

ABSTRACT

EXPANDING BOUNDARIES: DEFINING AND FOSTERING AUTHENTIC STUDENT LEADERSHIP

The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism has meant that student leadership in Australia has to be re-considered and conventional thinking about student leadership has to be challenged. The development of genuine leadership is dependent on the process of reflection-in-action.

Processing and making sense of the lived experience contributes to understanding in our lives and valued life choices. Such processes of reflective practice can encourage human beings to become more aware of their beliefs, attitudes, judgments and assumptions and can contribute to personal growth and the development of authentic Christian leaders for the Church and the world. By engaging students in a continuous reflective process, they enter into conversation and critical analysis that integrates spiritual and social justice issues.

The paper will offer discussion of strategies that enable students to explore and enquire into their lived experience of commitment to community and mission engagement. There will be an examination of key student leadership experiences at ACU National and how reflective practice processes address this shift in the leadership paradigm and contribute to the development of effective and authentic student leadership.

BIOGRAPHIES:

Anne Ferguson is the national Manager of the newly-formed Mission Engagement Team. Anne has extensive experience in the area of Campus Ministry. Her focus has been working with young adults and university staff in the area of mission, leadership and justice education. She now leads a team whose focus is to bring the university's mission to life in the university setting and beyond.

Mary McInerney works in Mission Engagement on the Melbourne campus of ACU National and has extensive experience and skills in working with students especially in the area of Mission-based Community Engagement. Mary is active in a number of community groups and 'not-for-profit' community organizations.

There can be no doubting that the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism has offered a challenge to the higher education sector that, if taken seriously, will have a far-reaching impact on student leadership in tertiary education. If the challenge is taken up, then students and staff will pursue the meaning of authentic leadership. The challenge to move to a model of authentic student leadership is what the mission of ACU National calls forth from all members of its community. In particular reference to its students, it states that “its ideal graduates will be highly competent in their chosen fields and ethical in their behaviour, with a developed critical habit of mind, an appreciation of the sacred in life, and a commitment to serving the common good.” (Mission Statement, ACU National)

Is there a dividing line between pre VSU and post-VSU with regard to leadership? If one looks at the student associations as a particular model of pre-VSU student leadership, one would have to acknowledge that students were almost locked into a form of leadership that Joseph Rost would describe as “individual leaders doing leadership and followers doing followership”. The emphasis was unintentionally on “power and control”. (Rost as cited in Volckmann, 2005, p.7) The elected leaders were locked into a model of ‘management’ because ACU Student Associations were accountable nationally for the expenditure of almost \$800 000, a budget that called for extraordinary skills from inexperienced students, many of whom were less than 25 years old! The leadership training they undertook as members of the campus-based student associations was the traditional skills-based model that included topics like Meeting Procedures, Budgeting, Interpersonal Skills, Communication, Team Building and Time Management.

As students enrolled, they automatically became a member of the student association by paying a fee for student services. This was a fee that was collected by the university; a part of it was returned to the student associations to distribute the money as they chose. At larger universities, where student unions operate, the fees were collected on the assertion that the student unions were providers of services. At the relatively small campuses of ACU National, the money was typically allocated for subsidising social events such as harbour and river cruise tickets and the annual ball, free barbecues on a fairly regular schedule, sport which was seen as a high priority, meetings of the national student leadership body, payment of the allowance for the presidents on each of the campuses and the student Senator, payment for student diaries, funding to Student Services to assist students in need and funding of special events such as The Big Event and ACU Alive, both national gatherings of students.

The introduction of the VSU did not come as a shock! There had been numerous warnings. The Howard Government had foreshadowed change in 1996, announcing its intention to

introduce VSU. There were strong campaigns from students across the nation opposing the introduction of VSU and the legislation was only passed when the Howard Government gained control of the Senate in 2004. The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 was passed in the Senate on 9 December 2005, and received the Royal Assent on 19 December 2005.

So how did the introduction of the VSU impact on the students of ACU and in particular on its student leaders and the model of student leadership that was in operation? How can the impact of VSU be measured? Certainly, less money had a huge impact. In total in 2007, student associations of ACU National had \$331,000 available, a little more than a third of the funds that were available pre-VSU. As a result, there have been fewer barbeques and community events, very few took part in the recent national sporting event, Student Services no longer receives any funding for students in need. The Dean of Students, Tim O'Hearn (2007) has noted that since the introduction of VSU, he has observed across the campuses;

1. Less participation in association-organised events/occasions
2. Significantly fewer numbers are members now that they have a choice about paying for membership.
3. Fewer association-organised functions
4. Lower level of student association 'presence' on campus

He goes on to state that it is difficult to know "whether the cause is VSU or timetable or connected to factors mentioned in the AVCC poverty report."

When the members of the university's national student leadership association (ACUNSA) were asked to comment on the effects of VSU, they responded that there was a definite loss of community life and spirit – students were not prepared to hang around the campus if there was nothing on and whilst planned functions are very successful, there is a marked decrease in the number attending,

The Senate Committee alluded to this in its Report:

1.47 It is clear that if student organisations operating under the proposed legislation continue to offer the current membership and service models, then their organisations will fail. Failure of student organisations under the proposed VSU legislation will not necessarily be the product of the legislation but could be as a result of:

- *poor administration;*

- *failure to effectively market their services;*
- *failure to respond to student demand; or*
- *failure to adapt membership models to a voluntary environment.*

And again,

1.56 *While there will always be a need for student leadership in the organisation of provision of services and amenities, the nature of this leadership will change with the different expectations of university life post-VSU. ...We can expect both the emergence of different student leadership, and the re-invention of those who adapt to change. (Senate Report: Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005)*

What will this “different student leadership” look like? The Mission Engagement Team of ACU National has taken this task seriously and, before the introduction of VSU, had begun to enter into a number of processes with students with a view to bringing into being a model of authentic student leadership, one that moves towards Rost’s model where “leadership does not reside in a person or even several persons. Leadership resides in a relationship among people.” (Rost as cited in Volckmann, 2005, p.5). This is truly authentic leadership. It is one that moves away from the control or management framework; a leadership that is not driven by economics. According to Rost, authentic leadership depends on the presence of four elements: “that the activities be influential, that is, noncoercive....that the activities be done by people in a relationship...that the activities involve a real significant change ..and that the activities reflect the purposes of the people in the relationship, not just a single person.” (Rost as cited in Volckmann, 2005, p.5)

If this is to be considered in the development of an authentic leadership model for students at ACU National, then it is clear that a the process of reflection needs to be become focal to any form of leadership preparation that take place.

Engaging with students in reflective procedures so that they can make sense and meaning in their lives is a core component in some course work at ACU. It is also included in leadership programs that are led by the Mission Engagement teams. Its purpose is to encourage new learnings and understandings. “Our own experiencing is the primary source for understanding our own way of being in our lives. Understanding leads to clarification of what we know; this leads to consideration of how we want to be in our lives; this leads to exploration of possibilities of choices and consequences, thence to choice of value and their applications” (Lett, 2007) Companioning others in a dialogue of inquiry into meaning is part

of group reflection. "Reflection is a continuous process and can incorporate a number of possibilities and there are a number of different ways that students engage in reflection. Student empowerment and change are enhanced by reflection where students take an active role in the construction of meaning." (Densten and Gray 2001, p. 122.)

A number of key questions need to be addressed: How do students name, and rename and describe their experiences in order to move as authentic leaders into the future? How do students make meaning and sense together of their experiences? How can students enter into reflective procedures that are different, engaging and lead them to meaning? How can they collaborate, co-construct meaning together? How do they personally move beyond the known to construct new knowing? Engaging collaboratively with each other is fundamental. "Above all, we need to be able to connect to the heart, the spirit and the soul in order to give meaning to our existence and place life and work in proper meaningful perspective." (Duignan, 2002, p.8) The creativity that this process both allows and encourages is one that is closely connected to the spiritual and there is space within this model to move to a process of theological reflection.

At ACU "specific courses embody particular aspects of the Mission". (McMullen) University - Community Engagement and volunteering activities are extra curricular requirements that are linked to the institution's Mission; they also include opportunities for personal reflection. Community-based experience is a compulsory unit of work for some students, while teaching and learning courses offers service learning that also provides students with vocational experiences and a "greater sense of social responsibility and civic engagement." (Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead, 2006, p. 216). With the rise of community engagement opportunities for students at ACU National, it is an important challenge that we make genuine efforts to develop appropriate structures within the university where students have opportunities to enter into reflection and engage in reflective procedures that lead to meaning. There must be an adequate allocation of time for students to meet, to reflect, to collaborate, to lead.

Students are confronted with many rich experiences during their university life and these opportunities can lead to personal growth. It is essential that students have the space and opportunities in groups to articulate and describe their experiences, express their feelings and thoughts and synthesize their learnings. At ACU, students enter into a number of different reflective opportunities e.g. reflecting in groups about the Mission of ACU and how they will live this during their university life, theological reflection, service-learning reflection, faith and spiritual reflection.

“Another way to think about this process is by asking What? So What? Now What? The ‘what’ is the experience. What did I experience today? What did I experience today both from the outside and from the inside? What did I see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Touch? What did I Feel? The “so what” is the reflection. So what that I had this experience? So what that I felt this way? What does it all mean? How can I integrate the experience into my life? How will the experience change me? The “Now What” leads us back to action. Now what do I do as a result of having this experience and reflecting on it? What small things can I do? How can I think differently? Is there something larger I can begin to do? Are there others that can help me in my efforts? This ‘Now What’ brings us back to another experience and the spiral continues. What? So What? Now What?” (www.creighton.edu/ccsj/home/aboutourlogo.html)

It is important that students are led into reflective procedures that not just record what they did but provide the means for a deeper level of meaning-making. The depth of reflection leads students to examine how what they do impacts on themselves and others. Journeying with students in group reflective procedures enables “potential for transformational thinking and social action is increased.” (Green, 2006, p.4). Some opportunities for group reflection lead students to co-construct meanings together and it is within these reflective opportunities, meaningful interactions and relationships develop. It is in these conversations and exchanges that students encourage and energise each other to make a positive contribution and make a difference to society. “Mutuality of experiences provides a context for understanding the place of self in the overall scheme of things. It helps ground the synthetic self, often displayed in organisational settings, in an interconnected and independent framework for meaningful interactions.” (Duignan, 2002, p.6)

In engaging with students in community engagement work and then spending time in group reflection, the following effective inquiry procedures are incorporated. An important starting point for reflection is to start with the student’s personal experience and then to inquiry into the experiences. The individual is encouraged to be present to the experience – adopting an “opened presence to the phenomenon that is unfolding.” (Giorgi, 1976, p.313). They create a representation of the experience – this can be represented in a number of different ways - visually, through clay, collage, postcards, movement, pose, etc.

They are then asked to describe every detail of the representation that is before them, knowing that each aspect holds the possibility for potential meaning. They enter into a conversation with another person in the group about the experience, using the representation as a focus for dialogue. With all the material gathered to this point, they enter into a ‘reduction’ process, selecting key words/phases that hold some significance from both the

description and the dialogue. Group members are invited to respond to each other and this can be expressed in various forms – a drawing, words, music, objects, poetry, etc

The invitation is given: “What is the theme that emerges for me out of this inquiry?” A statement of meaning –making or a creative synthesis is created.

When this process of reflection is practiced, there are a variety of outcomes. Students learn from their experience; the inquiry procedures that the students engage in lead to deeper understanding; students experience a deeper sense of engagement and connectedness within the group; the reflective procedures lead to engagement; the essence is that the reflection was collaborative and that relationships had developed in the group; the inquiry procedures were engaging and creative. Having reflective procedures offers an opportunity to reflect about one’s own personal life but also allows others into that reflective space.

Students, in their evaluations, indicate that have come to the following conclusions about facilitated and facilitating reflection:

- “Students and staff entered into conversations together and created reflective time and space “.
- “I feel I am a more centred person for knowing so much more about what I felt and how I think”
- “The relationships that developed were important; it was not just coming to something as a one-off but developing relationships and getting to know each other at another level.”
- “It is applicable in many contexts –education, personal knowing”

At ACU National, various initiatives have been developed by the Mission Engagement Team so that students might make meaning out of their experience and reflection on that experience. The Big Event, a national gathering of students from every campus, began in 2004. It drew together students from across the six campuses, who showed potential for leadership. They were drawn together to participate in an exercise with the stated aims of developing a nation-wide ACU National student community event; of engaging in social and conversational activities around personal, social, leadership, professional and spiritual issues and of inspiring participants, as a result of this experience, to actively engage in their local campus and communities. Successful applicants were not always those of the elected student leadership group on the campus. The letters of application highlighted that amongst the student population, there were unidentified leaders who were genuine in their desire to engage with the university and wider community. They really wanted to “make a difference”.

In his words of introduction to The Big Event, the Vice-Chancellor, Peter Sheehan wrote:

“These events have the potential to be life-changing. You have the opportunity to focus on how you can make a difference, in your personal life and on your campus, by focused attention on the three aspects of TBE’s themes: awareness, advocacy and action. I urge you to take up the challenges that I am sure will be presented to you. You will not be alone. There are many persons who want to be part of creating a better world.

The activities of the four-day program provided many opportunities for reflection. After each of the key-note speakers, there was “Stop Time”, a time of silence with key questions related to the topic. At least twice a day, participants met in “Contact Groups”, where they reflected on the workshops they had participated in during the day. They were asked to transfer the results of their reflection into some form of creative design. It was a process of reflection leading to action.

The outcomes of The Big Event 2006 illustrate that authentic leadership is being exercised on the campuses of ACU National. This is illustrated by the following example. Two students who had never held any formal leadership positions on the campus participated in a workshop on Homelessness that was led by a graduate from their campus. They were inspired to do something more and wanted to encourage others to be aware and be involved in some form of reflection and action. They met with the Mission Engagement Team and other key people on the campus. As a result, Homeless Awareness Week came into being and various activities were organised. The students whose idea it had been designed posters, fliers and emails. All members of the community were invited to an open forum with representatives from local organisations who work with people who are homeless. The weekly liturgy centred on homelessness. There were works of art strategically placed around the campus to raise awareness about the plight of families and individuals on the streets; members of Campus Operations were involved in preparing various spaces; the student association provided a barbeque; students and staff combined to play a soccer match which raised funds for Rosies’ Street Van. It became obvious that through these community events people had really connected to the mission of the university.

Authentic leadership had been practised where these leaders had focussed ‘on the best in people – on harmony, charity and good works.’ (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1998). They had not depended on funding that, because of VSU, was no longer available. Amongst the leaders, there had been collaboration, a shared purpose, division of labour and a learning environment. (Astin and Astin, 2000 p.11)

It is interesting to note that at ACU National every President of the Student Association in 2007 had been a participant in The Big Event of 2006. Across the campuses, there are students engaged in various forms of social justice and community engagement. Students for Awareness groups are active on two campuses. They "seek to make a specific contribution to its local, national and international community" [ACU Mission] by

- ✓ informing ourselves and raising our awareness
- ✓ identifying and sharing information on relevant issues with the wider community, and with the local community in particular
- ✓ supporting and leading actions as discerned by the committee."

(Signadou Mission Statement of Students for Awareness)

There are Young Vinnies groups that have been strengthened by The Big Event, a number of students have signed up for Night Patrol, others are working with those in high-rise inner-city housing. On another campus with a large number of international students there has been a celebration of the richness offered by the diversity of these students. The "Make Poverty History" has become a strong rallying point for the rights of human beings internationally.

It is important to note the role of mentoring in the development of authentic leadership. As part of the structure of The Big Event, participants are given the opportunity to take part in a number of workshops. The Mission Engagement Team identifies graduates of the university to conduct these workshops. These graduates are recognised as being authentic leaders, making a positive contribution to the community in which they are engaged. Many of these students are relatively close in age to the participants, although across the workshop facilitators there is quite an age range. There is in operation here a two-way process. The graduates are being recognized as leaders; they are now acting as models and actively engaged mentors. They are often the reason that the participants get involved or are interested in further activity. (Kornives, Mainella, Owen, Osteen & Longerbeam, 2005) Some of the feedback from students in their evaluation of The Big Event workshops bears this out:

- *She was really inspirational. I wanted to change the world after her workshop*
- *Very informative about poverty and the wealthy. Shared stories of volunteering etc. It helped put an emphasis on all we had learnt on our Big Event journey. I feel more empowered, knowing a range of initiatives that I can get involved with.*
- *She hit the benchmark for what I expected from TBE workshops. She led the group to the edge of their comfort zone - where some great learning was achieved. A very enlightening and stirring workshop, which profoundly affected me.*

- *He was humorous, inspiring and interesting. It was wonderful to talk about 'living a life in Christ' with an ordinary everyday person rather than a theologian or priest. It was great to hear from someone who had been a student on my own campus. It was good that he spoke about his own experiences. I got to reflect on my own faith without being pressured. Personal growth is what I really gained.*

There were other forms of mentoring. Students who exhibited strong leadership potential were targeted by the Planning Committee, which had formerly consisted of Mission Engagement team members, to become part of that committee for The Big Event. They were involved in decision-making at every level of planning; they were asked to represent a student viewpoint when decisions were being made; they were given specific responsibilities. They were helped to set high expectations for themselves. There was evidence that, in response to positive reinforcement, some of the students became self-directed. (Kornives et al., 2005)

As noted earlier, the type of student leadership exercised on campuses pre-VSU came out of the responsibility they had for the dispersal of funding. No longer can those involved in leadership development teach what has been traditionally taught. In order to reflect this new paradigm, there is need to encourage them in consensus, cooperation and collaboration rather than competition and conflict. Students need to be led in a process of understanding the nature of transformational change. They must learn to challenge the status quo, create new visions and sustain the movement. (Rost, 1993)

What is it that is held in common by members of the university community? The starting place is the mission of the university and since 2006, student leaders have been involved in "Exploring the Mission" workshops. They are led, through reflection, to consider the purpose of a mission statement, key words and phrases, the underlying beliefs and values, signs of welcome, activities and events, large projects, things that draw attention to the university from the outside. They are then asked to reflect on the implications that these things have for themselves as student leaders. As a group, they have to come up with one key statement about their living of the ACU Mission and how they hope to continue to live this in a specific way as the Student Association of their particular campus. This is now done on every campus. When students were asked what they had learnt about the mission, they stressed the importance of community and the place of collaboration in achieving important goals. There was a recognition that their purpose was to build a sense of community and that equity, justice and spirituality were integral to their lives as members of the ACU National community. They came to an understanding that the mission was the basis of their

commitment to students, and that it gave them goals to work towards. There was a realization that everyone in the university community shared this mission. It became the basis of their goal-setting for the year. As a result, community engagement and spirituality became an important focus for their work. Whilst less money had a profound impact on the range of activities that were on offer, money had also lost some of its power. Making “a specific contribution to its local, national and international communities” as well as having “a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and for the dignity of all human beings” was not dependent on how much funding was available. (ACU Mission Statement)

Changing the face of student leadership at ACU National is a slow and steady process. In some ways it could be said that the introduction of VSU has almost been a ‘blessing in disguise’. Students have been challenged to work more collaboratively. The student community can no longer rely on a few willing workers to carry the responsibility for leadership on the campus and across the university. All members of the ACU National community are challenged to live the mission; academics must ensure that the mission is integrated in the curriculum. Reflection must become integral to all that is done in our work with the students.

For those who work with students in the development of a model of authentic leadership, the challenge is put succinctly by Duignan, 2003, p.22):

“Many current leadership preparation and development programs need to be transformed by engaging participants in educative processes that draw on their life experiences and inner wisdom to better equip them make informed and wise choices in situations of paradox and dilemma. An understanding and appreciation of values, ethics, spirituality, art and great literature, including poetry, as well as habits of critical reflection on key issues of the day, can be important resources for leader formation programs.”

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