand the relationships between the abstract theory of their training and the practical applications of these theories. Further, these professional workers are increasingly expected to work as professionals on teams rather than work as isolated individuals.

An initial problem encountered when investigating tertiary topics in professional sociological areas is that a majority have been developed along content driven approaches which fail to forefront the desired outcomes and abilities developed through the learning process. Content driven approaches tend to support a misleadingly linear concept development-and-then-critique models which are unable to provide the skills development and grounded theoretical understandings possible within outcomes driven approaches. Outcomes approaches often utilise experience based modes of delivery and are frequently built from the end to the beginning, a reversal of approach from traditional content driven models.

A further problem of content driven courses is that they generally fail to provide assessment and evaluation which are appropriate to the professional goals of the programs mentioned above. Some other predictable limitations of approaches grounded in content are a lack of teamwork development, a lack of exposure to and application of relevant research methodologies (particularly in the early stages of training or as a commitment embedded throughout the educational program) and the previously noted workplace issue of an inadequate training in the transformation of theoretical understandings into practical abilities for these professionals.

Tertiary Contexts in Professional Sociology

A traditional approach to teaching these theoretical subjects is to present a body of theory and after a reasonable competency has been achieved proceed to a critical approach with these theoretical models. It is a linear model and has a rationality which assumes that theoretical competency is "acquired" at a certain point and then "critique" is performed once this acquisition has occurred. There is scope to build in new theoretical competencies but it is an approach which reinforces a false dichotomy between theory and practice.

Within this model prior understanding and engagement with the topics by students tends to not be recognised. Further, the concept development-and-then-critique model fails to demonstrate that professional settings provide an intensified space in which workers must

be practicing professionals while evaluating and critically developing responses to the problems they encounter. It was a misrecognition of the intensified conditions of these work sites which led, in part, to universities reducing the practicum requirements of their courses. This was particularly the case in old teachers colleges which went to a university model and then reduced their substantial practicum experience. This has been similarly experienced in nursing programs in which the practicum model has been eroded in favour of a more detached conceptual approach. These processes have served to separate theoretical understandings from the workplaces in which they would be applied.

In nursing programs which have been shifting their pedagogy from hospital based learning to university programs, teachers of nursing have been asked to valorise abstract and theoretical understanding at the expense of more grounded experiential training in intensified nursing workplaces. Teaching programs went through these transformations earlier but have since been re-evaluating the need for increased practical experiences before moving into their professional teaching. This has led to programs being overstuffed with theoretical requirements as well as increased requirements for practical and on-site training. The problem of finding some reasonable balance between theoretical coursework and practical training is growing. Few courses successfully combine both.

Developing a Grounded Theoretical Approach

We began from a perspective which assumed the necessity of a transformed subjectivity for workers in professional sites such as teaching, nursing, law, medicine, social work, counselling and tourism, among others. Workers in these fields need to not only be aware of current theoretical models which might impact on the work they do but must also be able to make the links between these models and their professional practice. In other words, these professionals must be able to ground their formal understandings within responsive professional activity. In many cases this requires that neophytes in professional settings both develop their broader understanding of the field and challenge their personal positioning within the field.

Additionally, contemporary debates within social theory make it difficult for responsible practitioners to find their way between personally reflective practice and critically grounded action. This mirrors the impasse experienced in current debates in social theory. Poststructuralist accounts of social reality often overlook (or fail to account for) the ethical implications of the contingency of all contexts. This failure has led to the legitimate criticism that poststructuralist accounts of social reality, regardless of their critical strength, are left open to a debilitating value relativism which effectively eliminates imperatives for social action. Critical dialogical theory, while powerfully invested in questions of social change toward an enhanced social project, tends to lack (or fail to acknowledge) the critical power of poststructuralist critiques of reality. This failure tends to lead critical theorists to devise social agendas which do not adequately account for the complex interweaving of social and political contingency.

Students teachers in sociology of education courses, for example, are traditionally asked to become aware of oppression, wherever it may lurk, particularly in school settings. They are asked to conceptualise along the lines of social division, or the "oppressed other", of race and ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, and so on. Students are also asked to think of themselves as "social agents" who are able to freely interact in their world in ways which will effect social change. Unit and subject materials provide readings which both evidence social division and alienating school practices, and which present alternative or challenging models for educational activity. After a traditional lecture course it is not surprising that students respond in evaluations that "all this theory is fine, but what are we really to do?" This approach, whether grounded primarily in a critical theory framework or in a poststructuralist

framework, has left students floating. Many either find themselves unable to see how their developing understandings can make a difference in the world or commit themselves to the position that attempting to make a difference is a flawed goal given the absolute contingency of all knowledge and truth claims.

There are, however, theoretical positionings which can inform coursework toward developing student awareness of social issues and then challenge students to position themselves as agents and as teaching professionals who are both socially constructed and constructing, who are personally reflective and capable of critical reflexivity. Steele (1997, 8) describes this complimentary subject positioning in this way:

A good way to get hold of how language, ethics, and the self are connected is to think about the conflicts in daily life between understanding someone as an agent (what I call a first-/second- person account) and understanding him or her as a constructed subject (what I call a third-person account). In first-person accounts we seek to articulate the subject's intentions, background assumptions, and the vocabularies used to constitute personal or community identities. In third-person accounts, we redescribe the subject's language or action in terms that do not respect the integrity of the subject's self-constitution.

Steele rather effectively presents the conundrum faced by students in social theory units who are asked not only to become critical readers of research but also to be personally aware and responsible for their professional actions given their study. When students and teachers are asked to operate from both a first-/second- person perspective and a third-person perspective they begin to develop and enter into the kinds of intersubjective critical spaces which affirm personal and social existential experience and which develop socially critical awareness and understanding. The approach attempts to position participants in multiple subject positions without disempowering them from action. It attempts to reaffirm understandings of social and political contingencies while providing avenues for social change within specific professional contexts.

Cochran-Smith (1995) takes the position that responsible teaching must be oriented to political and social understandings and practices. She advocates a classroom model which incorporates the collaborative efforts of prospective teachers, experienced teachers and prospective teachers in "communities of learners" who work together to develop responsive pedagogies. These communities are envisioned as "generative" and ones which challenge the partners to both investigate and question their assumptions about their professional contexts. It then asks that they develop informed understandings of the cultural complexities of the communities they will teach. It is through these engagements that a more responsive pedagogy might be developed and enacted. Cochran-Smith privileges an "inquiry-centred" approach over traditional "plan-centred" approaches.

Ladson-Billings (1995) signals the problem that pedagogy is often overlooked within approaches to social justice development in teacher education programs. She takes the position that responsible social activity in schools, her site of professional activity, must be informed by a rigorous locating oneself both within their theoretical framework and real workspaces. She states: "Thus, I have attempted to search for theoretical grounding that acknowledges my standpoint and simultaneously forces me to problematize it (1995, 471)."

Opportunities in experiential learning.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (see also, Sims, 1990; Evans, 1992, 1994) conceives learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation

of experience. This process begins with experience and involves students in a cycle of performance (short term adaptations to immediate circumstances), learning, (longer term mastery of generic classes of situations) and development (long term adaptation to the world).

While the Kolb experiential learning cycle is a technical approach to curriculum development it is open to an intersubjective approach to students, teachers and communities. Kolb's experiential learning cycle encourages an approach which foregrounds the aims and objectives of the unit before devising an assessment method. An experiential learning model focuses on learning which occurs as students engage in a variety of learning processes. This "grounded" approach values content and theoretical understandings but develops these through carefully constructed learning activities. The approach helps to collapse the false dichotomy between theory and practice (a dichotomy which has been reified through pedagogical practices in the west.). This model requires the development of a critical reflexivity on the part of students, it is a meta-cognitive approach in which students must be able to reflect upon their own learning as they engage in a variety of experiential processes.

The collaborative challenge.

Individualised learning models form the dominant paradigm in western formal educational systems. They are grounded in assumptions of intellectual autonomy, the individual "ownership" of academic (and other) work and the primacy of individual achievement in educational settings. Individualised learning models are in use when students are asked to learn and achieve on their own. These models can be informed through an understanding of different learning styles but generally are hallmarked by a single mode of delivery. Formal lectures, independent reading and analysis are forms of delivery which correspond to these models. Any assessment style which asks that students work independently fit this model. The individually written critical essay or research project and the formal examination are common to this approach. It can be beneficial in that a strong degree of independence is encouraged for the learner and there is a sense of student ownership of learning. The benefit for teachers is that it is relatively easy to assess student work in an equitable way.

There have been a number of problems, however, related to these individualised approaches ranging from experiences of student isolation and alienation, both from the course material and the learning process, to a reinforcement of linear approaches to problem solving and research. Individualised approaches paradoxically fail to cater for the needs of culturally diverse student communities. In addition individualised approaches are not modelled on the professional contexts in which students will eventually work. This is a serious problem within programs of study designed for students entering the intensified field of professional work.

Collaborative learning models have been developed to address the limitations of more individualised pedagogies. These models emphasise learning which occurs within group processes. Collaborative learning environments ask that students be responsible for creating understandings and skills with other class members. Each collaborative group develops their own approach to the subject matter and progresses organically with assessment tasks. The approach demands the development and facilitation of groups working skills. Collaborative approaches work well in project work situations where the collaborative groups must come together as a working team, define the roles and goals of individuals within the groups, achieve the work as set out and then present their findings in a unified manner. This work can be enhanced through processes of critical reflection on the part of group members involved. It also seems to value and incorporate prior student learning and skills abilities.

Assessment can be a difficult issue in collaborative modes. While it may be important to provide as single grade which all members share, it may also be important to provide mechanisms for students to assess their own and others members' contributions to the group process. Self and peer assessment provides a way of evaluating students' critical abilities with content material and it encourages assessment which "overlays" learning as students revisit course content from different perspectives. Students are more able within collaborative approaches to learn in depth than in individualised approaches (Candy & Crebert, 1990; Resnick, 1987). The development of team approaches to problem-solving and research tasks is an important skill for most professionals. Since it demands flexibility and understanding of a variety of approaches to learning and problem solving, more substantial project work is possible than with individualised approaches.

It encourages lateral and alternative approaches to problem solving and research and is modelled on actual professional working contexts. Collaboration reduces the sense of isolation experienced by students studying within individualised learning environments and allows them to focus on developing process skills. The latter is viewed as a possible disadvantage of the approach since it may not encourage a breadth of content understandings. Another possible disadvantage is that the requirement for collaboration sometimes poses difficulties for students in finding times to meet and some students may be disadvantaged by other obligations.

Exploring outcomes driven approaches

The more familiar approach to many teachers involves content driven course development. This is both a traditional and a conservative approach and therefore it tends to be efficient and cost effective. It requires limited materials and few if any innovations on the part of teachers or students. A course is conceptualised by thinking through the content which is to be presented or "transmitted" to students. Students are generally seen as passive recipients of this content and succeed to the extent that they are able to demonstrate their representation of content materials to the course instructors. Freire (1970) has unforgettably named this 'banking pedagogy'. The approach is exemplified in courses which progress in a linear fashion in which lectures and readings form the most significant portion of learning materials. Assessment tends to be traditionally developed and may include essays, research reports and examinations. It is simple to develop and assess and provides a familiar and "comfortable" format for students although, interestingly, is often criticised by students as "interesting but irrelevant" to their future professional work (Academic Services Unit, 1994-1996).

During the past decade outcomes driven approaches to course development have become popular within education systems catering for primary/elementary and secondary or high school education in Australia and elsewhere (Kissane and Willis, 1995; Brady, 1996). Outcomes approaches begin with questions of what is to be learned within a unit and all further unit development follows on from there. Once the outcomes (that is, what students can do at the end of a unit) have been identified, then assessment tasks are developed which will guide those outcomes. Unit content materials -- readings, lectures, workshop activities are among a range of options -- are selected and developed which will allow for the successful implementation of these assessment tasks. The approach foregrounds students' and workplace needs and can be linked to other institutional requirements such as 'graduate qualities' set out by some universities and by some accreditation boards.

Assessment tasks are crucial in the successful development of course design as they are tied to the learning outcomes. This is sometimes referred to as 'authentic pedagogy' (Sullivan, 1997; Newmann, 1995). When a desired learning outcome or objective has been identified the assessment task provides the vehicle through which the learning is mediated.

Assessment tasks tend to vary greatly within this approach and tend to be continuous and developmental through the run of the unit. This can overburden already overworked staff if the number of assessment tasks is not carefully monitored. It is important that the assessment tasks are appropriately contextualised in terms of the requirements of the profession for particular qualities or competencies so the approach relies on teacher creativity in finding ways to design outcomes that will combine a number of linked requirements. Responsibility for learning is shared and rests with both the teacher and the students. The requirement to link outcomes to professional contexts means that assessment tasks tend to "make sense" to students. They understand what is expected of them in explicit terms from the outset of the course.

These broad frameworks for teaching and learning in tertiary settings informed our approach to developing a grant proposal for the Commonwealth funded Committee of University Teaching and Staff Development scheme. We set ourselves the challenge of redeveloping the existing *Sociology of Education* units and subjects from each university into ones driven by experience based and project learning. These units were further informed with an outcomes based approach as described above. The following is an account of how this worked on two campuses, Murdoch University in Western Australia and James Cook University (JCU) in Queensland.

The Murdoch Challenge

Two major goals of the previous Murdoch University *Sociology of Education* unit were to help students research the populations they would teach and to understand from a critical perspective the institutional constraints and possibilities of their future work environments. These goals were achieved through teaching reading-based research skills and essay writing skills which involved synthesis of diverse theoretical perspectives and critical evaluations of their potential usefulness in practical settings. The unit assessment consisted of the standard three hour weekly contact and the assessment ritual of a tutorial presentation, a major essay and a final exam. The unit had a sound record of introducing students to issues relevant to the populations they would teach but did not provide experiential bases for learning or working with relevant communities. Furthermore, the unit did not allow students to develop a perspective of informed agency given the sociological problems they addressed and neither did it prepare students for their role as critical researchers in their field.

The JCU Challenge

Two major goals of the earlier James Cook University unit *The Context of Education* were to 'familiarise students with selected sociological theories of identity, society, schooling and change' and to 'examine forms and practices of Australian education, particularly schooling, which are both socially-constructed and constructive of Australian-ness'. (Faculty of Education Student Handbook, 1996, p.99.). As with the Murdoch unit, *Sociology of Education*, these goals were achieved through teaching reading-based research skills and essay writing skills. The assessment consisted of a 2,000 word assignment which required students to demonstrate an understanding of the theoretical perspectives covered through the set readings and to critically evaluate their usefulness for explaining the socially constructed nature of Australian-ness. The assignment, worth 40% of the total assessment requirements, was followed by an end-of-semester examination comprising the remaining 60% of assessment. The unit, offered as a second year foundation subject, worked well within the four year Bachelor of Education degree program in that it provided a solid theoretical basis for students' later studies. It did not provide experiential bases for developing team work competencies or for working with relevant communities. And, as a soundly based but abstracted theoretical approach, it did not encourage students to develop

an experientially informed perspective on sociological problems related to schooling and teaching.

Practising Theory: *Schools in Context* at Murdoch

Schools in Context was developed by Associate Professor Jan Currie and me (James Bell) for an inaugural run in first semester 1997. The unit is offered at second year level, within the one year Graduate Diploma program and the three year Bachelor of Education degree program, for students preparing to graduate as teachers in the Primary and Secondary sectors. It runs as an on-campus offering over a 10 week semester. The unit was offered both externally and internally and as a four point unit for all but the Primary Graduate Diploma students who were offered a three point version. The unit provides forty hours contact in total across the semester. In 1998 the unit was also provided as an on-line offering for each of the four modes.

The unit was developed not from lecture series and reading and then on to assessment, as are many units, but was developed from our list of learning aims and objectives. The assessment tasks were then devised in a response to these aims and objectives. It was only after the development of the general principles of assessment that the lecture sequence, workshop activities and tutorial program was arranged. This is the first time I have been involved in designing a unit from an outcomes approach, but I have been impressed at how well form and function of unit elements have worked together.

The unit assessment is comprised of a critical autobiography, a tutorial presentation with a reflective paper the following week, an individual ethnography paper, a group ethnography presentation and written reflections on the ethnography work. The teaching schedule is comprised of a four hour contact week which includes a mass lecture, a workshop session devoted to developing process skills with the associated content material, a workshop session devoted to developing research methodologies and troubleshooting problems students encounter with their ethnographies and a tutorial session devoted to engaging with the weekly topics of the unit.

Our proposal for unit development stated that the new units would neither increase the workload of the students nor of the academic staff involved in the unit. The assignment work was devised as both "continuous" and "developmental". This means that there is on-going assessment throughout the semester and that each semester component builds on work previously done. While assessment work which is continuous and developmental may be pedagogically sound increasing student understanding and awareness of unit issues, it is time consuming for both students and staff. One senior staff member tutoring in the unit has continually dropped by my office chanting: "Paper and exam, paper and exam." Clearly this more traditional assessment profile would help keep overly burdened staff members from wanting to tear their hair out at certain times of the semester, but would effectively gut the program we had developed.

When thinking through student learning and outcomes it seemed that Murdoch students would necessarily gain particular process skills by devising a small research project, carrying it through and reporting on it on a chosen sociological topic. There was a concern however that overall content understanding of the unit material could be compromised by this approach. Since we had taken an outcomes approach to unit development this sort of problem had to be addressed more from the perspective of the unit development than from the perspective of student failings (Newmann & Welhage, 1995). At Murdoch we accepted that content understandings may be compromised in favour of developing the process skills in which students would be able to identify and succeed as novice researchers in a professional context. This may not be an appropriate compromise in other settings. We

expected that the second required sociological unit would develop those content understandings and critical abilities. This strategy necessarily depends upon a team approach to overall course design within the institution. Our outcomes driven approach foregrounded student needs as well as helped to encourage more collaborative unit development in other areas at Murdoch.

Practising theory - *Contexts of Education* at JCU

Contexts of Education was developed by Dr Ruth Smith and me for an inaugural run in second semester 1997. This is a foundation unit, offered at second year level, within the four year Bachelor of Education degree program for students preparing to graduate as teachers in the Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary sectors. It runs as an on-campus offering over a 13 week semester. Contact comprises two, one hour lectures followed by a one hour tutorial which provides thirty-nine hours contact in total across the semester. In 1998 the lectures were supplemented by notes posted on a web site and tutorials were supplemented by student access to tutors via email. Enrolments are around the four hundred mark on two campuses, Townsville and Cairns. In most years the proportion is three quarters in Townsville (280 - 300 students) and one quarter in Cairns (80 - 100 students).

The unit was developed from a series of expected student outcomes linked with assessment requirements rather than from a lecture series, complemented by a set of readings and then on to assessment. By beginning with desirable student outcomes we were able to generate the general principles of assessment that the lecture sequence and tutorial presentations supported. The unit was developed within the wider institutional contexts of budgets, availability of staffing, levels of co-operation from schools in the local community, with a view to conserving teaching resources in a School of Education that was in a contracting economic mode. This period of contraction impacted on the face-to-face contact arrangements in that it was not possible in the opinion of School and Faculty executives to move to a combination of a one hour lecture followed by tutorials and workshops. The two hour lecture by one hour tutorial was identified as the cheapest staffing measure available.

In many respects the subject developed at JCU is the 'bread and dripping' version of an 'ideal' 'strawberries and cream' unit developed at Murdoch. That is, it is resource lean, in line with current budget requirements and resource availability. It therefore provides a less adventurous and intense experience for students. It also places less strain on teaching staff in terms of demands on their time and this is an important factor given the numbers of students currently enrolled in the undergraduate program at JCU. The cost of this approach is in a higher fail rate in this unit (JCU: 22%; Murdoch: 6%) and in lower completion rates for the degree program. Approximately one third of undergraduate students enrolled in the first year of the Bachelor of Education at JCU complete the four year degree.

Outcomes for the unit were designed in accordance with the requirements of the overall degree program and with the professional requirements of the state. In Queensland, the Board of Teacher Registration provides standards and requirements for professional certification. In addition, graduate qualities designed at JCU provided a guide to thinking about outcomes. But outcomes also need to be tailored to the particular requirements of the group of students studying the subject. Approximately 18% of students enrolled in *Contexts of Education* are graduates who are completing a two year Graduate Bachelor of Education. Another 15% are mature age students. The remaining two thirds of the 400 hundred students enrolled, are in the first semester of their second year since leaving school. The profile of a typical student enrolled in this unit then is someone who is a female (76%) who is 18 or 19 years of age (60%), who is studying full-time (90%); and who is not from a non-English speaking background (87%); who has not identified him or herself as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (99%). The student is possibly living away from home, and probably

from a rural or regional town in the North Queensland region, and is likely to be within the first generation of her family to enter university. She may have successfully competed in first year the pre-requisite units for *Contexts of Education*. (the pre-requisite is loosely interpreted and often not applied due to the vagaries of Handbook presentation and uneven staff development on enrolment advice). The two pre-requisite units are *Introduction to Education* and *Education and Cultural Diversity*. In these and other respects then, the unit as it is presented at JCU is intended to meet a slightly different set of demands from those at Murdoch where the institutional constraints and student needs are differently configured.

The unit assessment is comprised of a group tutorial presentation accompanied by a set of 'resources' prepared by the students to support the presentation (10%); an individual ethnography accompanied by an analytical paper (40%); and a three hour, examination consisting of one essay question and twelve short answer questions on the content of the readings and the lectures (50%). Students can take the textbook for the subject into the examination room. The assessments did not include the opportunity for peer evaluation as described for the Murdoch model although that is planned for 1999. As Sherman (1995) notes 'students "authentically" construct knowledge from their experiences within a social context of peer influence" (p.1) and it is this ideal of "authenticity" that outcomes based design, collaborative learning and peer evaluations informed by critical reflective practice attempt to achieve (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Sullivan, 1997).

The teaching schedule is comprised of three hours contact per week over a 13 week semester. Two of those hours are 'mass' lectures with 300 students in a 500 seat capacity lecture theatre in Townsville with one lecturer, and 80 - 100 students in a lecture hall in Cairns with another lecturer. Although the lectures were scheduled to run at the same time in Cairns and Townsville we did not take advantage of the video link facilities available on each site to team teach in lecture mode. One reason for this was the poor quality of the sessions we had observed. Both audio and visual quality was lacking, and even the limited opportunities for personal interaction offered in a large lecture hall were absent. Both lecturers prepared the lectures using PowerPoint, projected directly from laptops at each site. The lecture materials were jointly prepared by the Cairns and Townsville lecturers working mostly by phone and email to plan and design the lecture slides. Students at both sites used the same unit Prospectus and text book. Students at both sites wrote the same examination which was set by both lecturers in consultation with tutors.

The assignment work was designed with a view to developing team work skills and collaboration; to providing research experience in a school site with a view to assisting students to make explicit connections between the theory papers read for the unit and their professional work in schools; and to familiarising students with a range of sociological viewpoints on education.

The differences between the JCU focus and the Murdoch focus should be immediately apparent. Students at JCU were not subjected to constant monitoring and feedback on their work. They received limited personal assistance to prepare for the group tutorial presentation and for the interview task conducted in schools. They were provided with structured print-based assistance through the Prospectus which contained criteria sheets, marking guides, letters of introduction to schools and other necessary paperwork for ethics clearance. In addition, two lecture hours were devoted to explaining the procedures and processes involved in conducting the school-based ethnography. Both the group tutorial presentation and the school based ethnography were time consuming for students as they required organisational and team work skills, and a level of expertise with electronic technology to record data and prepare materials. Furthermore, the tutorial groups were large with 25 students per group at JCU (16 at Murdoch). This combined with the distinctly impersonal delivery mode of one lecturer with hundreds of students resulted in students

having to assume responsibility for their own learning. The intensified regime of student production of work and peer and tutor feedback conducted at Murdoch was missing from the JCU model. Is possible that as a consequence of these factors the JCU students did not enjoy the successes of their Murdoch counterparts which is reflected in the higher failure rate and more 'normal' distribution of grades at JCU.

***Schools in Context* and Student Experience (Murdoch)**

In the beginning of this paper I signalled a high proportion of High Distinctions and Distinctions. The breakdown of marks for the 159 internal mode students by percentage is as follows:

High Distinction 15.2%

Distinction 31.7%

Credit 33.1%

Pass 11.9%

Fail 6.6%

This is significantly higher than the university average of 20% - 30% in the upper two grade categories. It is difficult to justify these marks as grade inflation given double marking procedures and on-going tutors meetings.

Student feedback for *Schools in Context* has been mixed, particularly given different times of the term. Students have generally felt overwhelmed in the first sessions when they learn that they will be involved in a small school-based research project with team members they have not yet met and being required to achieve principal approval for the work, as well as agreement from teachers, students and parents.

There were 159 students in the internal mode of the unit and the statistics that are presented are from the 59 students who took part in the unit evaluation.

The presentation of group ethnographies was daunting for some and one of our tutors received a lengthy letter of concern. Here is an excerpt:

I have personally long been worried about the point of an auditorium group presentation in the context of what we are training to become. Because all I want to do is get my qualification and get out there and teach I haven't previously expressed this concern, my motivation being I need to do it to get my points to get my qualification. However I have since discovered that for many students the prospect of an auditorium presentation to a company of strangers (which is what those outside our tute groups are) is creating a great deal of stress. That it doesn't particularly daunt me is irrelevant: it would be good to clarify the point behind the exercise so that those who are affected know that this added stress is not an undue one. (Mistakes in original.)

While this student's concerns were noted and addressed in a workshop session (the workshop sessions contain a variety of structured elements but are designed to flexibly address issues which arise throughout the work of the term) the aims of publicly presenting the research findings were part of the explicit unit aims. The quote also demonstrates some of the student resistance to this intensive pedagogical style which demands a possible

discomforting level of self-reflexivity. Many students were unsure of presenting and many had never presented to a group of thirty to forty others.

What has been remarkable about the student presentations is how professional they are in terms of both the presentation style and the developing understanding of theoretical concepts of the unit. A problem which arose in the evaluations is that the students were unaware of how well they were understanding the material. While 57.6% of students reported they were "highly" or "extremely" interested in the unit only 27.1% reported that they were "highly" confident of having done well and only 1.7% were "extremely" confident of having done well. 61.0% were "moderately" confident in having done well. Thus student perceptions of having done well did not mirror their overall grade results.

The unit offers four credit points and consisted of four contact hours. There was a one hour lecture and a one hour general workshop for films or learning activities. This was followed by a one hour workshop in which project groups met to problem solve and to develop their research agendas. At some other time in the week, students met in their tutorial groups of sixteen or fewer member for an hour. In these tutorials students made presentations and worked through unit issues. The four hours of contact is an hour greater than most other four point units in the Institute of Education and students made it clear their sense of being asked to spend so much time in contact. Students doing the three point Primary Graduate Diploma were also required to attend these sessions and were resentful of this inequity in a program which is already overloaded.

In student evaluations of the fifty-nine students responding of the 159 internal students 32.2% reported spending six to eight hours on the unit (excluding contact time) and 23.7% reported spending nine to eleven hours. Given accurate student estimation of time spent on the unit, this pushes a full time student load to the top of acceptable levels and sometimes beyond, based on full time unit work. In informal evaluations during tutorials at the end of the term students were asked what assessment components they would leave out. Remarkably most students said that all of the assessment was essential to develop the understanding they had achieved.

Students are achieving better than they think they are based on the evaluations. While there is a lot of nervousness during the course of the unit students have been returning in later semesters to report that *Schools in Context* has been one of the most important units they have completed. The unit is a wearying one for both students and staff. There is a great deal of theoretical and practical information covered in the ten contact weeks and students who are not committed from the beginning or who do not consistently work through the semester report feel overwhelmed and "swallowed" by the work. The group approach is generally quite effective in providing support from within peer groups and our aim is to expand on this in the next run of the unit. We are planning to provide a peer marking approach to the critical autobiography to engender the group working culture more early in the semester and to alleviate some of the marking load on staff without sacrificing important unit content.

Schools in Context is a well developed beginning response to the challenge of linking theory work with practical research experience. We continue to look at ways to streamline the unit while maintaining the content and process experience.

Contexts of Education and Student Experience JCU

The breakdown of grades for the 353 students who completed the subject on the Townsville campus provides a contrast to those above. I have listed the students' anticipated distribution of grades alongside the actual distribution, however, the students' predictions were made in response to an item on the subject evaluation form and only 155 of the 353

students who completed the subject also completed the evaluation form. This may account for the differences in terms of the credit and pass categories. It may be that the failing or lower achieving students did not complete the evaluation and that 45% of the students who completed the evaluation form did receive a credit. The evaluation is conducted in the normal lecture time in week 10 of a 13 week semester. The evaluation item 'What mark do you expect to receive in this subject' did not include the option of a fail but it did include the option of 'don't know'.

Actual distribution of grades n = 353		Students' anticipated distribution of grades n = 155	
Grade	Distribution	Grade	Distribution
High Distinction	5%	High Distinction	2%
Distinction	11%	Distinction	15%
Credit	23%	Credit	45%
Pass	35%	Pass	31%
Fail	22%		
Other	4%	Don't know	7%

The actual distribution of grades is in line with the lower edge of the JCU guidelines for the proportion of grades awarded which are:

High Distinction 5 to 10%

Distinction 10 to 15%

Credit 25 to 35%

The fact that the students in the *Contexts of Education* subject at JCU were on the lower edge of the guidelines for the upper three grade levels may indicate that the students found the assessment more challenging than the teaching staff expected it to be. It may also indicate that the assessors were applying criteria that were set too high for the cohort and the subject. Or it may mean that there was a mismatch between the teaching of the subject and the assessment requirements which resulted in higher than expected levels of difficulty for the students. Interestingly, the same, or similar cohort studied a compulsory subject in the second semester of the second year which immediately followed the *Contexts of Education* subject and although the second compulsory subject was taught through more traditional methods the distribution of grades was similar to that for *Contexts of Education*.

Students' assessments were graded by only three people, all of whom were full-time academic staff in the School of Education and all responsible for teaching the subject. They followed the grading criteria agreed upon prior to the commencement of the semester and included in the subject Prospectus supplied to each student. It would be difficult to find better inter-marker reliability than was achieved by the three experienced academics who graded approximately 400 separate items of written assessment on two occasions. The marking team engaged in sessions, prior to taking their allocated bundles of papers, where approximately 15% of the items were 'blind' marked by all three assessors and the final grade of each compared. This ensured a high degree of comparability in terms of how the criteria were applied to individual pieces of assessment. Markers rarely if ever disagreed on the grade range although occasionally they disagreed on where the work was located in the grade range. That is, there was some disagreement over whether an item was at the middle or the top of the Distinction range, for instance. The consensus approach to grading does not, of course, protect students against a harsher than necessary application of marking criteria as it could be the case that all three markers applied the criteria strictly. In addition, the grading of the 'lessons' taught during the tutorial sessions was not verified by academic colleagues, but again, a marking criteria sheet was used and students were asked to self-assess before the debriefing session with the tutor.

Contexts of Education at JCU was evaluated on both campuses on each occasion that it was taught. The evaluation was undertaken by the unit responsible for subject evaluations across all Faculties at the university. The lecturer in charge of the subject received frequency distributions, means and standard deviations for each of the 20 items in the Subject section of the questionnaire where students were asked to rate the subject in terms of items such as workload; assessment; clarity of the aims of the subject and so on. In addition to the 20 items of evaluation for the subject there were a further 5 items each for evaluating the quality of lecturing and tutoring. These evaluations were supplied separately and directly to the individual academics whose tutoring or lecturing was being evaluated.

Students tended to rate the subject higher than the actual distribution of grades might suggest to some (cynical?) academic observers. As noted above, this may be a reflection of the actual cohort present when the evaluation took place. Nevertheless, on the workload fairness scale the subject scored a mean of 3.9 on a 6 point scale where 6 = very unfair which may indicate that the workload was considered to be slightly on the high side of students' expectations. A mean of 3.8 on a 6 point scale where 6 = 'very unfair marking of assignments' again indicates that students perceived that the marking was only slightly harsher than expected. On the item 'The assessable work helped me learn the subject: 1= very little; 6 = a great deal' the mean score was 4.5. Overall the mean scores on the 20 items did not deviate more than .3 on any item from the mean scores reported for the total number of subjects evaluated across the university in this round of evaluations.

The quantitative evaluation data is supplemented by a qualitative data that is collected after the students receive their final grades. These data take the form of an invitation by the Subject Evaluation Unit to students to provide written comments on their experience. Students provide written feedback under two headings: 'What are the teaching strengths of this subject?' and 'What improvements would you suggest?' Ninety-eight students (out of a total of 353) responded to the request for written comments. The comments in terms of the value of the student led assessment in tutorials was mixed, with about half the students who commented on this aspect of the subject strongly in favour of it and the other half strongly opposed to it. Little of a conclusive nature about the assessment could be derived from the comments. The few complaints that did not focus on infrastructure issues such as the acoustics in the lecture theatre, or the cooling systems in tutorial rooms, did, however, raise the issue of "too much content" and "too little connection with schools". Generally, though,

students appeared happy with the subject overall and they made few suggestions for improvement.

The 'average' evaluations (in terms of the University mean scores) combined with few complaints about the subject overall possibly indicate that it is posing few challenges to students' established ways of thinking about teaching and learning. This could be a result of the conservative approach taken to teaching and assessment in this subject. The JCU subject is undoubtedly less intensive both in terms of what students are required to do and what staff are required to do and it offers fewer challenges by way of collaborative work since that component of the assessment is less in comparison with the Murdoch model. The subject makes modest moves towards collaborative learning and almost none towards peer assessment. A more adventurous approach is planned for 1999 in a first year introductory subject where more elements of the Murdoch model will be built into the assessment. The aim is to provide more opportunities for students to connect the theoretical content of the subject to professional concerns by linking the first two assessments to a week of school practice.

Conclusions and Outlook

The approaches from the two institutions offer alternatives in the form of funding and staffing requirements, pedagogical framework, student positioning possibilities and program delivery. The JCU model benefits from a streamlined and cost efficient delivery. Two staff members (one of whom delivers the lecture series) meet the needs of more than 300 students on one campus and one additional staff member meets the needs of a further 100 students on another campus. Further, the JCU model is comprised of three hours of weekly contact (two lectures followed by one tutorial). The unit is outcomes driven and provides students with methodological and practical experience as novice researchers. This approach, however, lacks the intensity of the Murdoch program and might help to explain the more normalised distribution of grades including a high fail rate (compared with the Murdoch cohort) and a lower completion rate.

The Murdoch model benefits from its flexibility and diversity of approach (six modes: internal, external and on-line for four and three point versions with four hours contact weekly for the internals and a welcome invitation to any of these sessions to external students). Also outcomes driven, the unit develops collaborative approaches to research design, data gathering and presentation. The approach is costly requiring four tutors (two of whom coordinate and deliver lectures) and the continuous assessment requires an intensive dedication among both staff and students. Given this, we are reminded that when resources flow into responsible course development and delivery that student learning improves.

We have found that a grounded approach to course development, regardless of the extremes of resource allocation and the mode of delivery, results in student experiences which provide an enhanced basis for linking theoretical understandings with the real life contexts of their profession. Further, this approach begins to position students as researching professionals in their respective fields and at a relatively early segment of their study.

From an institutional perspective our work points to more collaborative pedagogical development across a degree program. This in turn challenges the notion or presumption of the autonomous academic devising pedagogy and content in isolation. It points to a shift in thinking about how we approach both student learning and professional academic practice. Such an approach may meet considerable resistance in some institutions. The benefits, however, seem too significant for this approach to be ignored.

The post-Dawkins era has resulted in university environments in which academics are expected to plan and develop units that meet the needs of their students. This marks a distinct contrast from earlier Australian tertiary contexts in which students were expected to adapt to and perform the requirements devised by academics. While aware that universities have been faced with decision making responses to Dawkins which have ranged from the unpleasant to the undesirable, we are seeking to accept the student needs based rationale for program development as a progressive imperative and one which might lead to responsive and competitive university practices in a globalised tertiary market. If taken seriously, it is a position which demands that academics be at least as responsive to students' needs as those students are expected to be to the requirements of their programs.

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