Leading learning in Australian tertiary institutions: Narrative support for unit coordinators

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This research investigates the experience of unit coordinators across Australia. It builds on an earlier Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project that examined and clarified the role of unit coordinators as leaders of learning in higher education (UCaLL). In this paper we focus on the first phase of the project that involved crafting narrative accounts from semi-structured interviews describing the lived experiences of participants. We wanted to know how unit coordinators perceive their role as leaders of learning in higher education and whether the support provided to them met their needs. Nine themes were identified among the narrative accounts and these include; teaching and assessment, starting out, managing workloads and complexity, leading learning and feeling isolated. We found that unit coordinators welcomed our interest in their work, although many did not view themselves as leaders of learning in their institutions. We also found that few unit coordinators described strong institutional support for their role, instead relying on building supportive relationships with colleagues and that the development of a 'just in time-just for me' website interested our participants.

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretive research is to investigate the experience of unit coordinators in a selection of Australian universities. The study builds on an earlier project funded through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) that examined and clarified the role of unit coordinators as leaders of learning in higher education (UCaLL), (Roberts, Brooker & Butcher, 2011). Unit coordinators are described as leaders of learning who proactively and professionally support scholarly teaching approaches to students and staff that reflect contemporary disciplinary content and practice (Roberts et. al., 2011). The findings of earlier projects also revealed that there is little targeted support in place for unit coordinators to handle the many issues that arise from leading a unit of study (Cohen, Bunker, & Ellis, 2007; Lefoe, Parrish, Hart, Smigiel, & Pannan, 2008). A major study undertaken by Scott, Coates, and Anderson (2008), also acknowledged that existing training resources do not fit the 'just in time-just for me' demand.

The aims of this project are twofold. First, we are developing narratives from the lived experiences of unit coordinators to provide relevant 'just in time-just for me' support for their peers. Second, we are exploring the availability of training and useful resources relevant to university unit coordinators and, linking them to the narratives. Our narratives and training/research links will be available via a purpose developed website. This research is designed to reinvigorate and strengthen engagement among academics responsible for unit coordination. While much of the leadership

development in higher education focuses on the more formal and traditional leader our research focuses on leading learning from the Unit Coordinator's perspective. Our research questions are:

How do unit coordinators perceive their role as leaders of learning in higher education?
How does the support provided to unit coordinators in this leadership role meet their needs?

Method

Our research and development study is being conducted in two phases with the crafting of narratives from semi-structured interview transcripts forming the first phase. Academic developers across Australia were invited to nominate colleagues willing to participate in the study. Fifty two semi-structured interviews were conducted with unit coordinators from twelve universities across four Australian states beginning late 2010 and during the early months of 2011. From our base in Western Australia data collection occurred in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Interviews are continuing during 2011 in Western Australia. Seventeen narratives were also developed from semi-structured interview transcripts from the UCALL project (Roberts et. al., 2011).

Our semi-structured interviews were initiated to gather information about participants': job satisfaction; their opportunities and requirements for professional development and; their perceptions of leading learning. After agreeing to an interview participants were asked several introductory questions, and then invited to describe unit coordination as they experienced it. With each participant's permission interviews were taped for later transcription and the crafting of narratives. On completion, each narrative (or case study or vignette) was returned to the participant for permission to use on our website.

Narrative accounts, were selected as our qualitative research strategy because they permit life-like and powerful stories focused on 'the lived experience' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narratives also enable participants' stories and descriptions of experience to be honoured and given status (Conle, 2003; Pepper & Wildy, 2009). Such descriptions support the criteria for 'good educational research' as they contribute to peoples' well-being (Hostetler, 2005).

Through analysing our narratives, we answered our research questions. Initially, we searched through our narratives and identified phrases describing aspects of the unit coordinators work. For example, phrases such as "I had three weeks to sort out the curriculum, find tutors and text books for students"; "nothing was left behind; it was a case of sink or swim", and "I received little guidance so had to find out how to do things for myself" were categorised as Starting Out. Similarly, phrases such as "In the short term my research is on the back burner"; "see some tension between research and teaching expectations"; "I work to be strategic and marry my research and teaching agenda" and; " must choose between focusing on research into chemistry or education

research or simply move away from both to teach" were categorised as Research/Teaching Dilemma.

After several iterations we categorised the phrases into a number of themes before reducing them to a manageable number. Our next step was to ascertain how unit coordinators coped with the challenges they met in their role. To do this we categorised the many challenges referred to within our narrative accounts and looked for patterns (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

As our one page narratives become available on the purpose developed website, we are also uploading generic resources linked to the themes identified within them. Thus, we are building a resource for unit coordinators so that they may access information, just in time, to meet their need for information and support.

Data analysis

After intense interrogation nine themes emerged from our initial data analysis and these are listed in decreasing order of frequency in Table 1 below. Participants were not restricted to one topic of discussion so several themes were identified in each narrative account.

Table 1: Percentage frequency of narrative themes

Theme	% frequency
Teaching and assessment	60
Starting out	44
Managing workloads and complexity	41
Maintaining and improving unit quality	32
Administering, complying with policy	28
Leading learning	25
Working with sessional staff	15
Research/teaching dilemma	13
Feeling isolated	13

From Table 1 it is clear that comments on teaching and assessment, starting out, and managing workloads and complexity, appear most frequently among the narratives. The research/teaching dilemma appears, with feeling isolated, as the least frequent themes drawing comment from participants. Numerous specific challenges are identified within each theme with behaviours perceived to minimise the challenges of unit coordination also identified by participants. These behaviours are listed in Table 2.

From the information tabled it is clear that participants rely heavily on their colleagues, building relationships and communicating with others to minimise the challenges they face as unit coordinators. Organising and accessing formal training are also considered helpful.

Table 2: Behaviours identified to minimise challenges within narratives

Narrative theme	Behaviour to minimise challenges
Teaching and assessment	Build rapport with students
	Seek mentors
	Access formal training
Starting out	Informal networks
	Seek mentors
	Access formal training
Managing workloads/complexity	Communicate effectively and share responsibilities
	Plan and prioritise
Maintaining/improving quality	Communicate, collaborate with colleagues
	Implement small changes initially
Administration/complying with policy and technology	Create a checklist of key deadlines and policies
Leading learning	Act confidently
	Model professionalism and conscientiousness
	Be organised
	Demonstrate enthusiasm
Working with sessional staff	Communicate clear expectations
	Access teaching and learning support centre
Researching/teaching dilemma	Negotiate workload allocation with Head of School
Feeling isolated	Seek mentors
	Build relationships with colleagues

Three narratives are included to illustrate our data. All narratives have a title to distinguish them from other narratives. The first, Organised chaos, was written from an interview transcript gathered during the UCaLL project and describes the work of an experienced unit coordinator who has become familiar with her role.

Organised chaos

When I think about my role as unit coordinator I think 'organised chaos'. I mean that the role is labour intensive and involves a variety of different abilities and skills so it covers everything from knowing the content through to delivering the material. I think about the administration, working with sessional staff, timetabling, ensuring equipment is ready for class and making sure appropriate rooms are ready for class. I can appreciate that my experience as unit coordinator in the performing arts may be different to that of others in different fields. For instance, we have specific space, rehearsal and equipment needs.

I began coordinating units at this university three years ago after working as a unit coordinator for a few years previously at another university. My understanding of unit coordination began earlier while working as a sessional and asking what others probably saw as 'dumb questions'. At first I expected to receive some form of training

and when I realised it wasn't going to happen I started asking questions of my line manager or people in adjoining offices. There were many times I received no pre-warning about timetable request deadlines or deadlines for ordering textbooks and library requests. For much of the first two years I was in reaction mode until the fog cleared and I realised there is an annual sequence and predictable deadlines keep recurring.

Now that I am more familiar with the system I know how to organise most things for myself. I coordinate about seven units each year; teaching in three and delivering lectures in the others. Because I remember the difficulties of sessional work I try to help our sessional staff concentrate on their area of expertise so I look after much of the administration involving their classes. For example, I ensure duplicate sessions are timetabled on the same day for them, do the photocopying, locate recent texts and articles for them and generally monitor their classes' progress. It is important that I know how students are progressing so I consolidate all marks and often attend the final performance sessions. Each semester I spend time with each sessional staff individually and during these informal, paid meetings I hear how the semester ran, listen to suggestions for improvement in content and delivery and show my support for their work.

I feel valued and supported by my line manager and my peers. Though, as the only full time performance studies lecturer, I sometimes wonder whether it is pedagogically sound that I select the unit content in isolation. On the one hand I can be creative and have fun deciding on material myself, but on the other hand I miss the collegial conversation and moderation possible with others. Where possible I collaborate with colleagues based in other state universities and attend drama conferences to keep my knowledge current.

When she reflects upon her role, this coordinator associates organised chaos, labour intensity, and the variety of skills she requires to perform all aspects of the role. She sees the time she spends with staff as important to develop and support them. As a specialist she feels professionally isolated and worries about the rigour of developing a unit on her own.

A baptism of fire, our second narrative describes the early experiences of a unit coordinator and her strategies to cope successfully in a new and unsupported role while dealing with large student numbers and sessional staff.

A baptism of fire

Prior to my university career I obtained qualifications in chemistry, worked in the mining industry and ran my own business interstate. My appointment here was to a temporary general staff position in what is now called the School of Business Management, and after several months I was employed on a permanent basis. Fortunately academic colleagues recognised my skills and I was identified as knowledgeable about accounting and information systems. I was then appointed as a tutor and two years later to an academic position.

On my appointment as an academic in late February, my new boss said, 'We don't have a course coordinator for the first year business information systems unit, can you

look after it?' I had three weeks to sort out the curriculum, find tutors and text books for 900 internal students and 350 external students. Because the previous coordinator left nothing behind, stepping into the role became a baptism of fire, a case of sink or swim, and felt scary. Fortunately, my previous experience as a general staff member ensured I was familiar with writing newspaper advertisements for tutoring staff, I understood how the School ran, while also retaining a strong rapport with staff, and I was familiar with the unit content.

Selecting tutors from among the 25 applications I received and my own contacts meant classes were quickly organised as I was happy to deliver the unit lectures. After choosing an appropriate text I scoured the internet for materials and relied on experienced colleagues to also contribute. My survival depended on accepting help from peers I respected, trusted, and who were willing to offer advice or correction as necessary. By working with others in a cohesive, supporting team I managed to coordinate the unit and survive.

The next year a similar situation arose when I coordinated our Masters course. I saw that the materials being used did not match the student syllabus and knew it required courage to tell others that the course needed redesigning or changes made to the course statements to align the documents. With support and assistance from my peers the changes were made for the benefit of our students. As a more experienced unit coordinator now, I still discuss ideas with colleagues regularly, especially around assessment issues. I encourage several valued external tutors to remain involved in our units for their own and the Schools' benefit.

I also enjoy keeping up with changes in technology by trialling new software and working at the cutting edge. In recent times I also trialled our Learning Management System, teaching summer school units and our new course outline testing panel. I still enjoy teaching and finding out what works best for each student. I remain passionate about new courses, liaising with industry representatives to develop joint projects and teaching off shore.

This unit coordinator describes a challenging situation on assuming her new academic role. She also describes her previous experience in the tertiary sector as assisting to prepare her for the responsibilities of unit coordination and her pleasure in facing new challenges.

The third narrative, Leading not managing, describes the practice of another experienced unit coordinator who articulates her feelings of being undervalued in the tertiary setting. She manages to merge her teaching and research interests.

Leading not managing

I have coordinated units in my discipline, design practice management, here for the past seven years and for three years before that at another university. Unfortunately, I remain convinced that teaching is severely undervalued in the university context and, in my experience, if managers are unaware of what an academic is doing then they may not provide the appropriate support. My first years of unit coordination were demanding and I felt isolated much of the time. It was difficult not knowing who to ask for information and I found my first Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning

unhelpful. For some reason it was assumed that newcomers know all about university operations and processes. Luckily, as the daughter of two academics, I knew some excellent senior level academics that I approached for help. It still took me three years to settle properly into the role.

As unit coordinator I constantly change my teaching program to make my classes relevant to my students, interesting for me, and to lead the learning. With responsibility for the largest class in the school I deal with huge diversity, provide pastoral care and provide on line assistance to students. In my tutorials I encourage one team of students to present to the others so there is an element of game playing, and then I help them apply the learning feedback from their peers. In another unit I bring in an industry speaker weekly. Industry experts and graduates are excellent exemplars for students to see how the business world operates and the potential careers open to them. Students tell me that my lessons are great. I regularly collect and publish data on my teaching and learning and I am preparing to publish longitudinal data collected from my third year students.

I now see my role as leader in my discipline rather than manager. It has been in my own interests to develop supportive networks external to my discipline and my school so I participate in teaching and learning communities as much as possible. These communities permit inter disciplinary conversations appropriate for design thinking, recognise good teaching practice, encourage self determination and provide emotionally intelligent support. I value diversity and self reflection so enjoy meeting new people from different backgrounds. I already use on-line tools for collaboration and discussion with my students and my local and overseas colleagues both within and outside my own discipline. Membership of one teaching and learning community currently enables me to participate in an on-line pilot study learning to develop an evaluation tool, peer review and build problem resources around technology.

While it took some time for this coordinator to settle into her role she now sees herself as a leader in her discipline. She values her membership within supportive teaching and learning communities.

Discussion

Early feedback from our participants indicates that they appreciate the time and confidentiality our project, to develop narratives from their interviews, offers them. They recognise their efforts in unit coordination are valued and appreciate our efforts to portray their experiences. Participants also express their pleasure in sharing their experiences for the perceived benefit of others and express their interest in accessing our website when it becomes live. Such responses suggest that our research is contributing to participant's well-being and thus qualifies as 'good educational research' (Hostetler, 2005).

As leaders of learning, proactive unit coordinators who model scholarly teaching approaches to students and staff are also successful in inspiring them (Roberts et. al., 2011). Across the narratives participants describe a range of responsibilities shaping their role. For example, their responsibilities generally include leading a unit of study, liaising, collaborating and networking with stakeholders and maintaining unit resources that reflect a command of the field. Others specifically describe their responsibilities

to: motivate and inspire their students to learn; locate, manage and supervise sessional staff; and to manage large numbers of students much as described by Roberts et al., (2011). Sometimes these responsibilities are assumed by coordinators as they grow into the role because they are infrequently stated explicitly. According to Southwell et. al., (2008) most curriculum leaders, including unit coordinators, learn through trial and error in their leadership experiences.

The challenges mentioned most frequently among the narratives fall within the theme, Teaching and assessment, inferring that unit coordinators place much emphasis on this part of their role. Teaching and assessment was also acknowledged as an issue in two of the three narratives appearing in this paper. Unit coordinators represented in the narratives indicate that the challenges: creating a robust curriculum; locating and choosing appropriate texts and materials; ensuring content relevance and interest; and maintaining good teaching practice may be alleviated by: building rapport with their students; seeking mentors to encourage and nurture them, and by accessing formal training offered by the university.

The theme, Starting out emerged as the second most frequent in Table 1 and is evident in the three narratives. Challenges linked to Starting out include: asking 'dumb questions' of the line manager and people in nearby offices; operating in reaction mode; receiving no pre-warnings about important deadlines; being left no materials from a the previous Unit Coordinator; sorting out curriculum; finding tutors and text books for large classes of students; isolation and having no knowledge of university operations and processes. The impacts of these challenges typically associated with starting out in the role may be minimised through accessing informal collegial networks, seeking mentors and accessing formal training.

The third most frequent theme, Managing workloads and complexity, is also evident in the three narratives, and challenges may be alleviated by communicating effectively with colleagues, sharing responsibilities and planning and prioritising. Challenges outlined in the narratives from which this theme derives include: rushing to meet curriculum and reporting deadlines; receiving little guidance or information, and inadequate explanation about the expectations of the role. Emotional outcomes arising from these challenges include feelings of isolation, of fear and fogginess leading participants to believe that that they were being placed in a position of 'sink or swim' or they experienced 'a baptism of fire', and that they were not highly valued as unit coordinators.

Surprisingly, while isolation is mentioned in the narrative 'Organised chaos' it does not feature highly across the study, perhaps because many unit coordinators learn quickly, that survival in this demanding role requires them to be proactive in building networks of support. A further surprise is the relatively low frequency of the research-teaching dilemma and working with sessional staff themes, although this may alter as further analysis is completed.

For most of the other themes, the behaviours suggested to minimise the impact of challenges encountered by unit coordinators relate to good communication and

relationship building with either a mentor or Head of school and being organised. Demonstrating confidence, professionalism and enthusiasm towards both students and colleagues are strategies described to reduce the challenges of learning leadership. Our research questions are discussed below.

How do unit coordinators perceive their role as leaders of learning in higher education?

In one quarter of the narrative accounts unit coordinators discuss leading learning. Teaching leadership is described by Debowski and Blake (2004) as the situation where an individual seeks to influence the teaching practice of others, and they believe it may occur at all university levels. This view is similar to that of Scott et. al., (2008) who describe leadership as focused on many things including 'leading through influence'. In the majority of narrative accounts the leading learning component of the Unit Coordinator role is described as a challenge for them. It appears that there is little perception among unit coordinators that their role involves leadership responsibility and instead they prefer to be considered as professionals rather than leaders. This perspective contrasts with that of Southwell and her team (2008), who consider unit coordinators members of a leadership cohort whose primary focus is to enhance teaching and learning, and regularly lead decision making in aspects of student learning. Instead, much of the Unit Coordinator discussion centred on daily issues related to teaching and assessment, starting out in the role and managing the complexity of their workloads. Although these issues are common in the early years of tertiary teaching it appears that some of these challenges still exist for more experienced unit coordinators.

How does the support provided to unit coordinators in this leadership role meet their needs?

In the main, few unit coordinators describe strong institutional support for their role. Instead they comment on the need to build relationships with their colleagues, seek mentors and develop supportive discipline networks as strategies to deal with their role. Many of the challenges identified from among the unit coordinators relate to an absence of induction processes and limited time to access professional development. Instead, some note the need to pretend they know more than they actually do. In an effort to address similar issues Southwell et. al., (2008) developed a program framework that acknowledges and builds upon three enabling strategies for curriculum leadership in teaching and learning. These include, modules focused on self-directed induction, surviving and thriving in teaching and learning leadership roles and change management in higher education teaching and learning. Unit coordinators expressed their interest in our study and the website being developed specifically for academics in this role as a potential resource available to plug the gaps in their knowledge.

Next steps

With phase one of the project complete we are progressing to the second phase. This involves uploading all narratives onto our purpose built website where they will be accessible to our national and international university peers. Accessing our narratives

on the website will occur via several links, including by theme, by challenges and as 'just-in-time' solutions for unit coordinators. Currently, we have in excess of 90 resources, (reports, references, research projects and books) being linked to our narratives through the website.

Conclusion

In the first phase of our project to research the leading of learning among unit coordinators through semi-structured interviews, and provide 'just in time-just for me' narrative accounts for others to consider, we are building on prior knowledge acquired from previous studies (Cohen et. al., 2007; Lefoe et. al., 2008; Roberts et. al., 2011). Our investigation into the experiences of unit coordinators across Australian universities has highlighted nine themes regularly occurring within our narrative accounts. These themes relate to: teaching and learning; starting out; managing workloads and complexity, maintaining and improving unit quality, administering and complying with policy, leading learning; working with sessional staff, the research/teaching dilemma and feeling isolated.

Sixty percent of our narratives include comments relating to university 'teaching and assessment', forty four percent relate to 'starting out' in the university sector and forty one percent refer to 'managing workloads and the complexity' of the unit coordinators' work. Surprisingly, just twenty five percent of our narratives developed from participant interviews refer to 'leading learning'. Apart from the occasional exception few unit coordinators perceive themselves as leaders of learning though appreciate there is scope for such leadership in the role. Disappointingly, few unit coordinators describe strong institutional support for their role in their universities. Frequent comments describing strategies to compensate for inadequate orientation and the provision of adequate professional development time occur.

Unit coordinators describe coping strategies to compensate for the above shortcomings throughout the narrative accounts. Such strategies include building relationships with colleagues, both individually and in supportive networks, and with mentors. On completion of our project all narratives crafted from our interviews will be placed on our purpose built website where the themes described in them will be linked to a number of resources located from across Australia and internationally. Among unit coordinators across Australia, strong interest was expressed in the 'just in time-just for me' website under construction. Unit coordinators also appreciated our time listening to and valuing their stories.

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