

## Coordinators Leading Advancement of Sessional Staff (CLASS) Project

### UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY OVERVIEW OF ACTION LEARNING

#### INITIATIVES

June 2011

#### Dr David Newlyn:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecturer, School of Law, University of Western Sydney

**Project Title:** Building essential skills for effective tutorial teaching

**Project Details:** Over Spring semester, 2010 I presented four self-contained fact/information sheets to the casual staff in the *Introduction to Business Law* unit (200184) that I co-ordinated. These four self-contained information sheets were based on resources provided in the CLASS session held at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) on June 18, 2010 and from the CLASS website. The self-contained sheets focused on establishing essential skills for conducting tutorials and included individual sheets which contained tips and strategies to be used during class such as 'Asking effective questions', 'Getting to know your students', 'Classroom management' and 'Group work strategies' as they related to the teaching of interdisciplinary law units. Each of the identified areas were essential skills for the effective operation of tutorials. Tutors were presented with these sheets at the beginning of weeks 3, 6, 9, and 11 and were asked to implement some of the tips from the sheets in their next tutorial and then provide feedback on how successful they were in implementing these tips and strategies.

#### **Major Project Achievements:**

- Developed four learning and teaching focused information sheets for casual staff.
- Raised awareness amongst casual staff of essential skills and professional behaviour associated with teaching.

#### **Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:**

Casual staff are an inherently disparate and diverse group. They come to UWS with a variety of different experiences and backgrounds. This diversity is important but it makes it challenging to develop resources which target their needs. The resources that have been developed are therefore quite general in nature. If the profile of casual staff change then new more appropriate resources would need to be developed, or modified from the resources developed, as a result of this project.

#### **Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:**

- Considerable time was taken to develop the relevant information sheets and discuss them with the casual staff.
- It proved difficult to follow-up the successes of the sheets with all individual staff members. Numerous follow-up emails and telephone calls were needed. This was time consuming.

**Additional Comments:** The developed sheets will provide a useful resource for staff in future semesters.

#### Dr Judith Thistleton-Martin:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecturer School of Education

**Project Title:** "What about me?" : Reculturing primary practicum supervision by better supporting casual academic staff

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**Project Details:** The aim of the project was to identify constraints in primary practicum supervision and remove them or reduce them in order to strengthen the relationship between the Professional Experience Coordinator and casual staff, as well as maintain and increase the number of casual academic staff.

### Major Project Achievements:

- Identify and prioritise areas of need and concern for casual academic staff in primary professional experience.
- Develop the collaborative partnership further by providing opportunities for casual staff to jointly develop, with the Professional Experience Coordinator, strategies to overcome the identified issues.
- Prioritise and action the developed strategies in the delivery of the professional practice programs.
- Evaluate collaboratively the implementation of the developed strategies and plan for future action.

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

The Professional Experience Coordinator met regularly with a group of 22 casual staff who were retired school teachers employed as part of the primary professional experience casual academic team. This team's main vehicle for communication was the University's Learning Management System, vUWS. After the 3rd meeting it was discussed that there could be improvements made to vUWS access and questions were raised in relation to how to get on vUWS, how to get set-up on the system and the need for step-by-step guides. The Coordinator noted casual staff were accessing and using feedback on vUWS in an effective manner.

After collective evaluation, the Coordinator and casual academic team explored scenarios for students at-risk during practicum. They used the meetings as a space to share insights, notes and advice on how to resolve issues for at-risk students. They ran mediation sessions on how to handle volatile students and reach appropriate resolution. By the end, casual staff felt very comfortable and were well-equipped with strategies on how to deal with situations to achieve positive outcomes for all parties (pre-service students, practicum sites and the University).

The School of Education's professional experience committee paid for casual staff attendance at meetings. Staff members from other programs have since reflected on the good practice from the model of the primary practicums and the School is considering implementing the model in future programs. The follow-on from this project has been twofold; a checklist has been developed focusing on the administration of practicums for early identification of gaps and, secondly, an awards process for casual staff within the School will be implemented and celebrated at a formal event.

### Dr Olayide Ogunsiji, Lecturer:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** School of Nursing & Midwifery

**Project Title:** Use of debriefing techniques in supporting sessional staff in unit, *Knowing Nursing*

**Project Details:** The focus of this project was to use debriefing techniques in supporting and engaging sessional staff towards the provision of high quality teaching to first year students enrolled in the unit, *Knowing Nursing*. Outcomes of the project are informing future practice in supporting sessional staff.

### Major Project Achievements:

As a result of this project, sessional staff have:

- settled comfortably into teaching the unit, *Knowing Nursing*, through the use of debriefing techniques
- been adequately orientated to the unit and as a member of the teaching team

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- been made aware of relevant University policies and rules that govern their teaching in the provision of high quality university education

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

The unit, *Knowing Nursing*, is a large first year unit taught across three campuses. The management of sessional staff, particularly new sessional staff, is complex. The project provided briefing and debriefing sessions which the School funded sessional staff to attend. In conjunction with a coordinated approach by the Campus Coordinator, and information about computer set-up, printing, and phone contact, these sessions were challenging but proved highly effective. The debriefing sessions in particular highlighted many challenges and issues faced by sessional staff. For example, sessional staff not knowing which staff member teaches which unit until the Friday before semester and how permanent staff distribute materials to sessional staff and prepare for the unit. These were issues were seen as having a major impact on the overall quality of teaching.

The outcomes of the project included visits and updates by the Unit Coordinator with each sessional staff member by the end of the third teaching week to debrief with staff at end of an observed teaching session. Sessional staff felt comfortable they were appropriately guided and were confident they could prepare for their classes. This high level of support and step-by-step approach provided an excellent level of consistency regarding practice within the School. The Unit Coordinator has also been able to develop a list of sessional staff who are ready and prepared to teach within the School. This information has led to better practices whereby sessional staff are now contacted in advance about possible teaching assignments and are able to prepare appropriately. Guidelines from this project have been developed and will inform future practice with sessional staff within the School of Nursing and Midwifery.

### Dr Swapan Saha:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Associate Head of School, School of Engineering

**Project Title:** Developing tutors for online assessment.

**Project Details:** This project aims to develop tutors' skills in setting up online quizzes using lecture notes. As part of the project tutors were provided with specialist training on how to set up quizzes online using e-learning facilities. This approach is designed to further stimulate discussions in the tutorial class, provide additional tutoring for students and provide online grading of the quizzes for large classes as a formal assessment.

### Major Project Achievements:

- Enhance tutor's skill with the use of e-learning facilities
- Improve student and tutor's engagement in the class
- Save time in marking and students can practice at home

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

The Engineering unit in this project is hoping to increase to 180 students next year and so they want to plan for more comprehensive tutorials that are easier to manage. The project aimed to change the format to include more online quizzes and marking. This required further training of sessional staff which was paid for by the School and this project. Sessional staff enjoyed receiving the extra training. Lecturers wanted to also use the knowledge that tutor shave to create better support for students and also to

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encourage them to take on a greater leadership responsibility in the unit. There has been a shift in the way marking is done which has reduced the time paid for marking. As a result, 50% of marking is down due to assessment items online. The other advantage is that students receive immediate feedback online.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

The participant had designed smaller classes for a unit within the School of Engineering however due to student demand there was an increase in numbers and classes grew from 20 to 120 students. The unit has been difficult to manage as tutorial times decreased to 1 hour and tutors' could not cover all materials in the timeframe provided and in response students were providing negative feedback. The project provided additional lessons online which required the tutors to have face to face training from e-learning on using online assessment items. This meant that tutors could provide feedback online and marking hours were paid out in training (as marking hours were reduced). They found the students were not contextualising and a big question database was set up online and week by week practice unmarked quizzes were available which were unlimited and provided immediate answers to questions. There was an exam set up at the end as a final assessment item and the tutors worked with UWS e-learning staff to set up the password protected questions so that students would have randomly selected exam questions from 150 questions out of 40 to ensure there was no academic misconduct.

**Additional Comments:** The project was very successful. Students were positive about the change. Other academic staff have shown interest in the project and are interested in applying some of the same online support for students.

### Katrina Sandbach:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecturer, School of Communication Arts

**Project Title:** Social media as a space for collaborative teaching

**Project Details:** This project used a social media platform to facilitate an online meeting space to cultivate a stronger sense of connectivity for teaching team members, particularly sessional staff, who were off-campus.

### Major Project Achievements:

- Understand the effects of social media on professional communication
- Develop a more connected teaching community
- Enhance the teaching experience of the team, particularly sessional staff

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

The project included staff teaching into a fourth year unit in the Bachelor of Design, Communication Design: Professional Brief. An online meeting space was created using social media (Rabbithole studio with Facebook as the social platform) with the aims of better understanding the effects of social media on professional communication, developing a more coherent and connected teaching community, and fostering good practice for sessional staff.

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The project was designed to run like a professional studio via a Facebook platform with a maximum cohort of 30 students, however enrolments unexpectedly jumped to 100. This proved to be challenging in a small studio location for 8 hours. The Unit Coordinator worked closely with one sessional staff member to manage the high student numbers and subsequent pressure placed on the teaching team. This collaboration continued up until week 10 after which it became unmanageable to sustain. As the project evolved the students engaged with the process of using the Facebook groups. Students were good at synthesizing and had faster feedback, which they wanted, and the project created a demand for an ongoing community of practice.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

Student expectations increased and needed to be managed carefully. For example, students expected feedback to be provided 24/7 or immediately, which was not possible for the teaching staff involved. There were also issues of privacy due to communication through the personal social media platforms of Facebook.

**Additional Comments:** As a result, it has been decided that using social media for this kind of communication is not as problem free as first thought and the Unit Coordinator will explore alternative options for future classes.

**Mr Ian Stevenson:**

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Course Advisor, School of Communication Arts

**Project Title:** Conforming Assessment Standards

**Project Details:** This project will attempt to formalise the process of moderating assessment standards between staff working in a unit. The proposed method is to blind double mark a small selection of student assessment tasks and then compare the application of the standards and criteria and discuss discrepancies. Once marking is complete the descriptive statistics of the results of each marker will be compared and assessed.

### Major Project Achievements:

- Development of a strategy for comparing the application of assessment criteria and standards across academic staff within a unit.
- Application of the strategy for comparing the application of assessment criteria and standards across academic staff within a unit.
- Evaluation of the strategy for comparing the application of assessment criteria and standards across academic staff within a unit.

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

The original project was to develop strategies across two units which had 50 students in each and casual teaching staff however in the end only one unit was used. An assessment review meeting for the early major assessment task was scheduled and marking was compared. This process was not as formal as the Unit Coordinator would have liked however divergent points were identified and were discussed, to ensure greater consistency in the marking. The Unit Coordinator marked all assessments as well and they later compared grade distribution, which was the same in both cases. The final assessment tasks were also the same. The unit coordinator feels confident to leave marking to the current casual staff and

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feels comfortable that it is consistent. The Unit Coordinator believes that this approach is important for all units that use sessional staff.

### **Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:**

Issues included marking hours for casual staff being taken over by full time staff. This then added to their workload. It proved useful to have an assessment strategy and apply standard criteria across marking.