

Supporting good first year course design: The FY PATI

Dr Sharon Cooper*, Ms Katherine Lindsay** and Ms Vivien McComb*

* *Centre for Teaching and Learning*

** *Newcastle Law School*

The University of Newcastle

The First Year Peer Assisted Teaching Initiative (FY PATI) saw its debut as a pilot at the University of Newcastle in 2012. In response to an existing gap in support for staff whose responsibility was teaching first year university students, the Initiative aimed to provide both the know-how and the 'space' to design or re-design their courses. Based firmly on the Six First Year Curriculum Principles developed by Kift (2009), and using a variation of the popular Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS) (Carbone, 2012), the initiative resulted in some significant innovations both in terms of first year curriculum design, and in support for teaching staff at the University. This session will explain how the Initiative was undertaken, and report on the results of curriculum design innovations on student learning.

Background

The University of Newcastle is a large regional university which boasts a significant proportion of enrolments from non-traditional backgrounds. Like many others, the University has put a degree of effort into enhancing the experience of first year students, largely with a view to stem attrition. Not unusually, significant attention has been paid to programs which provide students with support such as orientation activities, peer mentoring and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Although there were some early attempts to support teaching staff responsible for first year courses, these lacked organisational support, and largely fell by the wayside. As is common, pockets of action existed without real connection. The recognition of this gap in connection and support, and a corresponding shift in approaches to staff development at the University through the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), resulted in the trial of the First Year Peer Assisted Teaching Initiative (FY PATI).

Initial conversations included the possibility of having three areas of focus drawn from the First Year Curriculum Principles developed through Kift's ALTC Senior Fellowship (2009). These were design, assessment and engagement. In considering difficulties with timing (mid-year conferences meant there was a period of time where communication was difficult) a more restricted focus seemed more feasible. Already being used with some success at the University was the Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS) model, developed at Monash University (2011). It was decided that this structure would provide an effective foundation for the Initiative.

The first run of the FY PATI focused on first year course design. The overarching aim of the initiative was to have course coordinators working together in such a way that stimulated dialogue about, and action towards, approaching first year curriculum design with evidence-based best practice principles in mind. As with other "peer assisted" approaches, the development of collegial relationships was also an aim.

In many cases, course coordinators feel an individual responsibility for course design, and/or feel isolated whilst undertaking course design or redesign. The support provided by such an initiative takes pressure off individual course designers, allowing them to have sounding boards, receive new ideas, and access support that facilitates the process, among other things.

What happened?

Expressions of interest were strategically sought from two areas of the University – the Faculty of Health and the English Language and Foundations Studies Centre. The former is known for its large first year service courses, and the latter is responsible for University enabling programs. An initial meeting of interested academics was called for the purpose of explaining the Initiative’s principles and structure, connecting people, and ascertaining the types of support that might be required. Out of around a dozen that attended, eight academics took part in the Initiative in various ways. They were from the areas of health, enabling programs, and education.

The Initiative offered included:

- A Blackboard site for communication and sharing of resources;
- Working bees & workshops for active application of first year curriculum principles;
- Resources on demand;
- Consultation in the form of third-party review and feedback, classroom observation, student feedback surveys and focus groups, instructional design assistance, and technology know-how; and,
- Connections to others for strategic, supportive networking and sharing of ideas.

Structure

The Monash PATS model includes strategically placed workshops for participants that focus on the development of teaching and learning strategies. In a point of departure, we decided that traditional workshops were to be avoided (except for the first meeting, at which the FY Curriculum Principles were unpacked), and that a more hands-on approach would be adopted, taking into account the significant expertise of the coordinators taking part. The term “working bees” was used to focus attention on the hands-on nature of weekly sessions and to emphasise their usefulness as time and space for course redevelopment. It was important to stress that no extra work was expected of course designers (this threatened to be a sticking point, as expected) but that the time they spent working on their course in working bees was a valuable contributor to the completion of the work they already had at hand. The working bees focused on the direct practical application of the First Year Curriculum Principles to courses. Each working bee was facilitated by a CTL staff member skilled in first year teaching (and coordinator of the Initiative), and where necessary, with the assistance of others so that expert advice could be gained and applied in context. Three working bees were initially planned, but their popularity meant that more were scheduled throughout the semester.

Working bees were scheduled for every week. A dedicated room was booked, and refreshments provided. At attendance at these working bees, course designers were given a coffee voucher each. They were to use the incentive to meet with each other outside of the working bee times to discuss their ideas and progress.

A key component of the Initiative was the linking of participants with other services and resources. During working bees, needs were determined, and the necessary resources and connections were provided.

Relationships

As with the Monash PATS model, participants had options – reciprocal partnerships, or mentor-mentee partnerships. Although one mentor-mentee relationship was formed, those who participated formed reciprocal partnerships. It was left to the academics to arrange their own working partner, while the mentor-mentee partnership was brokered by the coordinator of the Initiative.

The participants were:

- Two public health lecturers, with three first year courses between them;
- Two education lecturers, sharing one course;
- Two enabling program lecturers, with one course to design from scratch; and,
- One nursing lecturer with one course.

The nursing lecturer was paired with a mentor from education, known for her FY curriculum success.

Working bees

Working bees were held twice weekly throughout the semester, with participants expected to come to one only. Flexibility was allowed in that the groups could swap the order of the working bee topics to suit their needs, or ask for others. Topics of the working bees were aligned with an existing course design framework at the University. This is based on Biggs & Tang's model of constructive alignment (2007).

For one group, the topic sequence was left up to the coordinator in such a way that the progress of course evaluation and design was in the control of the 'expert'. Participants sought assistance in the form of 'expert consultation' and throughout this process worked on their course.

At the other working bees, the shots were called by the participants, using the coordinator as a sounding board and as someone to inject ideas. The groups were very different in feel and approach.

Working bee topics were:

- Course alignment (including developing learning outcomes)
- Developing a teaching and learning sequence
- Assessment design
- Assessment criteria and feedback
- Integrating academic skills and literacies
- Formative feedback
- Resolving tensions between student feedback on courses and good FY curriculum design.

Each working bee introduced key ideas about a First Year Transition Pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005), and focused on practical ways to address this in the above aspects of course design. The Six First Year Curriculum Principles (Kift, 2009) were the key to developing ideas and strategies. For example, the Initiative assisted participants to design assessments such that students receive early formative feedback, and to design a teaching and learning sequence that scaffolded the development of academic literacies.

Curriculum innovation

For the first team, their involvement resulted in a complete re-design of course objectives (learning outcomes) as well as tasks, learning sequence, etc. More importantly, the curriculum was re-designed so that the development of students' academic literacies was made central. Crucial changes to assessment meant that authentic opportunities for students to engage in early, low-stakes tasks, were included, and in a way that developed and scaffolded their skills of self-assessment.

For another team the Initiative resulted in a commitment to align their course with another concurrent course such that a first year experience was shared. Previously, the concurrent course shouldered the entirety of responsibility for student transition, while the course under review did not. The use of new Blackboard features to enhance connections between two concurrent first year courses, and to improve scaffolding of students' learning, including embedding video and audio were a focus.

For another team the Initiative supported the development of a completely new course, based upon the Six First Year Curriculum Principles, and supporting students' social and emotional transition alongside their academic transition. This course is an enabling course, and as such will feed directly into a first year course in the area of health.

The Initiative saw the development of a close relationship between coordinators of enabling courses and first year undergraduate program courses. Mutual understanding of transitional issues and curriculum content was gained. This has a particular focus on the scaffolding of the development of students' academic literacies in such a way that the particular experience of the 'double transition' can be addressed.

Support outside working bees

The FY PATI connected staff with other CTL services such as instructional designers and learning advisers. Many did not know of their existence, and/or how they could get help. Through these connections, one of the teams arranged to make videos of prior students talking about their learning in the course in previous years. Another sought advice about embedded video and audio options in Blackboard, for providing more effective description of assessments, and feedback to students. Others are now working closely with learning advisers, who will assist with the embedding of academic literacy development by developing tutorial activities with this in mind.

Other things to note

A Blackboard site was initially considered to be an important part of the Initiative, but this was not used by the participants. The participants reported that they initially used to site to gather materials, but the working bees and connections provided the support they needed.

The offering of two working bees per week arose because it was not possible to take into account everyone's schedule. The provision of two time-slots, however, became a strength of the Initiative – allowing for (as noted above) the different approaches of the groups.

New resources for students and staff were developed through the Initiative, providing some unexpected bonuses.

Conclusion and questions

The FY PATI provided much-needed (flexible) structure and support for people designing first year courses. It cost very little money. The concept is adaptable for any type of peer-assisted initiative, and connected staff with people, resources and support they were not previously aware of. At the time of the FYHE Conference 2013, we will be able to report on initial outcomes on student learning on the course (re)designs that took place through the Initiative, with more evaluation to follow.

The FY PAT Initiative informs future CTL initiatives involving Peer Assisted Review of Teaching. Work is under way for planning for this for 2013, and will take into account the strengths and weakness of the FY PAT Initiative, and to develop it further into a more structured, wider-reaching program.

Questions

1. What strengths and weaknesses do you see in an Initiative like this?
2. Is this type of Initiative one that would work in other Universities?

References

- Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at University* (4th ed.). Maidenhead, England: Open University Press.
- Carbone, A. (2011). *Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme: Final report*. Retrieved from http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/resources/Carbone_Fellowship_report_2011.pdf.
- Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education: Final Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/resources/Kift%20Sally%20ALTC%20Senior%20Fellowship%20Report%20Sep%2009.pdf>.
- Kift, S., & Nelson, K. (2005). Beyond curriculum reform: Embedding the transition experience. In A. Brew & C. Asmar (Eds.), *Higher Education in a Changing World: Research and Development in Higher Education: Vol 28* (pp. 225–235). Sydney: The University of Sydney. HERDSA.