

## **For sustained commitment to enhancing the transition to higher education through improving accessibility to science, peer mentoring and leading the First Year Experience program**

### **Overview**

In 21 years as a full-time lecturer at Australian Catholic University (ACU National), I have been deeply committed to making higher education study satisfying and enjoyable for all students. I have developed a focus on the transition into the first year, as I believe that the experience of entry into study has a strong influence on the whole experience for the student. This has led to my work in establishing the ACU National First Year Experience (FYE) program. Recognising that academic staff too need support, I have established a peer mentoring system so that other academics, in turn, can provide suitable support for students.

### **Approaches to learning and teaching support that influences, motivates and inspires students to learn (Criterion 1)**

#### ***Long-standing work in science education***

Many of our students commence first year with limited discipline background or experience and those studying Applied Science for Practice in the Nursing course (the area in which I teach at first-year level) often approach science with barriers firmly in place. Their experience of teaching and learning at tertiary level should excite and challenge students – not overwhelm them, sap their confidence and expose their inadequacies.

All disciplines have their own particular language, but science seems to instil the most anxiety in this regard. This is often paralysing for first year students, particularly, but not exclusively, for older people returning to study, or those whose first language is not English. Using plain English and skilfully explaining technical terms are the best ways to show students that the material is well within their reach. I ensure that I explain the roots and meaning of the language so that students can extrapolate and learn new terms easily. As their confidence in the milieu increases, so does their capacity to learn, retain and build on requisite knowledge.

By encouraging students to see that it is acceptable, indeed expected, that they will need assistance in learning the language of the discipline as well as the content, I aim to help them not to feel overwhelmed. It is important to realise that science is not an esoteric field open only to the select few, but one that permeates our entire life and that it is, moreover, fascinating and accessible. To facilitate this, I encourage students to work with one another, both in my classes and also outside, as explaining a concept to another is perhaps the best way of learning it oneself. This, again, helps build their confidence and ease of operating in their chosen field.

Contextualising my teaching helps students to see the relevance of the material taught and its importance in their professional lives. Understanding and applying the content are essential for safe practice as nurses, and so relevance is vital. I make it a practice to show students the reasons they need to know something and how it fits in the bigger picture – they are more likely to accept it then, even if they cannot yet see themselves why it matters. I do this by making things as related as possible to the real world which we inhabit; this is perhaps best described as ‘opportunistic learning’. I also model to students the way that patterns, mnemonics and rhymes can assist in forming memory, as a thorough grasp of material learnt in first year is essential for building and applying knowledge in subsequent years. When students who ‘know’ that they are ‘no good at science’ suddenly realise that they do, in fact, understand a concept, the doors swing open and their learning journey is now manageable and even enjoyable. To achieve such a mindset early in the first year of a student’s course amplifies the chances of their continuing successfully with their study, and the resultant boost to their confidence can help them to extend themselves in other areas as well.

These are important dimensions of all teaching, but, arguably, they are most important for first year students when they are commencing their tertiary studies. Fundamentally, and irrespective of subject or even discipline, I believe that it is the 'how' of one's teaching, and one's enthusiasm, which remain with people, and I have tried to model this for my students. That students respond positively to my approach and care sufficiently to tell me, as in this recent email, is wonderfully rewarding and encouraging.

*. . . this is a good opportunity to tell you that I still really enjoy your lectures, and even more, your tutorials. You make the subject matter palatable, you insist on good grammar, and you like Monty Python. I know this sounds terribly boot licking, but to tell you the truth, it is nothing but a heartfelt 'thank you', for making a subject that I thought I would hate, into a subject that I look forward to attending. My Dad has always said that a good teacher can get you interested about anything, no matter what the subject, and you get me interested about such subjects as the immune and musculoskeletal systems. My thanks.*

### ***The First Year Experience Program***

The first experiences that a student has in higher education are pivotal in determining the quality and degree of ongoing engagement with the university community. My teaching has sought to help students enjoy these new experiences and to feel that this is an endeavour where staff and students can work in concert to achieve a great deal. Students blossom when they feel valued and where it is safe to take risks and make mistakes, and I try to create such an environment in my classes.

Each year over 5,000 students commence study at ACU National. Some students find this such a daunting and overwhelming experience that they withdraw, while others fail to reach their potential. In response to these concerns, ACU National explored the establishment of a program across its six campuses to support the transition to university. My role as Course Coordinator for several of the School's courses involved welcoming new students to university life and to the School, and advising and supporting them in matters related either directly or tangentially to their courses. This experience, coupled with my concern about how we can help first year students in their perceptions of, and response to, this new and often unsettling phase of their lives, led to an invitation to join the working party that recommended the establishment of ACU's First Year Experience (FYE) program. In 2007, I was appointed national coordinator for the FYE program, working with six campus-based local officers.

In this capacity, I have initiated programs that are aimed at supporting the transition period, both formally and informally. These include developing and facilitating the adoption of a University-wide Orientation Week program aiming to offer opportunities for equal participation to all students while meeting local needs; the institution of a series of academic skills workshops for new students in each semester; and the creation and oversight of a Blackboard [web-based] site for all commencing students. I have also developed teaching resources tailored to the specific needs of ACU's first year students.

The University's FYE program is now in its second year. Equitable experience is important for a multi-state institution, and this year I initiated a plan for an Orientation Week program incorporating course-specific academic introductory sessions in addition to the general introduction to higher education and social events. This aimed to ensure a common experience for new students across all campuses, while allowing for, and encouraging, local expression. Feedback from campuses to the official University coordinating committee indicated that this approach had helped to produce an improved Orientation Week experience for both students and staff. Participants commented favourably on the opportunity to meet others from their Faculties/Schools, and several campuses reported that the improved structuring of each day encouraged more students to remain on campus for other activities. In response to common and other issues arising from this new process, I have now established a Blackboard site where the six campus

Orientation Week committees can share knowledge, experience and questions, in an interactive and ongoing manner.

The student cohort at ACU National comprises many first-generation university students as well as many from disadvantaged backgrounds. Making their transition to tertiary study as easy and enjoyable as possible, within a limited resource environment, is in keeping with the University's mission statement. The geographic and cultural diversity in the institution mean that the virtual environment is essential to fostering a sense of community amongst our student body. I work with the campus FYE coordinators to develop and manage a Blackboard site for all new students, undergraduate and postgraduate, where students can communicate with one other and with staff, and build virtual communities that meet their needs. The value to students of this site is evidenced by the number of visits. Over the course of 2007 the site had 6,393 visits that explored 16,140 functional areas (discussions, information sites and so on). This year already, over a period of just 14 weeks, there have been 7,593 visits with 18,818 functional areas accessed. The majority of the discussion visits consisted of student replies to their peers' queries or comments, indicating that the students are, indeed, forming their own organic communities.

Helping students to discover their own optimal learning style, and to accept it as valid, is essential if they are to do as well as they can. My experiences from course coordination and in teaching large first-year classes have demonstrated that the needs of a mature-age student, for example, may differ from those of an international student in many ways, yet overlap in others. In 2007, in response to perceived student needs on the Melbourne campus, I initiated a weekly series of academic skills workshops for students commencing mid-year. Students, academic and academic support staff were asked to suggest areas of greatest need and the program was developed accordingly. I actively encouraged other academic staff to inform their students of the existence and the real benefits of this program. The success of this has led to its now being offered for each intake period at this campus, and also at other campuses.

### ***Supporting learning for first year students by enabling colleagues to enhance their approaches to teaching***

Essential to determining the quality of a student's learning experience is an individual's participation in academic and extra-curricular activities. Of equal import, however, is the role of the teacher. I aim to contribute to the University community by helping staff, both continuing and contract, to reflect on and enhance their own teaching practices. My philosophy is to model and encourage, not to pronounce. In recognition of my interest in this area and, with the University supportive of this approach, in 2006 I was invited, by ACU's Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, to develop and run a peer-mentoring program for my colleagues, "*Teaching skills development through peer observation and mentoring*", to help develop the skills and techniques that are important in all teaching, but particularly so at first-year level.

In 2006, I was one of two staff selected from previous winners of ACU's Excellence in Teaching awards to develop and run this program, aimed at facilitating the development of other academic staff in areas that relate directly, though not exclusively, to first-year classes. I believe strongly in experiential learning, and, in light of the extensive literature on the formal mentoring process, this project aimed to provide a supportive, encouraging and outcome-oriented group experience where staff could share their own skills and learn from others. Many of our staff are part of a very small discipline-base on campus, and thus may feel isolated in their growth as teachers in their field.

Our contention was that equipping staff with a diverse array of techniques and skills would enhance the quality of their teaching and thus the students' learning experience. As I believe good practice and techniques can cross disciplinary boundaries, and as there are few opportunities for staff in disparate areas to discuss and learn from one other in a way that is immediately useful, I was particularly keen to ensure this group comprised a variety of disciplines. The benefit of this was borne out by participants' responses

such as *“The benefits of talking to your peers about teaching and sharing strategies and ideas have been most worthwhile”* and *“I was surprised at the extent to which tutors in unrelated disciplines could provide ideas that could be adapted across disciplines”*.

The success of the 2006 program, exemplified by responses such as *“This was a source of mutual support where particular and shared issues could be aired”* and *“... some specific ideas I have used, but it also started me thinking critically about how to make tutorials work better in terms of where the student might start from [and] how effectively the time is spent”*, saw it extended not only for further semesters but also to another campus. The style is able to be adapted to perceived areas of interest and need, as for example when assessment became the focus in 2007.

Recent adaptations to the program include an ongoing Blackboard unit for all staff, casual and permanent, within my School, which will be regularly updated to contain necessary and useful information as well as examples of practices that staff feel could be of use to others, such as past unit outlines, assessment ideas, tutorial activities and assessment rubrics.

Many of ACU’s largest first-year classes are taught by new, and some by casual, staff and I am aware that the support for those in such situations is often tenuous with regard to academic professional learning. To reach staff at all six campuses, I developed – and continue to develop – a suite of resources in areas such as large group teaching, use of PowerPoint, use of WebCT/ Blackboard, and assessment strategies, which staff can access online. This initiative has, in part, been adapted and extended from the unit I co-teach in ACU’s Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, *“Contexts and Issues in Higher Education”*, and from my involvement in the above-mentioned project, *“Teaching skills development through peer observation and mentoring”*.

**How the contribution has influenced student learning and engagement, been sustained over time, and been recognized.**

My contributions to teaching were recognized by ACU National in 2004 when I received the University’s Excellence in Teaching Award, and by the invitation from ACU’s Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning to develop the peer mentoring program, described above, across all three Faculties. The extension of this program from Melbourne to other campuses testifies to its value to the University as noted in the email from the Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning:

*Just a note to say thank you ... Your willingness to share your time, experiences of the program and insights ... were much appreciated. Again my congratulations on what you achieved last year - it is not surprising given the careful and detailed attention that you gave to the program planning and delivery. I look forward to your involvement again in this coming semester.*

My effectiveness in advancing student learning and the wider student experience has been recognised by the invitation to fulfil other roles, such as national FYE coordinator, and by membership of Faculty and University working parties and committees concerned with academic honesty, podcasting and online enrolment. I have chaired the Teaching and Learning Committee of the School, and have been appointed by the Dean of Arts and Sciences both to Course Review Committees within my own Faculty and as the external University representative for other Faculties’ reviews. These activities have all been focussed on improving the student experience.

It is gratifying to know that one’s efforts bear fruit. My focus as a University teacher for more than two decades has been to listen to, support and encourage my students and my colleagues in the joint endeavour of learning. That to do this successfully requires more than merely academic ability is illustrated by this comment, which I treasure: *“Laurine is an everything mentor!”*