Learning to lead: Professional development for leaders in the First Year Experience

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Abstract

This paper describes an emerging initiative, the First Year Learning Leadership Program (FYLLP) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. The program aims to engage and enable professional and academic staff who teach and support first year students to extend their knowledge of first year curriculum design principles and transition pedagogy and to develop their sense of agency to lead and engage with complexity and engineer change. The program leverages the pedagogies of expansive learning and is characterised by the use of two distinct professional learning activities: participant projects and leadership laboratories. The discussion about this emerging initiative focuses on the challenges in utilising expansive learning as a professional development model and the benefits and challenges for participants in the program.

Introduction

This paper reports on an emerging initiative at USC (University of the Sunshine Coast); the implementation of a leadership development program to support and advance the practice of staff teaching first year students. The *First Year Learning Leadership Program* aims to engage and enable staff leading first year grants and school-based first year initiatives to extend their knowledge of first year curriculum design principles and transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009, 2015) while developing a mutually supportive distributed model of leadership in first year curriculum, learning and teaching.

USC's support for first year students is based upon a "third generation" approach to the First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) characterised by a "whole of institution" (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010, p. 2) approach that becomes 'everybody's business' (Kift, 2008). The approach is framed around transition pedagogy and the 6 first year curriculum design principles (Kift, 2015).

Background context

The main campus of USC is situated in Maroochydore, Sunshine Coast, Queensland. The university was established as a green fields campus in 1996 with approximately 500 students (USC, 2018). Since that time, it has undergone rapid expansion in its infrastructure, program offerings and geographical reach such that it now has campuses extending from Fraser Coast to Brisbane and international study hubs in Melbourne and Sydney. In 2020 the university plans to commence operations at a new Moreton Bay campus, offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs (USC, 2018). In 2017, approximately 13,500 students were enrolled across the various campuses. At the time of writing, prior to semester commencement, approximately 3200 first year students were enrolled for Semester 1 2018.

In 2014, Professor Karen Nelson was appointed PVC (Students) at USC with the remit of implementing a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the First Year Experience. Professor Nelson initiated a First Year Experience Enabling plan as part of the broader Student Engagement and Retention Blueprint which is intended to strengthen first year experiences (USC, 2018a). It includes a suite of activities and initiatives informed by best practice in the FYHE and more specifically the work of McKenzie and Egea (2016). The suite of activities and initiatives that comprise the FYE Enabling Plan include the establishment of:

- School-Based First Year Leads who build capacity and support good practice in first year curriculum design and enactment within their schools and faculties;

- A First Year Community of Practice for all academic, professional and sessional staff who work with first year students;

- A grants scheme that provides financial support for teams of academic, professional staff and students to embed transition pedagogy into first year curriculum;

- A First Year Learning Leadership Program (FYLLP) that supports first year leaders to engage in collaborative distributed leadership development.

This emerging initiative paper reports on the First Year Learning Leadership Program (FYLLP). This approach is novel in terms of the approach taken to professional development for staff working within the first year, situated as it is within an expansive learning theoretical framework with the intention of developing a distributed leadership network for FYE.

Literature review

The research focus on the FYHE has historically been student-centric and directed at identifying factors that lead to student attrition (Whannell, 2013) and/or factors that support and help to retain first year students (Coates, 2014). Within these two broad student-centric lenses, all manner of institutional personnel have directed their attention to contextualising and explaining attrition and/or retention in terms of, for instance, the student's socioeconomic status (McKenzie & Egea, 2016), social/cultural difference (Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011) and psychological dispositions (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Naylor, 2017; Fernandes, Ford, Rayner, & Pretorius, 2017). For example, Lizzio and Wilson (2004) directed the focus towards belonging and relationship building, specifically connecting first year students to their peers, academic studies, teaching staff, the institution and to their future careers. Their thesis has been researched and supported by others such as Wong (2014) who also stressed the importance of connection and relationship building citing such strategies as clustering classes in the timetable (see also Masters & Donnison, 2010), providing designated physical spaces for first year students to meet and socialise, building community within the classroom, and providing opportunities for staff-student interactions.

Some researchers in the FYHE have focused on the professional development of faculty and/or professional staff as a means of supporting the first year student. Wong (2014) highlights the importance of professional development for faculty and professional staff in teaching skills and assessments within the context of community building and McKenzie & Egea (2016) also argue that good practice in the FYHE should include professional development for staff working with and teaching into the first year. Hughes (2017) reports on professional development workshops on transition pedagogies for staff teaching into large first year courses and Leece and Jaquet (2017) describe a professional staff development program focusing on developing and deepening participants' understanding of student engagement. While there is a move towards addressing and considering student engagement and

retention more broadly the greater focus remains on what the student does and who the student is.

The First Year Learning Leadership Program (FYLLP)

The FYLLP was designed to engage academic staff to extend their knowledge of first year curriculum design principles and transition pedagogy in the context of an Expansive Learning Leadership Initiative (Readman, 2017). The program is characterised by the use of two distinct professional learning activities: participant projects and leadership laboratories that aim to develop participants' sense of agency to lead and engage with complexity, challenge cultural norms and engineer change.

Expansive learning is a contemporary learning model used in the workplace (Engeström, 2011) to support participants in collectively working on poorly defined problems, proposing and applying courses of action and resolving complexity faced in the workplace when there is no clear or pre-determined solution. Expansive learning represents a new way of thinking about learning that is particularly suited to learning at work; expansive learning can produce new patterns of activity that can positively influence both individuals engaged in learning and the organisation itself. Collaboration is a key aspect of the distributed leadership developed.

The leadership laboratory provides a 'formative intervention toolkit' (Engeström, Rantavuori, & Kerosuo, 2013, p. 82) for transforming activity. The FYLLP creates the opportunity for FY grant holders and School-Based First Year Leads to focus on developing their leadership capacity as a member of two defined groups: their 2-3 member project team and the broader School-Based First Year leaders group. Throughout the year, participants attend leadership laboratories, where they explore and reflect on their actions to support a first year initiative in their school or their grant. In each laboratory, they explore theoretical perspectives on first year and principles of leadership, share and resolve challenges, and model and test next steps for their projects. The iterative process involves the participants moving between the workplace where their projects are situated and the reflective laboratory space. They are moving through the seven learning actions described in the expansive learning cycle (see Fig 1) in non-linear and often arrhythmic ways.

Expansive Learning Cycle

7. CONSOLIDATING AND GENERALISING THE NEW PRACTICE

6. REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS

5. IMPLEMENTING THE NEW MODEL

1. QUESTIONING

2. ANALYSIS

4. EXAMINING AND TESTING THE NEW MODEL

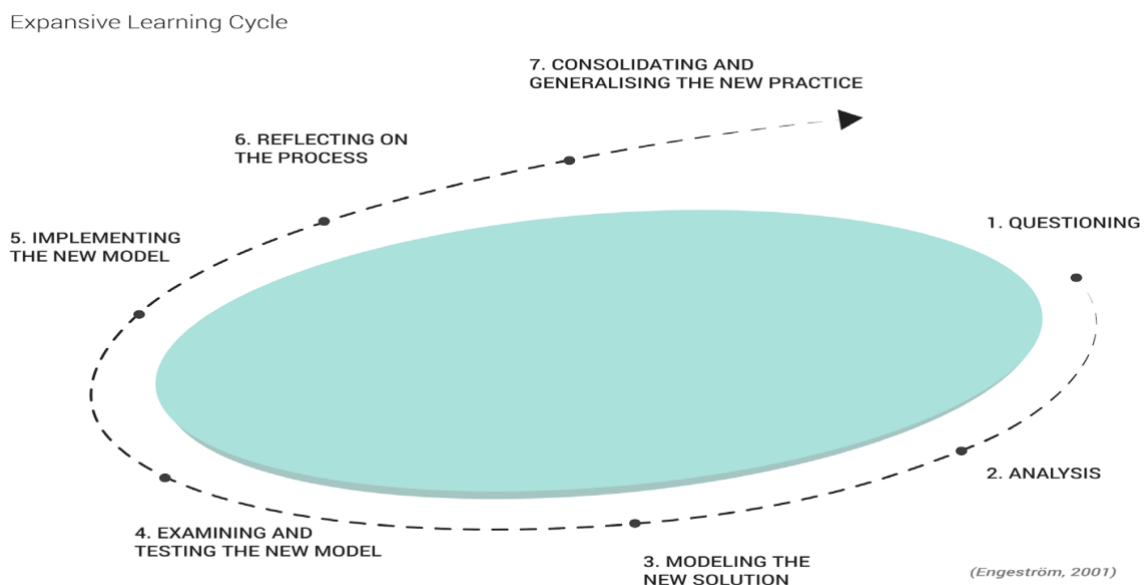3. MODELING THE NEW SOLUTION

(Engeström, 2001)

Figure 1: Sequence of epistemic actions in an expansive learning cycle. Adapted from Engeström (1999).

The FYLLP is being facilitated by the First Year Experience project manager and the Acting Director for the Centre for Support and Advancement of Learning and Teaching (C-SALT), both of whom are new to this methodology, although they are familiar with its social-constructivist pedagogical underpinnings (Vygotsky, 1978). This form of learning differs markedly from traditional forms in which the facilitator is the main source or arbiter of the knowledge that participants can access. Instead, facilitators trigger participants to find expansive ways of transforming the problem, and sustain the expansive process for and with participants (Eri, 2012). With such challenges in mind, a process to self-evaluate the facilitators' leadership of the program is underway, in conjunction with evaluation and monitoring strategies on the FYLLP as a whole.

Conclusion

This emerging initiative reports on the implementation of an innovative professional development program for faculty and professional staff working with and teaching into first year courses. It leverages the pedagogies of expansive learning, bringing participants together to solve problems – not just learning what is known but exploring and finding solutions to problems that are complex and for which multiple solutions are possible.

Discussion points

Professional learning for FY leaders as a method for (a) deepening knowledge of first year experience and (b) developing distributed leadership:

- What are the challenges you would anticipate in utilising expansive learning as a professional development model?

- What learning gains or changes in understanding would you anticipate that the first year leaders would experience as a result of the program?

- In your experience, what concepts have been 'threshold concepts' when engaging with FYE?

- What advice would you give about sustaining the learning gained by participants beyond the life of the program?

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