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| Project Title: | Effecting Change in Learning and Teaching through Living Curricula Implementation |
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Executive Summary

This project focused directly and concertedly on teacher perspectives of the current implementation of the Living Curriculum at Unitec. The major goal was to inform and influence the implementation and professional development components of the Living Curriculum.

The project used a case study methodology interviewing teachers from three departments, each representing one of the institution's three faculties. These were diverse departments reflecting quite different disciplines and teacher perspectives. While some departments were well developed in their thinking and understanding of the Living Curriculum, others were less informed and more resistant.

The project team interviewed teachers across the three departments to elicit in-depth information about teacher perspectives and implementation progress. The interviews offered a wealth of valuable information about teacher perspectives.

The major finding is the importance of ongoing teacher professional development with regard to interpretation of the Living Curriculum and implications for teaching and learning practice. Allied to this is valuable data on the provision of institutional support and change management for curriculum renewal including the provision of exemplars for teachers.

Background

Unitec is a 'teaching-led, research informed' institution. The concept of Living Curriculum is embedded in Unitec's curriculum policy. The Leadership Team believes that such a curriculum will enhance both learning experiences and future opportunities for learners as it assists in preparing them for autonomy, resilience and resourcefulness – all aspects of capability. It is the Leadership Team's expectation that, by the end of 2013, all programmes will reflect the prescribed characteristics of a Living Curriculum and programmes will be required to provide both documentary and practical evidence of this.

Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 51) suggest learning is 'the historical production, transformation, and change of persons' and involves the whole person in both the learning experience and the broader communities in which the learner belongs. 'Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities' (p. 53). While students are grappling with new ways of knowing, tertiary teachers may also 'become ontologically insecure' (Ball, 2003, p. 220). The implementation of a Living Curriculum thus requires support for learners and teachers as both identity and conceptions of knowledge are challenged. The research intended to identify where these identity challenges became evident.

The rolling out of the Living Curriculum requires a new way of being for both teachers and learners and this requires significant professional development, which is valued and supported by the Leadership Team. While some of this was already planned, this project aimed to identify the scope and nature of this professional development during the

remainder of the implementation. As a result, a coherent and reflective approach to developing our teachers was a desired outcome.

Aims and Objectives

This project took advantage of a naturally occurring event: the implementation of the Living Curriculum. It focused on identifying, tracking and evidencing changes in overall programme and curriculum design and, more significantly, teacher development, and how these ultimately impact on student engagement, learning, success and retention.

The research aimed to identify factors that affect both organisational implementation and teacher engagement and benefits.

For many, the process of transforming programmes into Living Curricula represents and requires radical changes. Gathering data from teacher perspectives enabled the project team to identify what common factors correlate most closely with significant benefits for learning and what challenges arise for teachers. The process of studying and analysing the changes so intensively created opportunities to reflect on and enhance teaching and learning, and therefore learner outcomes, in the medium and long term.

The research questions were:

- (1) What factors enable the successful implementation of a Living Curriculum?
 - What changes need to be made in order to accommodate a Living Curriculum?
 - What are the critical indicators of successful implementation?
 - What are the difficulties and obstacles?
- (2) What are the learner benefits of a Living Curriculum?
 - How does a Living Curriculum affect teaching practice?
 - How can the components of the living curriculum enhance student learning?
 - What are the indicators of increased student engagement and success?
 - What are the benefits for staff as learners?

Methodology

The project ultimately used an amended methodology from that initially planned. We used case studies within the context of wider institutional implementation of the Living Curriculum, so both specific and general contexts were investigated. The case studies focused on one department in each of the three faculties chosen to represent diverse discipline areas. The departments were offered anonymity in the process. They represented departments that were both making some early movement in implementation of Living Curricula or had challenges to deal with in the process. They therefore offered both indicators of success and areas of challenge.

The method involved an initial focus group for all staff in each of the three departments followed by interviews with five teachers from each department. These teachers were interviewed twice, approximately four months apart and they were selected to represent a range of perspectives from enthusiastic to querulous to resistant. We had intended to focus also on quantitative and qualitative data from success and retention statistics but, during the process, opted to focus entirely on qualitative data from interviews with teachers which were powerful sources of data. Early interviews indicated that teacher perspectives were sufficient sources of information early in the project to focus on and it was too soon to correlate this with success and retention data.

The Living Curriculum initiative is long term and work will continue beyond the life of this research project. Therefore the evaluative component was limited to the information available within the 12 month time frame. A key element of results dissemination was the ongoing development of a website resource for our own staff and other institutions considering implementing similar innovation.

One of our best (and unintended or expected) decisions was to use our research assistant funding to purchase expert NVivo (qualitative research analysis software) support. We were able to have all our interviews coded for quick and in-depth analysis and ability to revisit

the data from a plethora of perspectives. This will allow us many ongoing analysis possibilities.

We also valued hugely the support from an external critical friend from the University of Auckland.

Outcomes/findings

Several important outcomes have been achieved during the project, although it was recognised early that the planned scope of the research was too broad and it was more important to focus directly on teacher perspectives.

The strongest outcome is a wealth of information on the broad and diverse perspectives held by teachers regarding the interpretation and implementation of the Living Curriculum. Staff hold wide and varied interpretations of what the purpose and goals of the Living Curriculum are. These varied understandings intersect with teachers' own personal teaching approaches and philosophies – as a result some staff initially respond overwhelmingly positively, whilst others respond to the changes with caution and even suspicion. This is not unexpected. Our findings show that as teachers gain a fuller understanding of the substance and intent of the Living Curriculum, very few have substantive concerns about its aims. Quite a number of teachers in our study expressed enthusiasm for the Living Curriculum, seeing the initiative as supporting innovation in their approaches to teaching and learning. We uncovered many flawed or partial understandings and were able to monitor the development of perspectives and confidence over the life of the project.

As a direct result of the project, we reflected on our implementation of the Living Curriculum and made relevant improvements to maximise direct impact on both teacher and student learning and engagement. The research indicated that better methods of communication and explanation about the importance of localised interpretations of the Living Curriculum were necessary to help teachers understand that broad characteristics were necessarily interpreted and contextualised locally. Ongoing professional development at departmental level is critical. There is also evidence of the need for more leadership in support of teachers who are grappling with issues of uncertainty, ontology or change in their teacher identity and investigation of how change management can support that process.

The research also confirmed the importance of taking a two-phase approach to approval of renewed curricula. As suspected, simply renewing documents does not guarantee changes to practice and typically involves only a few selected members involved in updating documents. Ensuring that rhetoric included in documents is given life in practice is pivotal. This involves ensuring all teaching staff are included in professional development processes.

The further development of the website exemplars was an important component of the research. This involves recording actual exemplars from teachers who are already implementing characteristics of the Living Curriculum in their teaching. Several of the teachers in the study are included in these exemplars. Teachers are crying out for examples of what Living Curricula look like. However, it is unclear as to how much they are using this resource.

Conclusions

Three conclusions are evident. One of them regards the intent and methodology of the research project itself. Our original intent as to what could be achieved with limited funding and resource in a one-year project was over-ambitious. We had to pull back the scope of the project and, particularly the intention to make use of quantitative success and retention data alongside the qualitative data derived from interviews with teachers. It is much too soon in the implementation process for that to have meaning.

A second conclusion relates to the initiative under study, and the importance of ongoing, dedicated, concerted professional development for teachers to assist them in both understanding the intent of the Living Curriculum and ideas and support for its

implementation and for making the sometimes difficult changes required to teacher practices?. Allied to this is an acknowledgement that we need to continue investigations into teacher perceptions and professional development requirements.

The third conclusion is an understanding of the power of time as a catalyst for change. Our second round of interviews indicated that teachers became more positive and confident with regard to their understanding and implementation of the Living Curriculum over time from first to second interviews. Enthusiasm, a sense of capability, strengthening self-confidence and willingness to innovate were all evident as the project progressed.

Implications

The immediate benefits are to those responsible in the institution for the implementation of the Living Curriculum – specifically the Dean Teaching and Learning and the staff of Te Puna Ako who are at the coalface of support and implementation. Logically, the next immediate benefits are for those who experience the implementation process (teachers) and changes to implementation will benefit those beginning renewal in 2012 and 2013. Students too will experience flow-on benefits of improvements in understanding of the Living Curriculum by their teachers.

The analysis of the outcomes of the implementation of the Living Curriculum is of interest to many in the sector. At a Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia conference in 2010, a presentation of the Living Curriculum was received extremely well by the audience. This project will also enable Unitec to pinpoint the dangers, pitfalls and benefits for learners and teachers of the implementation of the Living Curriculum and the processes of implementation will be able to be improved to maximise direct impact on student learning and engagement.

If the Living Curriculum is proven to be successful, and early indications are positive in this regard, it could become a model that could be used well beyond Unitec and influence the way learners engage and achieve success in other areas of tertiary education.

The information disseminated will also be of interest to academic developers who are charged with heading up curriculum development.

Further research another year into implementation to test learner and teacher responses will be invaluable.

Recommendations

The major recommendation is the ongoing development of communities of practice across the institution in terms of curriculum understanding and implementation. This is being considered currently by broadening the Phase Two approval processes for The Tick.

Publications and dissemination

Collective work demands have made it extremely difficult to carve out time to achieve formal publications. However, during the year we have achieved the following:

- Extensive development of the external website featuring, for example, video clips of implementation stories, information about the case studies, podcasts, stories and reflections on the implementation and the benefits of this for learners and an open forum for browsers' comments.
- Presentation at Unitec's 2011 Teaching and Learning Symposium.
- Presentation at Unitec's 2011 Research Symposium
- Refereed paper presented to the ICELF eLearning Conference (hosted by Unitec) in Nov 2011

In addition:

- We submitted an abstract for the HERDSA conference in Brisbane in 2011 but this was not accepted as it was deemed to be too early in the project.

- We have one article almost ready for submission to the HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia) refereed journal *Higher Education Research and Development (HERD)*.
- We have two further formal articles in development for potential submission to *IJAD (Internal Journal of Academic Development)* and other journals such as the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, the *International Journal of Educational Research* and the *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (IJTLHE)*.
- We have submitted an abstract for the Academic Identities Conference in Auckland in June 2012.
- We have submitted an abstract for the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference in October 2012 and applied to be part of an international collaborative writing group associated with this.
- We have a wealth of data available for ongoing refereed articles as much as time will allow us to work on publishing these.
- We expect to present again at the 2012 Unitec Research and Teaching and Learning Symposia

References

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