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# Views from the top: Academic staff views on engaging students in learning

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*Since 2007, there has been an increasing focus on improving student engagement within the university sector at the undergraduate level (Coates, 2009). Improved engagement leads to greater student success (Zepke, 2013), and results in enhanced student experiences and higher student retention (Kift, 2009; Scott, 2008; Zepke, 2013). Academics play a vital role in student engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Whitt, & Associates., 2005), and we wish to address the apparent lack of research on engaging enabling students by investigating academics' view of this topic. This paper outlines two case studies from the disciplines of Linguistics, and English Literature & Film At the University of Newcastle's English Language and Foundation Studies Centre (ELFSC). These case studies form the basis of a pilot project, which aims to enhance the engagement of enabling students. The longer-term goals of the broader project are to develop a cross-institutional Learning Community for enabling educators to better engage our unique cohort of students.*

This paper will also provide individual case studies that reflect on attempts to improve student engagement in two courses offered in the University of Newcastle's (UoN) enabling programs. Specifically, we are keen to establish some practical advice for the implementation of course-based activities designed to enhance the student engagement experience that will later feed into a larger-scale project that will provide for a Learning Community centred on improving the student engagement in enabling programs. The key premise behind this project is that, whilst institutions typically take on the role of monitoring and reporting student engagement levels, it is the teaching academics who are usually best placed to set the "scholarly and social conditions that will enhance engagement." (Yorke, 2006, p. 45). In this way, this paper recognises the important role that teaching staff play in linking individual students to institutional-level support.

## Background

At UoN, Open Foundation is a preparation program that allows students aged 20 and above to gain a qualification that may be used to gain entry to tertiary study at many universities around Australia. The design of each course provides an introduction to a specific discipline, such as Linguistics, English Literature & Film, Chemistry, Sociology, etc. There is no generic academic skills course. An important component of each course is the embedding of Academic Literacies teaching that allows students to develop necessary skills required for successful tertiary study. The program is available online, and at the Callaghan and Ourimbah campuses of the university.

## **Academic views on student engagement**

It has been well-documented that increased student engagement leads to increased student retention and success (see, for example, Kift & Field, 2009; Scott, 2008; Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Tinto, 2012; Yam & Burger, 2009; Zepke, 2013). The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) was introduced in 2007 as a government-endorsed means of measuring student engagement within the tertiary sector (Hagel, Can, & Devlin, 2012). The Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), the survey's instrument, measures six areas that contribute to overall student engagement. They are: Active Learning, Academic Challenge, Student and Staff Interactions, Enriching Educational Experiences, Supporting Learning Environment, and Work Integrated Learning (Coates, 2009, 2010). Our view is that, because they meet all of the survey's criteria, the two courses of Linguistics, and English Language & Film are engaging to students. This section provides an overview of how these courses engage students according to these benchmark criteria. It is followed by two case studies (one case study per course), which contain specific examples relating to each engagement criterion.

### **Academic challenge**

Students find each course academically challenging for different reasons. Students enrol in Linguistics or English Literature & Film often with not only unrealistic expectations of university in general, but also preconceived ideas of the discipline content. For example, students may have little knowledge of what Linguistics entails, they may have preconceived ideas about language and grammar, or they may expect the course to focus on improving their English language skills. With English Literature & Film, students are generally very familiar with the types of texts studied, which, in turn may prove to be challenging when they study this content in an academic context. In both cases, students often suffer from academic culture shock (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002) as they are unaware of the depth of critical analysis required in both disciplines, and find it challenging when they need to readjust their preconceived ideas.

### **Active learning**

Active learning requires students to be active in class, usually working collaboratively (Tinto, 2012), and not to sit passively listening to the lecturer. This means that a wide variety of activity types should be employed regularly in the classroom and should appeal to the widest variety of learner types. Most activities in both courses feature discussion, either in pairs, small groups, or in the class as a whole, providing students the opportunity to "share not only the experience of the curriculum, but also of learning within the curriculum" (Tinto, 2012, p. 7). However, some time in class is allocated for individual work. Allocating time in class for students to start preparing assessment tasks is also an effective way of ensuring that students submit assessments on time, and that they are actively involved in their learning. Many students have heavy work and family commitments outside of class, and allowing them to time to start working on assignments in the classroom gives them opportunity to make a solid start on their work.

### **Student and staff interactions**

Although enabling students are adult learners, many are very dependent at the start of their program and require a substantial degree of pastoral care. In order to create a "sense of personal connectedness" (Krause, Harley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p. 37)

between students and academic staff, staff not only directly encourage students in their learning, but also foster the uptake of institutional-level support. This is aimed at assisting the students in becoming independent learners.

### Enriching educational experiences

Students are more engaged in their own learning if they are aware of the rationale for undertaking particular tasks. Explaining why they are doing what they are doing, and scaffolding assessment tasks, allows students to understand better what they are learning. This, coupled with the option to choose particular assessment tasks, enhances “independence, control and engagement” (Ramsden, 2003, p. 97), therefore providing students with more ownership of their learning.

### Supportive learning environment

Within both courses, various guests speak to the students directly in the classroom. This provides the students with the chance to become aware of the range of additional support outside of the classroom, which is vital to the earlier stages of tertiary study when “student success is still much in question and still malleable to institutional intervention” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). It also allows the students the opportunity to speak directly to, and get to know, the people in supporting roles better. In addition, it “normalises” the support that is available and may remove any particular stigma attached to seeking additional help. The main source of additional support is the Learning Adviser, whose position is solely to support and develop the Academic Literacies of students as part of the Learning Development team in the Learning Centre. The Learning Centre is a location where students can have individual consultations with the Learning Adviser, or attend academic skills workshops. Learning Development has a strong presence on both courses’ Blackboard sites, with not only links to the Learning Development Blackboard site, but also the inclusion of PowerPoint slides and other information relating to specific workshops. Additional guest lecturers include a Counsellor, who gives both a short introduction to Student Services at the beginning of the semester, and longer sessions on relaxation and reducing exam anxiety towards the end of the semester. The Student Liaison Officer and the Careers Counsellor also provide students with information while making short, in-class appearances.

### Work-integrated learning

At the enabling level, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is not directly relevant, as the program is designed for students to enter undergraduate study upon completion of the program. As Coates (2009, p. 62) describes it, WIL is the “integration of employment-focused work experiences into study”. However, although there is no specific WIL, there is certainly integration of Academic Literacies, such as essay writing and critical thinking, into the enabling program. Practice and knowledge of academic writing is vital for students as they enter undergraduate programs, and integrates future-focused experiences into current study. As there are no specific work-related outcomes for students undertaking enabling programs as such, this category is omitted from the case studies below.

The following case studies address how both the Linguistics and English Literature & Film courses specifically deal with and meet the engagement criteria outlined in the AUSSE mentioned above.

## **Case study 1: Linguistics**

### **Course overview**

The Linguistics course is part of the Open Foundation program at the Callaghan and Ourimbah campuses at UoN offered in both Part-Time and Intensive modes, and is available online as a Part-Time course. Newstep students (aged between 17 and 20) are able to join the Intensive course as part of their program. Both on-campus courses at Ourimbah are the subject of this study.

The course provides students with foundation knowledge of all areas of Linguistics for example, semantics, morphology, phonology, sociolinguistics, and basic syntax. Allowing for different learning styles, the course also provides students with a broad range of skills and knowledge that is useful for numerous areas of study including Humanities, Social Sciences, Communications, amongst others.

### **Course-based activities**

#### **Academic challenge**

According to Yorke (2006, p. ix), “Engagement in higher order forms of learning that involve analysing, synthesising, evaluating, and applying tend to be positively associated with most aspects of engagement.” In line with this model, both Linguistics courses allow the students the opportunity to develop a higher form of learning via various methods in class, which the students then apply in the form of assessment items. In one particular assessment item, students use various methods in the analysis of sentences to identify the various parts of speech. Analysing individual words according to certain linguistic criteria, instead of meaning, is often a skill, which students have never practised before studying the course. Through the writing of essays (a procedure which is scaffolded in class), students practise synthesising information from various sources to produce a coherent argument whilst evaluating various linguistic theories in relation to language acquisition, for example.

These assessment tasks, along with the expectation that students will be able to complete them, provide the students with a challenge that may at first seem overwhelming. However, students practise the skills necessary to complete these requirements of the course in the supportive classroom environment. Completing challenging tasks in this environment builds feelings of competence, which leads to motivation and self-belief (Zepke, 2013). This results in a greater chance of engagement and successful completion.

#### **Active learning**

Whilst lectures are the main type of learning situation in Linguistics, they often include a wide variety of learner-centred activities. For example, in order to consolidate the concept of attitudes towards sociolects (dialects based on a person’s social status), students complete a sociolect scale while watching a series of video clips showing speakers with a variety of sociolects. The five-point Likert scale contains eight items, against which students measure the speaker’s competency, pleasantness, reliability, etc. based purely on the way the speaker speaks. Students then compare their ratings and discuss the overall experience. This process reflects real-world sociolinguistic studies investigating attitudes towards language variation and raises students’ awareness of the

judgements people make based on an individual's use of language, and thus links the classroom to the outside world, an important process in engaging learning (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

A popular end-of-semester revision activity is the Game Show. This activity allows students either to confirm their content knowledge of the course or to become aware of areas that they need to revise further in preparation for the final exam. The game show involves the students forming small teams and answering questions to win prizes. The use of "buzzers" (squeaky dog toys), sound effects, the general competitive nature the game and, of course, the prizes at the end (usually lollies or biscuits) all add to the fun and exciting atmosphere.

In order to enhance the social engagement amongst students, which is an essential component to the overall student experience (Scott, 2008), students are encouraged to work in pairs or in small groups, even during lecture time. This not only engages students in exploration of the topics, but it adds an element of social and psychological engagement (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Activities such as Think Ink Pair Share (TIPS), where students consider a particular point or question, write an answer and then share it with a partner or the entire class also encourages social inclusion. Other quick activities during lectures to ensure active participation include 60/60 recalls, where students speak for 60 seconds to a partner on the topic just covered in the lecture, and then the partner responds for 60 seconds. Frequent breaks (for 10 minutes every hour) allow students to speak with each other (and with the lecturer) in an informal manner and discuss the course topics, upcoming assessment items and anything else which is appropriate to studying at university.

### **Student and staff interactions**

As mentioned above, the lecturer is available for informal discussion with the students during class breaks, as well as before and after class. Also available are individual consultation for two one-hour sessions per week, and students may negotiate additional consultation times. Offering these additional consultation hours around peak assessment periods has also been popular.

### **Enriching educational experiences**

In the Linguistics course, the overall educational experiences of students are enriched in various ways. For example, the students have two sessions in the library. Both sessions are aimed at not only familiarising the students with all the services the library offers, it also allows students to work on their essays during class time with a librarian present. The librarian guides the students in a computer lab through the library's website. This allows each student to sit in front of a computer and follow along with the librarian's directions. The librarian introduces the concept of the Dewey Decimal System, how to search the library catalogue and journal databases, and introduces other services the library offers such as printing and short loans. Once the demonstration is complete, the students then undertake an activity that consolidates the previous information that the librarian demonstrated. The task is in the form of a questionnaire. The students, working in pairs, complete a series of questions (the answers to which are on the library website), and then search for particular books on the library's shelves and return with either a photo of the book on their smartphone, or the book itself. The students are given extra incentive to complete the task as quickly as possible because they are given prizes

for getting all questions correct and returning with the correct book or photo of the book. Prizes include USB-flash drives, pens, notepads, fold-up shopping bags, key rings, and lollies. A good sense of humour is very useful for this task, as well as the ability to create enthusiasm and excitement in the students in what could otherwise be a somewhat dry, information-heavy activity.

The second library session builds upon the skills learned in the first library session. This involves students, in a small computer lab, searching the library's catalogue and journal databases in order to find information for their essays, which they had previously brainstormed and discussed in class. Students find this session worthwhile because, although the concept of searching for a book does not present too much of a challenge, many find the task of searching databases somewhat more difficult, and require assisted practice. The librarian is present to provide expert assistance, while the lecturer provides content knowledge, if needed. The atmosphere is collegial, as the students help each other in their research.

Once these activities have been completed, a lecturer-led discussion takes place in order to elicit whether the students understand the rationale of each lesson. If the students do not immediately understand the lesson's purpose, the lecturer explains that, for example, being aware of the full services provided by the library, and the skills needed to access them, are important for successful study at university and that the activities were designed to allow students to become familiar with them. A similar discussion of lesson rationale takes place after various other "fun" activities to ensure students understand the purpose of each activity.

### **Supportive learning environment**

The Learning Adviser hold in-class essay-writing and exam-preparation workshops based on the specific topics and question types students are to address. This kind of workshop, tailored to suit the students' needs, occurs in a timely manner, allowing students to start working on their essays in class and become familiar with the exam layout. Similarly, the Counsellor also holds in-class sessions on reducing exam anxiety where the students perform a short meditation exercise as part of the revision week activities.

The Careers Adviser and Student Liaison Officer also visit lectures to provide specific information that is relevant to the whole program outside of Linguistics. Students are also reminded of other Centre-wide activities and events by small "advertisements" presented to them at the beginning of lectures.

### **Evidence of engagement**

At the time of writing, (a little over halfway through the semester), student engagement appears to be still rather high. The 14 students enrolled in the Part-Time course have close to no unexplained absences. These students are in their second semester of the part-time course, which means that any disengaged students have left the course already by the end of Semester One. The remaining students have accessed the Linguistics Blackboard site 749 times in the period of 1 July to 17 September (however, the semester started officially on 29<sup>th</sup> July). 60% of hits were for the Course Materials section, which contains the lecture slides, 15% accessed assessment materials (all of which are posted at the beginning of the semester) and the remainder were spread

between practice quizzes and general resources (including YouTube video clips and additional websites). For the Intensive course, with 11 students, the proportions were similar to the Part-Time course, with only slight differences in total numbers. There were also very few unexplained absences.

All students in each course completed their assessment tasks on time, apart from two. Attendance in the Intensive course is also very high, with only three students who have not been attending regularly. One of whom has had medical reasons; the other two have indicated that other “life” reasons have interfered, such as juggling work and family.

The greatest indicator of student engagement in the two Linguistics courses came from focus groups, run by an independent staff member from the University’s Centre for Teaching and Learning. The feedback from the focus groups was overwhelmingly positive and the students claimed that the lecturer’s enthusiasm for the subject, sense of humour and “willingness to be a bit silly” - a valuable attribute, according to Ramsden (2003) - was the most engaging component of the course. Students also appreciated scaffolding certain concepts and being treated like adults. In terms of activities, students enjoy working in pairs or groups, and then feeding back to the rest of the class. They also greatly appreciated inclusive practices, such as being asked for their opinions and having them respected.

The overall responses claimed that the engaging style of lecturing, clear and thorough explanations, and a wide variety of video clips and websites demonstrating “real” examples of language were more valued than types of specific activities. However, that said, it appeared that students would be open to other, innovative classroom practices.

## **Case study 2: English Literature & Film**

### **Course overview**

The English Literature & Film course is on offer at the Callaghan and Ourimbah campuses of the UoN in both the Part-Time and Intensive modes of the Open Foundation program. Students in the Newstep program are also able to enrol in the Intensive offering of the course in the second semester of their year-long program. Although a number of these students choose to go on to study literature and/or film at the undergraduate level, the course is designed to provide a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills that are relevant for a wide variety of Humanities-based disciplines. Many students also choose to pursue careers in Education, Communications, and Social Work. The popular nature of the discipline means that students often come to the course with a relatively high degree of prior knowledge of discipline-specific content. However, very few have the critical skills that are necessary for study of the subject at the tertiary level. Aside from negotiating marked differences in the cultural capital of individual students – which becomes particularly apparent when considering the historical context of different texts – consideration must also be given to the ‘enjoyment factor’ of the discipline. This is because students come to terms with the notion that a pleasurable past-time has been reconfigured as an activity demanding critical analysis.



## Course-based activities

### **Academic challenge**

For a number of years, the key concern in this course has been the selection of texts that provide the best basis for critical instruction of literary and film analysis at the enabling level. Students in the Intensive course cover as many as twelve different texts in as many weeks. This adds time and monetary considerations to other practical concerns of text selection, such as accessibility, difficulty, and the appropriateness of content for students who may be under 18 years of age. In an effort to provoke greater critical rigour whilst reducing the amount of time students need to spend familiarising themselves with texts, the course has seen the introduction of a number of challenging new texts, including the short story and film of *Brokeback Mountain* and the introduction of the graphic novel and film series of *Sin City*. The thought-provoking nature of the topics generates enthusiastic responses from the students and provides a useful template for engaging with the more traditional texts in the course.

### **Active learning**

Part of the approach to encouraging student engagement is the lecturer's own self-reflection upon her passion for the course's topics. Whilst students do not have to share this passion, they are more effective learners when they are able to identify aspects of the course that they find interesting or relatable to their own life experiences. In this way, students are encouraged to recognise the skills they already have and to share their knowledge and ideas during group activities, such as class discussions, peer review of essay plans, a group presentation task, and an active online discussion board.

A basic principle of teaching and learning is the demystification of curricula as students become aware of some of the hidden expectations they will encounter in tertiary-level study. Students need to understand why they are to complete certain tasks and during class, they are made aware of the future relevance of the skills they are acquiring. The final factor in this promotion of active learning is to ensure that students are given adequate opportunities to fully engage with the material. For example, all notes are provided well ahead of the lecture so students have time to think about the topic and come to class prepared to participate. Some class time is also allocated to brief practical activities that assist students to develop effective study strategies. These activities may include completing a breakdown of assessment tasks and constructing a 'plan of action' for activities that students need to complete during study breaks.

### **Student and staff interactions**

In their feedback, students often make special reference to teaching strategies that demonstrate high-level communication and interpersonal skills, such as the availability and accessibility of the lecturer, strong student support, and the encouragement of student participation.

### **Enriching educational experiences**

Scaffolding assessment tasks, for example, when students create a draft essay plan for the major essay, introduces students to critical thinking and encourages them master basic academic skills. Students are also encouraged to become lifelong learners by always having the rationale behind different activities made clear. They regularly reflect

upon their learning, which highlights progress and builds confidence. Independent learning is fostered through a variety of teaching and assessment strategies. These may include encouraging individuals to select aspects of the course that most appeal to them by offering choice of topic in some assessment tasks, as well as promoting independent research for the major essay, and introducing an assessable personal reflection on the group task.

### **Supportive learning environment**

All classes begin with announcements about the current support initiatives offered by the Centre, from reminders about information sessions and dedicated student support sessions, such as BOOST and PASS, through in-class visits from Learning Development staff, Counsellors, the Student Liaison Officer, and the Careers Adviser. In addition, students can access links to resources and help sheets from these support staff. They also partake in mini Academic Literacies workshops in most lectures.

### **Evidence of engagement**

Taking a holistic approach to teaching and learning ensures that all teaching practices – in class, online, in the development of materials, and course design (from text choice to assessment) – focus on supporting students at the enabling level. In this way, students are introduced to the demands of university-level study, and may therefore build their skills and confidence.

Individual student comments in formal university surveys, such as the Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT) and Student Feedback on Course (SFC), provide evidence of the impact of current teaching methods employed in this course resulting in student engagement. Specific mention is repeatedly made of how the lecturer's enthusiastic teaching inspires students.

## **Conclusion**

This paper represents the pilot stage of a large project designed to measure a wider variety of academics' views on how they engage students, both at the Centre, institutional and inter-institutional levels. The aim of collecting such views is to compare the results with other studies on students' views of engagement, in order to identify the gap between what each group considers *engagement* to be (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). This will then assist in developing a Learning Community that will model best practice, and will improve the quality of teaching and support in the enabling sector. In turn, it will improve student engagement and retention. Hence, it will better prepare students for undergraduate programs, and potentially foster engagement and encouraging individual learning, better preparing students to be lifelong learners.

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