

## **Leading for Sustainable Teacher Development**

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### **Abstract**

Globalization presents unique challenges for the leadership and development of teaching in Higher Education. As global positioning prompts new challenges for industry; demands on Higher Education institutions and teaching staff also increase. The workplaces for which we are preparing our students are transforming. Tertiary education must be dynamic and responsive to not only mirror, but also anticipate these changes.

For teaching staff tasked with preparing students to thrive in emerging work environments, generic teacher development programs fall short. Approaches, frameworks and methods provide useful reference points, but do not facilitate practice responsive to the real time demands of industry, nor a culture of innovation in teaching. More than ever, tertiary educators need localised, highly current and evolving understanding of their practice and context. Leading educators in the active co-production of teacher knowledge is thus essential to the sustainability of teaching institutions.

This paper outlines the rationale and roadmap for fostering teacher-led inquiry through providing tangible support for faculty learning communities and action research at RMIT Vietnam. These development activities ultimately aim at equipping teaching staff to navigate the shifting landscapes of global higher education settings.

### **Introduction**

*‘Teaching is considered to be a process to initiate, facilitate, and sustain students’ self-learning, self-exploration and self-actualisation;’ Cheng 2012 p107)*

*‘To be an effective teacher, you can never stop learning’ (RMIT Vietnam Professional Learning Community Member)*

Globalization presents numerous challenges for the development and leadership of teaching and learning in Higher Education. Teaching staff at universities around the globe must reconcile the varied expectations of an ever more diverse student body with their own beliefs regarding education. They must prepare students for rapidly evolving and unpredictable work environments, and they must grapple with the challenge of instilling not only disciplinary

knowledge in their students, but the interdisciplinary competencies and capabilities that are increasingly desired as ‘graduate attributes’. This paper will review some of the key contextual factors that contribute to the complexity of contemporary teaching and teacher development before reviewing some alternative approaches to traditional teacher education programs. A case example is then provided by the work of the Learning & Teaching Unit at RMIT International University, Vietnam, where teacher led professional learning communities, action learning and action research have been introduced as key initiatives from February 2014. Insights gained from the fledgling stages of this process and early feedback from teacher participants is illustrative, and may indicate the potential of such approaches for teacher development in comparable contexts.

### **Changing Contexts, Shifting Goalposts**

Much has been written in recent decades about the changing demands on teaching staff in higher education (see Tan 2012). While bridging the generation gap is an age old challenge, rapid social and technological change seem to be increasing the distance between teachers’ experiences and those of their young students. Teachers frequently lament that traditional sources of knowledge, authority and expertise do not resonate among students raised with Google and Wikipedia at their fingertips. Indeed, brick and mortar classrooms are being dramatically redesigned to support multiple focal points and draw attention away from the teacher as one of those knowledge sources. In these modern spaces teachers are being asked to implement student centred approaches they may never have experienced as a learner, and often to go further and move learning beyond the physical classroom, requiring them to navigate ever new spaces online. Amidst such fundamental shifts in the way that learning is conceptualized and managed, additional challenges are posed by the increasing diversity found in higher education classrooms, and the need to deliver curriculum in an inclusive manner. Increased transnationalism and accessibility of study abroad mean crossing sociocultural and linguistic borders in the classroom has become an everyday task. Teaching staff often need to accommodate students whose life experiences are vastly different from their own, and who may be learning through the medium of a foreign language. Schleicher (2012, p. 23) summarizes the challenges posed for teaching staff by contemporary expectations;

In the past, different students were taught in similar ways; today teachers are expected to embrace diversity with differentiated pedagogical practices. The goal of the past was standardization and conformity, today it is about being ingenious, about personalizing educational experiences; the past was curriculum centred, the present is learner centred.

Consequently, the efforts of higher education teachers are situated in an environment where change has become the only constant. They must be current, responsive and flexible, and their practice needs to be at once local and global - in fact a mirror image of the demands their students will face in the modern workplaces they are preparing to enter.

The notion of ‘work readiness’ now dominates statements of graduate attributes in higher education institutions around the globe, but what does the phrase ‘*work ready*’ actually mean in a

contemporary sense, and how are teaching staff to ensure their students attain this standard? Industry seems unable to answer this question with any certainty, as the spaces and modes in which people work continue to evolve. Tertiary institutions must therefore be dynamic and nimble, to not only mirror but anticipate the rapidly transforming social contexts which they serve. As Cheng notes, the challenge of equipping graduates with contemporary work skills can be daunting. Students are expected to graduate with the capacity to function and perform in a rapidly evolving environment and teachers are expected to provide learning that leads to the acquirement of ‘the high-level abilities needed for sustainable development’ as well as focusing on ‘lifelong learning, global networking, an international outlook, and the integration of IT’ (2012, p.103).

Preparing students for the future is now as much a process of instilling in them capacities for intercultural competence, resilience and adaptability as it is training them in specific skills or socializing them into particular disciplines, yet in many or even most instances higher education teachers themselves received no such training as undergraduates. In this context, a natural tension exists between the contemporary pressure to develop generic competencies & the traditions of education as a process of acquiring knowledge within a particular field.

If merely emphasizing the acquisition of information is now insufficient; it is imperative to consider how knowledge is used, interpreted and manipulated by learners. Graduates will need to critically evaluate the multiple and often competing sources of immediate information the internet has made available. Research skills are changing, as Schleicher (2012, p. 22) outlines in describing the new literacies expected of students;

literacy is about managing non-linear information structures, building one’s own mental representation of information as one finds one’s way through hypertext on the Internet, about dealing with ambiguity, interpreting and resolving conflicting pieces of information.

In a time when answers are frequently multiple or otherwise simply not yet known, teachers need to instil a resourcefulness in their students that they must also find within themselves as they develop strategies for facilitating new ways of learning, and actively engage in co-constructing localized, current and context specific knowledge of their own practice.

### **Responsive Teacher Development**

For teaching staff tasked with preparing students to thrive in emerging work environments, generic teacher development programs now fall short. Approaches, frameworks and methods provide useful reference points and solid foundation concepts, but do not facilitate practice responsive to the real time demands of industry or a culture of innovation in teaching. For those tasked with teacher development, actively engaging teaching staff in the development of their own skills, knowledge and ways of working is essential if higher education is to keep pace with the world beyond the campus gates;

Teachers must be able to be self-directed learners, able to use formal and informal learning environments to take on new knowledge and reflect on how that knowledge might impact on their professional practice (Taylor & Bodman 2012, p.254)

Based on the Finnish experience, developing a research-based approach is critical to teaching quality. Teachers should have a familiarity with current scholarship in learning and teaching and a reflective practice that allows for evidence-based teaching decisions (Krzywacki, Maaranen & Lavonen 2012). This approach is also conducive to the development of lifelong learning. As part of developing professionally, teachers need to be able to reflect on their experiences and how these relate to theory, and further on how this practice can be conceptualized and communicated to others. As part of this cycle ‘collaboration becomes essential as it forces participants to make their knowledge public and understood by others.’(Krzywacki, Maaranen & Lavonen 2012, p.297). Yet as Desrochers notes, these are not approaches typically embedded in teaching development, rather ‘one-shot workshops’ for faculty development - which do not appear to produce change in the complex area of teaching and learning - continue to be “the standard program offering of many teaching and learning centers” (2010, p.1).

Consequently, the Learning & Teaching Unit at RMIT Vietnam approached 2014 with a strong rationale for fostering teacher-led inquiry. Opportunities were created for teacher directed development of innovative practices to emerge, practices suited to the local dynamics of their classrooms and the global dynamics of their discipline. Specifically, the Learning & Teaching Unit has established and provided tangible support for professional learning communities in which action learning cycles and collaborative projects to improve learning and teaching are being fostered. In addition, curriculum within the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching & Learning - a recognized award program- has been rewritten to engage teaching staff pursuing this award qualification in undertaking an action research cycle, engaging participants in systematically addressing an issue or problem within their practice in a peer supported environment. Finally, the scholarship of learning and teaching is being encouraged through small grant awards and academic guidance. In the following sections of this paper, we will describe in more detail how some of these initiatives were implemented in the context of RMIT International University, Vietnam, before turning to a discussion of the challenges entailed in supporting teaching staff as they navigate the shifting landscapes of global higher education settings.

### **Professional Learning communities**

One form of professional development that provides teachers with the space to collaboratively reflect on their practice and develop a research based approach is the learning community. One of the key elements of successful professional learning communities is supportive and shared leadership, which deviates from the ‘leader as all-knowing expert’ model of leadership and thereby allows for the teaching community to bring about real change (Hord 1997). Facilitators must also foster a shared vision within the organisation on which a learning community focuses, as well as meet the physical and organisational conditions needed for a community to be initiated and thrive (Hord 1997). Desrochers (2010) also supports the use of learning communities for

sustainable teacher training, citing a study that demonstrates that those forms of learning that have been shown to be more effective with students, namely active, student-centred and group learning, are also more effective for teachers.

At RMIT International University in Vietnam, the establishment of professional learning communities needed to take into account the particularities of the context. Firstly, in a highly student focused environment working with a trimester model, teaching staff at the institution generally have less discretionary time to pursue research and development activities than those within a traditional semester based model. Secondly, available funding for learning community activities is minimal and so cannot be an incentive to staff in our context. Consequently, our learning community goals and the time commitment expected of participating teaching staff have by necessity been modest in the early stages. Teaching staff were thus asked to commit to six meetings of ninety minutes duration per semester, and to use initial meetings to negotiate achievable goals and outcomes for their work together. Additionally, while the learning communities were given scope to determine their own methods and aims, the concept of the learning community itself was new to most of our participants, and therefore it was considered that community pathways would be aided by grouping participants around themes in the first instance.

Three broad themes were identified during the first semester of 2014 that attracted sufficient commitment from participants to be considered sustainable; Innovations in Blended Learning, Scholarship of Learning & Teaching and Localization of Curriculum. Each of the groups developed its own manner of organizing meetings as was appropriate to the goals and preferences of the teaching staff involved. The Innovations in Blended Learning community focused initially on clarifying and negotiating definitions of and approaches to blended learning, and then began a more particularized focus on strategies for providing feedback to students in a blended mode. The Scholarship of Learning & Teaching community initiated a round of presentations of projects in development and areas of interest with the aim of identifying possible opportunities for collaboration. The third community, Localization of Curriculum, committed to an action learning process, which will be outlined in the following section.

### **Action Learning**

The negotiated aim of the Localization of Curriculum learning community was to implement an action learning process to provide the space for lecturers to reflect on the challenges of localization in the context of RMIT Vietnam and to collectively find practical teaching solutions. The outcome is intended to be documented examples outlining the teaching issue, reflection and action taken to be posted on the internal staff intranet. Taking as its starting point general principles of localisation from the literature, this group was focused on reflecting on the particular challenges of our context and how they could be resolved. Localization is a key requirement of teaching at RMIT Vietnam as the campus delivers RMIT degrees and curriculum is initially developed at RMIT Melbourne. Localization follows a constructivist method of teaching that connects new information to that already held by the student (Ryan & Hellmundt,

2005). This approach requires teachers to situate new concepts within the social and cultural context of the student which increases the relevance of the material and thereby increases student motivation to learn (Fernandes et al. 2013; Yamauchi, 2003).

A structured action learning cycle was initiated with each member of the group presenting an issue they faced that related to one or more of the principles of localisation. A vital characteristic of action learning is the questioning of the presenter by the group that generates reflection and prevents the session from becoming an interesting, but perhaps purposeless group discussion. The following quote from a participant vocalises their reaction to this new approach;

To be an effective teacher, you can never stop learning. The localising learning community was a valuable learning experience as we became the students, presenting concrete examples of challenges associated with localising the curriculum to our fellow colleagues across different disciplines. Rather than our colleagues simply telling us their opinions regarding how to respond to these challenges, they asked us questions that helped us come to our own solutions. This resulted in active learning experiences...[RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

Through the process of presenting an issue and arriving at an action plan after guided reflection, members are collaborating in a way that Krzywacki, Maaranen & Lavonen (2012) argue leads to professional development.

Action learning was agreed to be a practical and outcomes focused approach to the shared challenges of localisation as this 'learning by doing' provides tangible benefits to both the teachers and the institution. As one participant wrote;

It was great having the opportunity to discuss issues that arise when localising curriculum and to learn that we all have similar concerns and challenges across disciplines. Just being able to talk about these issues really motivated me, and I think others, to continue to strive at developing and refining our teaching practice. [RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

It is able to go beyond the limitations of generic training by providing a bridge between abstract theory and practice (Smith 2001). The process of constantly reflecting on practice is key to learning and professionalism in teaching (Altrichter 2005) and is appreciated by the teachers as this quote indicates;

I think the localizing learning community provided a structural way that helps me to reflect on my own teaching and a great place to exchange experience with others; we have shared that we are not alone in our approach towards localizing curriculum though we come from different disciplines.[RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

## Action Research

Educational action research typically engages teachers in working systematically through cycles of planning, action and reflection intended to effect improvements on student learning, often in a collaborative and peer supported manner. The systematic nature of action research combined with the immediacy of outcomes allows teachers to implement modifications and improvements to practice within the real time demands of their work, an advantage reflected in the comment below by one RMIT Vietnam teacher following an initial cycle of action research:

My experience of undertaking AR has been like a business cycle that we learn in theoretical macroeconomics. My AR implementation also went through ups and downs as in any standard business cycle. When unexpected things happened, I learned from that, tried to find ways to improve the plan and to move on the upper part of the cycle, eventually I attained some "small" successes (I hope to call that a success) and enjoy it very much[RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 165) write that;

There are two essential aims of all action research: to *improve* and to *involve*. Action research aims at improvement in three areas: firstly, the improvement of a *practice*; secondly, the improvement of the *understanding* of the practice by its practitioners; and thirdly, the improvement of the *situation* in which the practice takes place

Arguably, action research is particularly suited to the needs of teachers developing their practice in contemporary higher education as it provides an opportunity for them to develop their knowledge of context specific and current issues relevant to their work, and empowers them to take intentional action toward improvement as they move through their daily practices.

A 2013 curriculum enhancement of the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning, an award program offered for teaching staff development at RMIT VN and delivered by the Learning & Teaching Unit, provided an opportunity for our team to integrate a formal action research cycle into the requirements for completion of the program. Implementation of the new curriculum in the first semester has engaged a number of teaching staff in the process of 'planning, acting, observing and reflecting for strategic action (Kember 2006, p.85) in a peer supported environment. Teachers began by identifying an issue or area for improvement in their current practice, and progressed through a review of relevant literature to form a plan for action. Plans were shared with peers and critical input to further develop them was invited before implementation. Teaching staff then implemented actions designed to lead to improvements in learning, and collected observational and/or objective data (for example, assessment outcomes) to aid reflection upon and evaluation of the success of their implementations. Outcomes were again shared in presentations to peers. Participating teachers have responded positively to the opportunity this provided for them to not only focus upon practical issues directly impacting their work, but gain perspective from peers in the process, as expressed by this quote;

I haven't heard about the AR concept in my department before and I think it is something that can be useful for all lecturers or for a smaller team teaching a specific course. The collaborative aspect of an AR is a good platform to discuss about common challenges and sharing diverse teaching experiences. Consequently, as a new lecturer I can improve faster, feel supported and be proactive [RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

Like other initiatives outlined in this paper, initial feedback from participating teachers has been positive; teaching staff perceive the process to be relevant, useful and applicable across diverse areas of their practice, as the reflections below indicate:

Reflecting on this project and my action plan research I would say I have liked this new way of approaching research and find it quite flexible. As I chose to research a problem which is generalised to assignment work rather than specific to my particular discipline I noticed it had relevance for many of my colleagues... I also see potential for applying action research to other areas of my teaching [RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

I find the AR concept interesting and motivating ... it is very much aligned with the overall goal to improve teaching quality in the classroom [RMIT Vietnam Teacher]

### **Challenges & Learning**

While participant comments about their experiences in the first iteration of these Learning and Teaching initiatives have been positive, these new approaches to teacher education are not without their challenges. Time pressures are an obvious one. There are many competing claims for the time of higher education teachers, as they are often responsible for course administration as well as teaching, not to mention expectations that they are engaged with industry and discipline related research. The scheduling of learning communities as a regular commitment throughout the semester mitigates this to some extent as then teachers can include it in their time management plans. The close ties to their teaching practice of action research and action learning cycles also lessen the impression that it is an extraneous time commitment.

Another challenge is that introducing new ways of providing teacher training is often akin to a culture change within the higher education space. Perhaps the challenge is reflected in the results from OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (cited in Schleicher 2012) on teachers' attitudes and behaviours regarding professional development. This study indicated that although teachers recognise the value of professional development programs involving collaborative research, and consider the more traditional stand-alone programs less effective, they are more likely to attend the latter. It could thus be considered part of the role of leaders in education to encourage participation in more collaborative development endeavours by providing not only the time for them to be undertaken, but to reinforce the message that this is an effective and valued use of staff time.

## Conclusion

More than ever, tertiary educators need a localized, highly current and evolving understanding of their practice and context; engaging them in the active co-production of teacher knowledge is thus essential to the enduring vitality of contemporary teaching institutions. We believe that the types of professional development we have initiated at RMIT VN in 2014 and have described in this paper are able to have a more profound and sustainable impact on teacher development because the outcomes and relevance to practice are determined by the teachers themselves. However, this leads to a level of ambiguity in communicating to teachers about the exact nature of the development they will undergo. Unlike a traditional workshop focusing on a topic such as classroom management that will provide a specific set of techniques, teacher-led inquiry does not have a specified set of outcomes or deliverables prior to the teachers commencing the activity. Our position is thus that it is the role of leaders in educational institutions to actively advocate an adventurous, while evidence-based, approach to teacher development.

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