LOCATION! LOCATION! LOCATION!:
How Does This Affect the Operations of Learning Centres?
Some Personal Reflections from the Position of an Ex-Head.

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Abstract

Learning Centres operate from various institutional locations in universities across Australia. In addition to this, staff are employed under different employment conditions, some as general staff and some as academics, and different philosophical positions are taken by Learning Centres towards their work with students. In the current climate of economic efficiency and the restructurings which are often undertaken to improve this, these differences can become a source of controversy. This paper attempts to initiate a bipartisan discussion of the effects these differences can have on the operations of Learning Centres. It argues that there are legitimate reasons for such differences and that it is more important to be conscious of the needs of the student body, the faculty staff and the goals of the host institution when locating Learning Centres than it is to search for any ‘one right way’ approach to Centre location.

Introduction

Learning Centres operate from various institutional locations in different universities. In some universities, Learning Centres are located within Student Services (or its equivalent), in some they are located in Faculties (or their equivalents) and in others they are combined with units responsible for the academic staff development and so are located in Teaching-Learning Centres (or their equivalents). Furthermore, the services provided by a Learning Centre in any one university may be provided by two or more different units/centres in another university, for example generic skills development may be provided by one centre/unit whilst more discipline-specific skills may be provided by a different unit/centre. Learning Centres are defined for the purpose of this paper as any unit/centre established with the purpose of improving the learning outcomes of students studying for higher education qualifications by focussing on the development of students’ academic skills, including some or all of the following skills: learning skills; language and literacy skills, mathematical skills, science skills, and computing skills.

The institutional location of these centres and the employment status of their staffs can influence the operation of the centres by affecting the nature of their relationships with their clients; the research/teaching focus of the centres; the types and mixes of services offered (credit bearing academic skills subjects; teaching involvement in faculty delivered credit bearing subjects; non-credit bearing workshops; individual consultations; student tutoring programs and mentoring programs); and the opportunities the Centres have to influence the learning outcomes of students in the wider host institution.

This paper seeks to raise for discussion the potential strengths and weaknesses afforded to Learning Centres as the result of their institutional locations. Whilst no one location need inherently be better than any other, choices about location and relocation should not be made randomly, but should consider the needs of the students and the faculty staff and the experiences of the host institution in working with Learning Centres. For ease of presentation, the issues to be discussed are organised according to three common institutional locations: 1) within students services, 2) within a faculty and 3) within a teaching/learning centre. Each of these institutional locations carries a set of existing institutionalised relationships and methods of operating, a default set of conditions, which are the topic of debate in this paper. However, it will be obvious to the reader that the issues raised do not segregate themselves neatly under the three locational headings.

A final point which needs to be kept in mind is that any discussion of strengths and weaknesses assumes a philosophical position from which such judgements are made. Learning Centres often operate from different philosophical positions, so that what one Centre might see as a strength another might view as a weakness. This paper attempts to acknowledge this by critiquing the issues associated with each location from different perspectives and by including some aspects of
Learning Centres as both potential strengths and potential weaknesses. Any discussion of best location (or best practice) needs to include careful consideration of a range of factors co-existing at any point in time. Specifically, careful consideration needs to be given to the needs and strengths of both the student body and the Faculty staff population, the goals for the Centre as given by the host institution as well as relevant informing theories and pedagogies. In brief, in its extreme, 'one size fits all' is arguably closer in meaning to 'one size fits no one'.

**Learning centres within student services (or its equivalent)**

Some Learning Centres have been established within Student Services or its equivalent. These Centres usually offer a range of non-credit bearing learning opportunities including individual consultations, workshops of various lengths on generic and discipline-specific skills, and workshops designed in conjunction with Faculty staff to support specific assignments or other subject-based learning issues. Also, they often conduct student-based programs such as student tutoring and/or peer mentoring. These Centres usually co-exist and collaborate with various other student support services such as Counselling Units, Disabilities Support Units, Aboriginal Support Units and Careers Units.

**Potential strengths:**

The non-credit bearing nature of the services provided from a student services location, along with voluntary attendances by students, are arguably the main strengths of these Centres' approaches because they help neutralise the influence of power in the teacher-student relationship. This neutrality allows freedom from teaching to subject objectives and the opportunity to teach to students' needs as perceived and requested by the students themselves and as negotiated with them (Rogers, 1983). Students usually express their needs in terms of their experiences of their subject requirements, so that Learning Centre staff are working within the context of the students' discipline from the starting point of the students' perceptions of their discipline requirements. The information Learning Centre staff gain from working in this way is primarily information about the students' perceptions of their studies - how they understand and interpret what is required of them; how and why they select particular approaches to studying any one subject or assignment; in which areas of assumed knowledge and skills they feel they are strong or weak.

Non-credit bearing offerings can also allow for the absence of imposed negative consequences and fear of failure for poor performance, as the Learning Centre staff does not need to pass judgement on the students’ abilities in ways that will affect their degree progress in the form of subject assessments. Free of this situation, the students are more likely to speak openly of their perceptions and understandings of their subjects' demands so that Learning Centre staff can begin to understand the processes and understandings the students apply to their studies and address these (Rogers, 1983 & Heron, 1993) In contrast to this position afforded the Learning Centre staff, subject lecturers’ and tutors’ relationships with their students are largely influenced by the power they have over students' progress. Subject lecturers and tutors are responsible for evaluating the veracity of claims by students for assignment extensions and for appeals against grading decisions as well as for determining who are the better students and who are the failing students. Students may hide the extent of their subject difficulties and be more interested in saying what they think the lecturer or tutor will find palatable (Macmillan, 1993). Thus, the opportunity for subject teaching staff to gain a full understanding of their students' learning processes and understandings is often limited by the students themselves, in response to the power the lectures and tutors have over their progress.

Thus the location of these student services-based Learning Centres lends themselves to student-initiated support and to interventions which take as their starting point the students’ perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses. The co-existence of Counselling Units in Students Services is further validation of this philosophical approach.

Working with students in individual consultations and voluntarily attended workshops within the philosophical approach outlined above gives staff the opportunity to come into contact with a wide range of students’ concerns with their learning. Patterns of need can be identified, such as
difficulties with particular subjects or concepts, difficulties with assignments within subjects, and varying levels of preparedness for entry according to different entry pathways. This student-initiated approach to learning can be taken to a higher level of the organisation when Learning Centre staff represent students’ views and difficulties to faculty staff and initiate the co-development of tutorials and workshops targeting these learning issues, or prompt further investigation and reconsideration of university policies. Thus, the Learning Centre staff are able to take up the position of expert in the applied learning issues relevant to their campus of service.

Non-credit-bearing offerings can also free students from perceptions of competition between themselves. This provides an environment where Learning Centre staff can establish and encourage collaborative learning arrangements. The establishment of peer mentoring programs and students tutoring is philosophically akin to this approach and is often undertaken in these centres.

This general approach to student-initiated learning is suitable for the development of all academic skills including learning skills, mathematical skills, language skills, science skills and computer skills. It permits a developmental approach to student learning whilst simultaneously permitting teaching in areas of knowledge deficit, such as assumed mathematics and science knowledge.

Possible weaknesses:

There are also a number of potential weaknesses when Learning Centres operate from a student services location.

If the Learning Centre teaching staff are not comfortable with permitting students to suffer the logical consequences of non-participation or unsystematic participation in Learning Centre offerings to the point where they feel compelled to implement punishments, such as revoking the right to future appointments, then the power element is being reintroduced to the teacher-student relationship. Staff are then operating more in the role of a traditional teacher who has authority and control over the student and so the benefits of the non-credit approach can be lost. On the other hand, spasmodic attendances by students can make it very difficult for staff to provide a logical and cohesive teaching program from the point of view of skill development. Leaving the responsibility for student learning in the hands of the learners can be frustrating at times.

The second weakness is the potential to repetitively address learning issues that could possibly be better dealt with elsewhere, such as through a review of entry mechanisms or by systematic pre-semester preparation of students. If the notion of student-initiated learning is not embraced at senior levels of the university then information gained by Learning Centres about student learning may not be seriously considered by senior management when reviewing policies. Similarly, failure by the Learning Centre to notify senior management of problematic patterns of poor student learning can serve to mask the effects of inappropriate polices. The result of either situation can be repetitive requests to the Learning Centre for assistance with learning issues better dealt with in other ways.

Another concern with this location of a learning centre is that, by virtue of being a different approach to teaching from the predominant instruction-based approach (that is student-initiated and based on students’ perceptions of their needs as opposed to experts deciding on the content and pacing of learning) it can be seen as being in some way as not ‘real’ teaching. A lack of acceptance of student-initiated learning can lead to the perception of a lack of quality of teaching which responds to student initiations. This view is usually held by those who believe that learning cannot occur without a teacher having authority and control over the learning process. This view can affect staff morale as well as the types of referrals made by academic staff. Thus, it becomes important that the Learning Centre staff have opportunities to share their understandings of their work with interested Faculty staff and Learning Centre staff from other institutions.

A final possible disadvantage to this location of a Learning Centre is related to the employment of staff under general staff conditions. While these conditions do not place staff in the position of having to compete for promotions on the basis of research and publications and so take significant time away from teaching, they may also restrict the staff from conducting research into the learning
issues and processes occurring within the university. Staff may not have access to the support provided by institutions for research, such as grants, and may not have been selected for their ability to research. Research of high quality can be used to facilitate change to the benefit of the students throughout the host institution. Its absence can be to the student body’s detriment.

**Learning centres within faculties**

Some Learning Centres have been established within Faculties. These are usually staffed by people employed as academics and offer credit-bearing subjects for the support of students as well as non-credit bearing classes. Some individual consultations are also conducted, and some student based programs such as student tutoring and peer mentoring are often conducted.

*Potential strengths:*

The main potential strength of this approach is the support it offers for the use of a traditional subject teaching approach by the Learning Centre staff and its support for the employment of academic staff.

The provision of learning support using a credit bearing subject approach to the development of academic skills gives Learning Centres in this location the opportunity to use their expertise to decide on the needs of students and include these in a subject, along with the authority to require that students complete relevant instructional tasks. That is, the Learning Centre staff take responsibility for initiating, monitoring and assessing learning, not the learner. This can help ensure that students complete a logically structured series of readings, discussions and activities that allow them to develop the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed at university. Individual consultations are often only taken up by those students enrolled in the subject. This helps ensure that the individual consultations are also tied to the logical development of skills which the subject mode of teaching encourages. In addition, students are able to devote time to their development of academic skills within the subject as part of their course load. Students who do not have the motivation to seek assistance independently can be reached.

Another potential strength which accrues to the Faculty location of a Learning Centre is that the staff can be a part of the wider Faculty-based decision-making processes which affect the subjects offered to students and the academic requirements of these subjects. Through this the staff can become closely acquainted with the discipline’s assessment and performance requirements. Staff can develop and teach their own subject content so that it is highly relevant to the discipline demands the students face. An added potential advantage of this familiarity and peer relationship with faculty staff is that the Learning Centre staff member is well positioned to initiate and respond to suggestions for the co-development and co-presentation of material. This is effectively a team-teaching relationship between Learning Centre staff and the wider Faculty staff and it can embed the development of academic skills in ways which can be highly relevant to both the students and their staff (Elliott, 1997 & Chanock, 1994).

This way of operating, that is, credit-bearing subjects, is consistent with the dominant instruction-based approach to teaching valued by wider university practices in the pursuit of knowledge. When Learning Centres operate in the ways valued and practiced by the host institution, they are more readily understood and, when they work effectively, they can more readily achieve credibility within the institution. This credibility can be of value when Learning Centre staff attempt to influence the host institution to improve the learning opportunities of the students.

The employment of academic staff with research qualifications and expertise can help ensure quality research into the learning issues and processes within the institution. The results of such research can then be fed back into the university system for the improvement of students’ learning opportunities or be formulated into teaching material for implementation by many. Both of these ways of operating provide a systemic response to the improvement of learning opportunities and do so in a form which the wider university readily understands and accepts as legitimate.
Possible weaknesses

While these Learning Centres can be seen as highly credible they are also often bound by hierarchical lines of reporting which may limit their opportunities to use their credibility to influence the wider host institution. Suggestions from one faculty to another may be seen as an impertinence rather than a help. Similarly, a Learning Centre providing a multidisciplinary approach to student learning (that is, mathematical, computing, and language based) is inconsistent with a single faculty location.

The employment of academic staff with research qualifications and expertise does not guarantee investigation into that university's students' learning issues and processes. In the worst case, the research can be of benefit only to the individual staff member. If research is conducted into content rather than into the learning processes relevant to the content, that is, in isolation from the institutional context, the staff member is likely to be by far the greatest benefactor at the expense of the student body. Admittedly, the Learning Centre’s credibility may rise in such instances, but the value of this to students learning depends on the opportunities to influence others, as discussed above. However, if staff are expected to achieve research profiles commensurate with other Faculty staff in order to achieve promotions then research and publication may become the focus of the position rather than the actual implementation of support for students.

The difficulties with using credit-bearing subjects developed and taught by the Learning Centre staff to support the development of student learning skills are threefold. Firstly, there is the difficulty of accurately identifying which students have sufficient learning skills to be able to learn effectively through this medium yet do not have those particular skills which form the content of the subject. Secondly, there is the issue of how many students the Learning Centre wishes to assist. Does it see itself as primarily servicing those students who require the intensive approach a credit-bearing subject provides or does it see itself as servicing a broader range of student abilities? Thirdly, there is the difficulty of locating the subject within the degree. If it is offered in the first year, it may be that the student can gain most benefit and yet many degrees are structured so that the first year subjects include prerequisite subjects for future specialisations or other core subjects which, while not prerequisites, provide a broad base from which students can better understand their later subjects. Thus, there is not always room for another subject in the first year. Also, while this approach to the development of academic literacy is suitable to a developmental approach to learning, students with deficits in assumed knowledge (such as mathematical or scientific content) may not be as well catered for. There could be difficulties in having a subject covering assumed knowledge accredited, taking such a subject could extend the degree and affect HECS eligibility as well as affecting subsequent years’ timetabling.

A further possible disadvantage to this location is that academics in general are promoted and involved in teaching and research, with administrative duties being related to these activities. Because of the valuing by universities of instruction-based teaching, the development and monitoring of student based programs such as student tutoring and peer mentoring can be viewed as an ‘extra’ demand and so be minimised. Similarly, the opportunity for individual consultations, in line with faculty-based academics' practice, is usually quite limited and may even be restricted to those enrolled in credit-bearing subjects, thus severely limiting the number of students who can use the Learning Centre.

Finally, students may resent taking a subject which they perceive as remedial. Similarly, the faculty academics may perceive the Learning Centre teaching staff as inferior for teaching only a ‘remedial’ subject and consequently Learning Centre staff may aspire to leave the Learning Centre for faculties.

Teaching-learning centre locations

Some Learning Centres have been established as part of a Teaching-Learning Centre or similar, where university teaching and university learning are both dealt with. The Learning Centres can be a separate section of the larger Centre or the same staff can provide both teaching development
support and learning support. The Learning Centres often co-teach on credit-bearing degree subjects while also offering some non-credit bearing offerings and conducting some student-based programs.

Possible strengths:
Whilst the advantages which accrue to the faculty-based Learning Centres offering credit bearing subjects are also relevant to a discussion of Learning Centres operating in this location, their main strength is the institutionalised connection between the development of students' learning skills and the development of staff's teaching skills. This connection may offer particular advantages in terms of systemic and efficient improvements in the learning opportunities students are afforded. The Learning Centre’s officially-sanctioned connection with the body responsible for developing excellence in teaching gives it an authority by association, so that its suggestions concerning students’ learning are likely to be paid attention (Webb, 1999). This is particularly so as Teaching-Learning Centres are often staffed by academics at professorial level or higher, are comparatively well resourced (when compared to, say, most Student Services) and usually work directly with senior management. All of this serves to demonstrate the university’s valuing of such Centres and this can influence the attention the Learning Centre’s recommendations receive.

A further potential strength of this location is the opportunity it offers for the efficient use of resources by the mutual reinforcement of efforts directed at teaching and at learning. For example, the Learning Centre could focus on developing first year students’ learning skills to suit the types of instruction they will be receiving at the same time as instruction methods suitable for teaching first year students is being targeted by the teaching development unit.

Similarly, the insights gained by Learning Centre staff into student difficulties with particular subjects and teaching approaches could be passed onto the teaching development staff to ensure the targeting of relevant teaching issues by the Centre. The use of such insights to improve the instructional practices of the wider host institution can affect the learning opportunities of many of the students within the university and result in systemic change, although many would argue that this is a self-defeating approach (see ‘Possible Weaknesses’ below).

Often these Centres are heavily involved in research, the results of which are used to accurately direct and guide the use of resources and staff effort to change the host institution’s practices for the betterment of student learning.

The involvement of Learning Centre staff in the co-development and co-teaching of accredited degree subjects serves to embed the development of academic literacy skills firmly into the discipline requirements of subjects. The co-teaching of subjects can serve as a hands-on staff development activity providing immediate demonstration, guidance and support for the Faculty staff on how to develop their students’ academic literacy skills. This can result in systemic change in the way students are taught. Theoretically, the Learning Centre staff could eventually become redundant.

Possible weaknesses
Although co-teaching and co-development of subjects can be highly effective, control over Learning Centre staff’s involvement with students rests with the Faculty staff. It is up to the Faculty staff to decide whether or not they wish to involve the Teaching-Learning Centre. The students receive assistance at the discretion of the Faculty staff, not on the basis of their own perceptions of their needs or motivation. Similarly, whether or not staff continue to implement the modifications suggested by the Learning Centre staff once the co-teaching is finished is entirely dependent on the Faculty staff. Whilst they may be readily adopted by staff whose disciplines are education or linguistics or related in some other way to the disciplines informing the work of the Learning Centre, for many staff the learning focus of the Learning Centre only becomes relevant in relation to student evaluation. It is not always seen as inherent to their subject or discipline. If this approach to systemic change becomes a major goal of the Learning Centre, the Centre’s achievement of its objectives is outside of its own control and rests only on the motivation of the small group of
academic staff who voluntarily access the Teaching-Learning Centre. This can leave the Learning Centre institutionally vulnerable.

Another potential problem with this approach is the involvement of the Learning Centre staff against the wishes of individual Faculty staff, for purposes other than the development of student learning skills. In situations where subject coordinators are not happy with the performance of staff, the involvement of Learning Centre staff in co-teaching may be seen as an indirect way of forcing the offending staff to undergo staff development. If Learning Centre staff are involved in such situations, the focus on the development of student learning skills becomes secondary to the purposes of the subject co-ordinator, at whose discretion the Learning Centre staff are involved in the subject. Academic staff may become reluctant to invite Learning Centre involvement because of these perceptions of the meaning of Learning Centre’s involvement.

Similarly, referrals of students to the Learning Centre may be perceived as a reflection of poor teaching, particularly if the same staff are used in both centres simultaneously or if the information gained by Learning Centre staff is passed on to teaching development staff. This may lead to reluctance by faculty staff to have their students involved in the Learning Centre programs even independently of subjects.

As with the accredited academic literacy subject discussed under the faculty location heading, this approach is suitable for a developmental approach to skills enhancement, but is not suitable to the teaching of deficit areas of knowledge.

In addition to these disadvantages, those discussed under faculty-based Learning Centres may also be relevant.

**Conclusion**

There are many possible permutations of Learning Centres and many possible combinations of services and staffing conditions and those outlined above are by no means exhaustive. Often, the default location relationships discussed here are altered in a deliberate attempt to achieve the maximum benefits and to minimise the weaknesses of any one location. While this can be very successful, it also carries some weaknesses uniquely its own. For example, a Learning Centre located in student services but staffed by academics might choose to develop and offer a credit-bearing subject to support students. This may be problematic to the other student services units, such as counselling, if there are student complaints about the subject. Issues such as the students’ perceptions of the impartiality or otherwise of the counselling unit may arise.

Each individual combination of location, staffing and services will have its own potential strengths and weaknesses and it needs to be acknowledged that the strengths which are described by some may, by others, be perceived as weaknesses and vice versa, depending on the philosophical position of the adjudicator and of the student, staff and academic profile of the university in question. However, that particular sets of circumstances are likely to lead to particular outcomes, and why and how this takes place, needs to be considered in the placement of all services, Learning Centres included.

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