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Learning from Tasmania: Designing a distinctive student learning experience

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Introduction

lutruwita / Tasmania, an island in the south of Australia, offers one of two popular gateways to Antarctica. Aside from having some of the best beaches in the world, it is the home to one of a handful of the sandstone universities of Australia, University of Tasmania. For the past eighteen years, our colleagues have been collaborating on an annual Teaching Matters conference to share our learning and teaching practice, and collaboratively grow as educators of the next generation of leaders.

The 2019 annual conference was focused on unpacking the strategic vision of our University to build a sense of place and acknowledge our deep history on palawa land, lutruwita / Tasmania. Our University has focused on understanding what makes our learning, teaching, and research experience distinctive: what about our experience is unique and valued by fellow Tasmanians and those we welcome from across the globe. We are among more than two hundred of our colleagues presenting or attending presentations in November 2019. We focus in this Special Issue on three key themes emerging from the 2019 conference surrounding learning design, digital learning, and student experience.

There are numerous examples throughout this paper of unique offerings that both draw on, and inform, best practice learning and teaching in the higher education sector. We sought to present a combination of practical and applied papers for the implementation of emerging best practice, with research-driven and evidence-based papers that can inform practice. Each manuscript to get to publication in this Special Issue underwent a rigorous multiphase blind peer reviewing process. Authors below have passed an internal double-blinded abstract peer review, a conference presentation, and at least one additional international-pooled double-blind peer review in line with the Journal's practices prior to being accepted. We are excited to present this collection of expertise to provoke thought on how each university experience can be distinctive to their student

and staff communities, beginning with how learning can be designed.

Designing our learning

The human ability to learn provides us adaptability across a vast array of environments (Ormrod, 2016). Clearly, we share the ability to learn with much, if not all, of the animal kingdom. But some human learning is very different: formal, structured, and explicitly designed for specific purposes. Indeed, it is our ability to intentionally design and deliberately seek out structured learning that allows us to shape the world unlike any other animal (Kolb, 2015). And as we shape the world — producing rapid changes to our technical, political, social, and physical environments — the importance of learning dramatically increases. For Kuhn (2016) this makes learning itself the most important twenty-first century skill. By extension, the ability to effectively design learning, together with the sharing of innovations in the design of curriculum and pedagogy, has dramatically increased in value in the contemporary university (cf. Parsell & Chinchin, 2019). Of course, this is not to deny the importance of learning to humans for an incredibly long period of time. In lutruwita / Tasmania, the traditional owners, the palawa people, have been living and learning for 40,000 years¹.

In the present volume, Prehn et al. (2020) report on work to include palawa perspectives and epistemes in the curricula through a virtual touring of Country with Indigenous Elders and knowledge holders. This approach is a response to two

¹ Philosophical examinations of the importance and purpose of education also have a relatively long history in both Eastern and Western thought. In the Eastern tradition, Confucius is often portrayed as a teacher centrally concerned with moral education and the reciprocal obligations between people with different roles in society (see Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). Similar themes are found early in the Western tradition. Plato's account of education in *The Republic* is concerned with ensuring that each class of citizen has the necessary knowledge, skills, and commitments to allow the preservation of the just society from generation to generation. Aristotle extended the role of education beyond a just society, to include human flourishing. He asks how to structure education so that people have what they need to successfully pursue the good life.

competing pressures: a move to online learning, and a desire to be place-based. The study includes content analysis of an Indigenous lifeworlds unit delivered between 2017-2019. In an evaluation of the unit, students rated what was the most helpful aspect of their unit. Virtual Tours on Country were rated as helpful by 90% of students. One student commented "The virtual tours of Country were fantastic, both as a learning tool, and a means of connecting students to Elders and Indigenous culture and knowledge" (p. 15).

The theme of being place-based, or at least connected to the environment, can also be seen in Smith and Watson (2020). They provide a philosophical critique of the separation between humans and their environment. They see this separation as a byproduct of the neoliberal agenda. In response, they argue for a movement away from technology-based sciences, to enable students to authentically reconnect with nature in a manner that provokes and supports their imagination. McLeod et al. (2020) also pursue a broadly philosophical argument. Their focus is the deconstruction of Eurocentric educational practices. The paper takes the form of a collaborative reflection of six academics teaching healthcare. They articulate several principles for embedding the teaching of multiple perspectives into the curricula. The authors report strong student support for this approach that "celebrate[s] the complexity of individual uniqueness in ways that flatten everything down to the level of the individual" (p. 33).

The two remaining papers on the design of learning are more concrete and practical. Khan (2020) provides a thoughtful and engaging empirical examination of applying contemporary teaching practices to a traditional short course. The paper describes a pilot study with seafarer students who are provided authentic and self-directed learning experiences. Although practical, the paper does not ignore theoretical issues. Indeed, Khan (2020) uses an explicitly social constructivist lens to design learning that aims to provide future seafarers with a range of critical thinking skills. Nash et al. (2020) is an empirical study by a University of Tasmania Community of Practice. They examine the 360-degree Quality Pursuit approach to assurance of learning (360QP). The study describes five active learning workshops (n = 82 participants) across Australia. The outcome of the workshops is a clearly articulated professional development agenda, that sits alongside a series of inhibitors to the effective pursuit of quality.

Our digital futures

It is almost remarkable that in the lead up to 2020, we had little awareness of what was right around the corner, the design of learning papers above were conducted and largely drafted before COVID-19 with an expectation that life would continue as it had before. The papers that made their way into the theme on digital learning in higher education were based on a world almost foreign to our writers during the coronavirus pandemic. Institutions globally have turned to digital pedagogy as a potential solution to their self-isolating students, and disconnected cohorts and student communities. Across 20 countries, initial responses from the higher education sector were characterised from

responding to legal minimums (e.g. physical distancing and capacity restrictions), delayed commencement, and full digital delivery (Crawford et al., 2020). The latter appears to be far more successful as a response, but it is perhaps too early to be definitive on that matter.

The past two decades of evidence has shown rapid innovation in learning and teaching to include eLearning and its counterparts, yet for many there is still strong resistance (Findlow, 2008; Schneckenberg, 2009). To create sustained instructional innovation, it requires a positive organisational culture that values and embeds technology (Zhu, 2015) and positive forms of leadership, such as authentic leadership (Elrehail et al., 2018). It also, and rightly so, requires a beginning with the pedagogy and an understanding of the design of learning before an assessment of the technological capabilities is conducted. It is our technology that enables our learning design.

We conceptualised the importance of the digital component of learning as an essential enabler of learning and learners. Technology has the capability to support our students' journey, and to enable a positive experience in a variety of digital, distance, off-campus, online, flipped, and blended delivery methods. A foundational piece in the context of quality learning online is the first paper in this section. Eager and colleagues (2020) present a preliminary model, the tri-layered student online experience framework, with three lenses to viewing the online learning environment at unit, module, and assessment levels. The exemplar discusses the opportunity to create a warm and welcoming environment for students as they enter and immerse themselves in their own learning journey. The ability to support a positive learning journey for students is a multifaceted challenge and often includes a focus on authentic and collaborative learning, seeking to understand student motivations, as well as their own resilience compared with learning support structures (Walker et al., 2016).

The implementation of the tri-layered framework has seen strong growth in student satisfaction of their learning experience in end-of-semester evaluations. Kemp (2020) also discusses with some depth the preference of a group of third year psychology students in face-to-face versus online classes. Kemp's data provided support that there was general equivalence of student investment and effort across both modalities, but learned better in the former. The opportunity for synchronous interaction with their teacher and peers was important, as well as time to critically think independently.

Douglas et al. (2020) highlight a specific asynchronous communication resource for times where student engagement in the synchronous setting is not possible or pedagogically suitable. Through an effective series of iterations of a guide to developing digital engagement through facilitated discussion boards, an initial guide to facilitation was developed (see Douglas et al., 2015). Collective reflection from the researchers of usage data across the globe is summarised and extended during the paper included in this special issue. The value in enabling students learn through asynchronous learning environments can be early interactions and remain connected to those

interactions throughout their learning journey (Hammond, 2005). Likewise, these can be balanced carefully with opportunities for synchronous interactions. Like in the case of Kemp's (2020) work, there is considerable value in assessing the cohort and identifying a balanced platform of synchronous and asynchronous communication methods for online and on-campus learners.

The final paper presents a forward-thinking exposé for a digital learning environment enabled by authentic teacher leadership (Butler-Henderson & Crawford, 2020). Evidence from positive organisational scholars is drawn upon to examine the pedagogical power relationships that exist in conventional and contemporary learning environments. Leadership in this context is seen as a way of characterising relationships of influence between teacher and student in higher education. The leadership behaviours of an individual teacher will have significant influences on those around them, and this relationship is unpacked in the context of digital empowerment and fluency. That is, how can we develop our staff capability to support student access and skills in their digital learning environments? A question that is worth pondering on as we progress to the next section of this Special Issue on supporting a positive student experience.

Our student experience

Students and their wellbeing are at the forefront of a distinctive vision for Tasmanian education. The papers under the theme of student experience in higher education explore enablers of positive student experience, such as belonging, wellbeing, and engagement, from Associate Degrees to Doctoral studies across a range of disciplines.

Employability of doctoral program graduates in an increasingly competitive job market is more and more important, particularly considering COVID-19. Through employing a PRISMA approach, Young et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of 20 articles in the area of doctoral employability. They present their findings with reference to the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, presenting three high-level concepts: policy and economics, the student experience, and expectations of the student (Young et al., 2020). The authors propose a novel approach, aligning the expectations and needs of programs, candidates, and industry, with practically improving doctoral programs and associate student experiences, focussing on "innovative solutions that address the general themes of preparedness and the industry-academic gap" (Young et al., 2020, p. 97). This approach posits the mapping of a broad stakeholder network that could "facilitate a clearer understanding of the true needs of flourishing for candidates during their experience, while meeting institutional requirements and future industry needs" (Young et al., 2020, p. 104). The ability to understand competing demands (e.g. Kinash et al., 2016) that effect the student experience is essential in enabling a response to creating an experience students love.

At the opposite end of the Academy, Knox et al. (2020) seek to better understand student experience in an Australian Associate Degree program through the relationships

between the students' authentic leadership, wellbeing, belonging, and engagement. The authors used quantitative methods to explore changes in these relationships. Their results indicated that while students' self-reported authentic leadership scores were associated with gains in their psychological wellbeing, classroom belongingness and engagement, their informal influence was a more powerful positive factor. The authors suggest that "developing authentic leadership behaviours in students will have a positive effect on their sense of wellbeing, belonging, and engagement", hence improving their experience (p. 115). In an environment that is rapidly evolving, understanding how students can feel a sense of belonging to their campus is critical.

Contributing to scholarship in the critical space around student evaluation, Bartkowiak-Théron et al. (2020) challenge current approaches to practice in student feedback, arguing that student feedback practices "can become vibrant ways to embed students within curriculum improvement, unlocking new perspectives for teacher development as well as learning experience" (Bartkowiak-Théron et al., 2020, p. 119). They present the findings of a survey of teachers in a Police Studies program about their perceptions of the impact of an innovative approach to collecting and utilising student feedback. This approach to student feedback no longer used anonymous, quantitative evaluation tools; rather, they employed regular, identifiable, qualitative surveys thus making transparent what was previously opaque and providing more timely and relevant opportunities to improve curriculum and practice.

The impact of academic professional learning on student experience was explored in two of the articles in this theme: Canty et al. (2020) and Bridgman et al. (2020), perhaps reflecting the increasingly collaborative nature of contemporary research, both papers in this theme were completed by multidisciplinary teams. Furthering our understandings of issues informing student retention Canty et al. (2020) explore the professional learning of teaching staff through a Community of Practice. Student retention is a key strategic issue for many Australian universities as they seek to accommodate increasingly diverse and complex student populations. Canty et al. (2020) describe how members of a Community of Practice (CoP) focused on issues of student attrition in online courses have learned from one another, sharing ideas and approaches that has now begun "to inform change at the institution level" (p. 141). Through a series of cases the authors describe a CoP approach that identified four key challenges to student retention in online degree programs: "i) the importance of knowing your students, ii) the difficulty in getting reliable data, iii) the need for 'belonging' for online students and early, meaningful engagement, and iv) student access to 'known' academics" (Canty et al., 2020, p. 140).

Bridgman et al. (2020) also explore the impact of professional learning on student experience, investigating the role of an interprofessional learning (IPL) workshop, focused on "developing work-ready health graduates, and enhancing outcomes for people living with persistent pain" (p. 129). Pre-post surveys showed increased student confidence and self-efficacy, and these were reflected in qualitative

outcomes which “were mapped onto Adult Learning and Social Identity theory” (Bridgman et al., 2020, p. 129). The result was a conceptual framework informed by both theories. The authors’ conceptual framework included three elements: workshop design, proposed student learning mechanisms, and learning outcomes.

Concluding remarks

We have enjoyed the opportunity to curate these manuscripts and watch their evolution from abstract in mid-2019 to final publication a year later. We thank the peer reviewers who gave up their time and expertise to promote the quality of these works, alongside those authors who did not make it to final publication, and those who supported conference presentation in November 2019. We hope your scholarly interest is peaked and that this curation will serve as a useful reference to your own practice.

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