2001: Providing Space for a Learning Centre

Alan Calder
Learning Adviser
Academic Support Division
James Cook University

Abstract

In an environment of restructuring and shrinking budgets, Learning Advisers in Learning Centres, like all those in University support services, must undertake research and seek to involve stakeholders in an ongoing process of communicating, evaluating and, if necessary, redefining their roles. For the past two years, a Learning Centre at James Cook University, Cairns, has provided a home for the Learning Advisers and the Student Mentor Program. Using a ‘mosaic’ of evaluation techniques, this study examines how the allocation of space for a Learning Centre has allowed learning communities to evolve amongst students, mentors and Learning Advisers. The physical, organisational and virtual dimensions of this space have facilitated a model of learning support that has changed the way in which Learning Advisers meet the academic needs of students. The study concludes that the Learning Centre, Learning Advisers, mentors and all of the collaborative activities they are involved in, do combine to form a vital force that is worthy of continued institutional support.

Introduction

"Something exciting and something very useful is going on here." Whether by luck or good planning or a mixture of both, learning support staff often find themselves torn between joy and panic when a strategy or program is clearly succeeding beyond all expectations. The joy need not be explained, but the panic is often fuelled by a desperate need to communicate to others, particularly senior management, the fact that the learning support programs are indeed making a significant contribution to the strategic goals of their institution.

In an environment of restructuring which has seen Learning Centres, like all University services, undergo close evaluation, it is imperative that Learning Advisers undertake research and seek to involve stakeholders in an ongoing process of communicating just what contribution is being made to the University experience.

At James Cook University's Cairns campus, a Learning Centre has been operating on the ground floor of a new library for two years as part of a plan to integrate and consolidate a number of Academic Support Division services in the one building. These include InfoHelp (Library, Research and ICT support), Learning Advisers, ESL Support, Disability Resources and Equity. A decision not to proceed with the co-location of Careers, Counselling and other student services left sufficient free space for the Learning Centre also to become the home of the Student Mentor Program and Teaching Development staff.

This paper discusses how an allocation of a space has allowed Learning Advisers and mentors to develop a model of collaborative learning support that has changed both the way in which Learning Advisers and mentors interact, and the way in which learning support is provided to first year students. An investigation of this space allocation reveals that its physical, organisational and virtual dimensions, all play a part in the development of this new model of learning support. The paper also argues that the quality of learning support is not solely dependent on ongoing budget allocations, but can also be greatly influenced by a prudent one-off allocation of space. In order to assess how others perceive and value the work undertaken in the Learning Centre, a range of evaluation techniques was used, including a structured interview program of learning support stakeholders in the University.

Methodology

Learning Centre evaluations and measures of effectiveness are prone to both statistical and logical flaws as Learner (2001) admits when he revisits a quantitative argument he presented for a Writing Centre in 1997 (Learner, 1997). The argument presented by Learner is that we should move away from being little more than turnstile counters. Similarly, Kalikoff (2001) reminds us that evaluation
forms can often be little more than thank-you notes. Learner now calls for his Writing Centre to be linked to larger values and theories, as well as to university-wide strategic goals. “In essence, I call for us to be evaluated on our own terms, to lend our expertise to discussions of outcomes assessment, and to pursue our goal to make writing-and writing centres-central to improvement of teaching and learning” (Learner, 2001, p.1).

Motivated by both the joy and panic already referred to, this study draws on the 'mosaic' approach to assessing support centres advocated by Kalikoff (2001). This approach involves implementing a series of textured and complementary evaluation strategies that aim to provide reliable and detailed information about what is being accomplished. Kalikoff suggests that "mosaic strategies also create new opportunities for collaboration while providing colleagues and administrators with a fresh look at our pedagogies"(2001, p.7).

The pieces of the mosaic in this study include quantitative data (consultations, Learning Centre "traffic flow") and videotapes of focus groups and individual users, as well as structured interviews with key personnel (Administrators, Academic Advisers, Deans, Student Association Staff).

Transcripts of video taped discussions with groups and individuals have been included in this study to provide a forum for the users of the Learning Centre to voice their observations and experiences and to allow readers to draw their own inferences and come to their own conclusions (Lather, 1993).

The structured interviews follow a methodology adopted by Stewart and Hartman (2001), which involves a systematic examination of the services offered by a Learning Centre in the light of the perceived needs of different campus constituencies. The structured interviews involve asking seven questions, relating to the participants’ perceptions of the role of the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program, their relationship to the Centre’s activities, and their suggestions as to how the services offered might be improved. Notes were taken at the interviews and then emailed back to participants. They were asked to reflect on the interpretation of their answers and to respond. Validation in this aspect of the study is derived from the strategies identified by Lather (1986) and the iterative nature of cyclic action research (McTaggart, 1997).

The methodology adopted for this study has a two-fold purpose that involves firstly, redefining what Learning Advisers and mentors do in the Learning Centre by seeking the views of our key stakeholders; and secondly, increasing collaboration in, and awareness and ownership of, the Learning Centre’s activities. If the Learning Centre is a vital force in the University then it is worthy of continued institutional support.

**Collaborative learning support**

JCU Learning Advisers have traditionally focussed on the first year experience of students through the implementation of an active and demonstrably successful Student Mentor Program (Hanley and Treston 1998; Treston, 1999a, Treston, 1999b). The mentors are the strength behind the orientation process and are the first point of human interaction and guidance a new student has with the University (welcome speeches from dignitaries notwithstanding!). The mentor provides a tour around the campus, advice and an introduction to social activities on the student's first day. In weeks 3, 6 and 9 follow up contact is again made by email, telephone or socially, but the majority of mentors maintain much more regular contact.

Additional support programs and workshops facilitated by Learning Advisers address the acquisition of generic study skills during orientation and throughout the first year. Examples of targeted collaborative programs at JCU include Ontrack (a retention strategy conducted with the Equity Office in which ‘at risk’ students are telephoned in week 3 of each semester); Kickstart (a mentor facilitated orientation course); Newstart (a support program which encourages continuing students with poor results to attend special workshops); Survivor (a refresher course on study and computer skills for continuing students conducted with InfoHelp) and Uniprep (a preparatory course conducted for equity groups in consultation with the Equity Office and a wide range of student...
support services). All of these programs are mentioned here because they deliver measurable outcomes, they are all collaborative, and the Learning Centre is the common denominator in each case.

The learning centre's role in facilitating learning communities

The first year experience for many students is characterised by their disengagement from traditional learning communities. This disengagement is evident in the highly mobile and technically aware students and includes those students studying combined degrees (McInnis, 2001). The latter group often do not identify with a particular faculty and are isolated from a course related cohort. In the case of JCU and other universities with high proportions of mature age students, the isolation is also often a result of lifestyle pressures and the trauma of adjusting to tertiary study.

The JCU student mentors have always played a significant role in supporting their small groups of mentees to adjust to the University experience. However, the allocation of a Learning Centre as an operational base in 1999 has resulted in some dramatic changes in the dynamics of the peer support process, as well as in the ways in which learning support is provided by Learning Advisers.

- Student mentors now work collaboratively with mentors from other faculties, Learning Advisers and InfoHelp (Library/Research/ICT staff) to support students.

There's always someone here - especially there's always mentors sitting around computers... there's learning advisers here too so you are always guaranteed that someone is here who has experienced these things before and can help. So the Learning Centre plays a crucial role for people to easily access and find someone to help them with their problems. (Juanita – 4th year education mentor)

I feel confident that I will pass and that relates mostly to coming in here and all the help I got from staff and mentors. I think I would have been quite lost if it wasn't for the help. (Debbie – 1st year arts student)

...it helps people work together...its a place where students and staff, undergraduates and graduates can meet and talk informally about issues affecting their course with someone in their own course obviously...but the cross faculty meetings...are also helpful as well. (Steve B – 4th year education mentor)

The Learning Centre has changed the dynamics of the mentor program itself because, when it was operating out of a corridor, you really only dealt with your own mentee. (Juanita – 4th year education mentor)

- Learning communities have been established amongst mentors, amongst first year students and amongst combinations of both.

...it’s a gathering of minds which is very hard to quantify...it’s like quantifying the learning that goes on in a playground in a park... you can't nail it down to specific events... it's people coming in and going out and talking and saying something and showing something... showing someone a website and all those things add up to a learning experience. (Steve B – 4th year education mentor)

It's given it a sense of community...it's made it like now we've really gotten to know other people sitting in here and working here instead of just sticking to our own education group. We've crossed over all faculties... (Juanita – 4th year education mentor)

The atmosphere is really good...to talk to anybody no matter what year or subject they are in...is really helpful. (Jutta – 1st year arts student)

- Student mentors have always found their role to be a rewarding experience but they now recognise that the University is acknowledging their role through the allocation of space in the Learning Centre.

...it's become part of my educational practice to make sure that I'm available to other students who need help and if it wasn't for the Learning Centre this wouldn't be possible...so I think that the Learning Centre has made a fairly massive difference to the overall attitude that is present on this campus... (Corey – 3rd year arts mentor)

Before mentors were just a notion or a name and now there's actually a place so it actually fits in quite well to the University 'cause any area of importance in the University has got a space, so before we actually got this space mentors, I don't think, were taken too seriously until the space was given. (Steve S – 4th year education mentor)

- Seeing a Learning Adviser or student mentor has become a much more informal process and while students can still have individual consultations, a significant amount of the Learning Adviser's time...
is now spent out in the Learning Centre alongside mentors helping groups of students or dealing with short queries (Figure 1). This is a marked change from the traditional (and intimidating to many) "medical model" where appointments are made by a receptionist for an Adviser who lives behind a closed door.

... and it's made it a friendlier environment and atmosphere where people really do feel they can go and ask for help whether it is big or small - it's a really casual atmosphere and that's the good thing about it. (Juanita – 4th year education mentor)

It's also made people more willing to mentor because it's a comfortable place, it's a safe environment - it makes it easier to do the mentoring. I think in this room I've been of more help to people than I ever was before. (Liz – 4th year education mentor)

Everyone who is sitting here is really willing to help...like yesterday I couldn’t do something so I came downstairs and there was someone who was doing science and I went over and said ‘help’... (Teresa – 1st year science student)

There are varying resources that are helpful, particularly for new students having trouble with referencing - that's really common...and somewhere to debrief from lectures and assignments ...an emotionally supportive place - a social environment (Liz – 4th year education mentor)

I’ve always felt comfortable coming into the Learning Centre...there’s always been help, very friendly help where it doesn’t matter what question you ask, there’s someone who will offer help or tell you where to find help. (Debbie – 1st year arts student)

Researchers have consistently advocated promoting learning communities to improve the intellectual outcomes at University. Tinto (1993; 1995) has provided sound arguments as to the value of social learning. Australian studies have also proposed specific strategies that Universities should adopt to promote such learning communities (Peel, 1999; Krause and Duchesne, 2000). Figuring prominently amongst these strategies are those which promote ongoing orientation strategies, peer support and collaborative learning support programs.

McInnis (2001) reminds us that such developments in learning communities are not new, but he does stress the urgency for institutions to design, promote and manage learning communities (and the whole undergraduate experience) rather than allow that undergraduate experience to continue to change through increased student disengagement. With this in mind, this particular study of the JCU experience suggests that we should build on the learning communities that have evolved in the Learning Centre. We must provide the student mentors with the necessary skills required to continue to facilitate group learning and social interaction and above all, we must do this with increased collaboration with academics, curriculum designers and other support staff.

Position, position, position!

The mantra of the real estate sales person is indeed relevant with regards to where Learning Centres are physically situated on a campus. Furthermore, Joanne Tiernan (2001) has recently initiated a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses afforded to Learning Centres as a result of their institutional (organisational) positioning. The outline that follows examines the physical and organisational location of the JCU Learning Centre and also offers some comments on its virtual location and operation on the JCU web pages.

JCU’s Learning Centre sits within a Teaching and Staff Development Program whose principal purpose, as identified in the Academic Support Division’s Draft Strategic Plan for 2002-2006, is “to provide leadership to the University's academic community in the adoption and implementation of appropriate learning technology, and provision of personalised learning support to students”. The Strategic Plan goes on to list major services which include:

- Develop strategies in conjunction with faculties and other divisions of the University to deliver an integrated program of learning support services that will enable JCU students to fulfil their study and life goals.
- Facilitate a Student Mentor Program, preparatory courses and study skills orientation programs that address student retention and improve the quality of the first year experience at the University.

Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association
- Provide Learning Centres as focal points for on-campus learning support from Learning Advisers and student mentors
- Coordinate learning support services for students with special needs including those from non-English speaking backgrounds, and equity, mature age and prospective student groups.
- Provide services to staff that support student centred learning practices and generic skills development. (Academic Support Division Draft Strategic Plan for 2002-2006, 2001).

The Learning Centre is clearly in an organisationally favourable location with explicit links to the University’s goals, but it is also located in a place which is operationally favourable. Being situated within a student centred learning support environment such as the Library moves the Learning Centre close to a faculty learning environment without the potential negatives that Tiernan (2001) identifies, such as the power relationships associated with student/teacher relationships in credit bearing courses. Of course, on a campus of about 3000 students, any physical devolvement of Learning Centre resources to faculties is impractical and collaboration with academic staff remains relatively easy to foster. This is helped through the Learning Advisers’ relationships with academic staff and their active involvement with the integration of generic skills into undergraduate subjects.

The Library is very much a centre that students gravitate towards because of the range of support services and resources available there. All students entering the Library, however, are aware that in addition to normal Library, Research and ICT support, they can also receive a particular type of informal and personalised assistance with their academic skills in the Learning Centre. Figure 1 shows the individual assistance provided by Learning Advisers in a sample week of semester 2, 2001. The data in Figure 1 illustrates a move away from traditional one-hour individual consultations to shorter five and thirty-minute sessions, many of which occur in the open space of the Learning Centre. It is becoming increasingly difficult to quantify the amount of ‘group mentoring’ that is occurring where both mentors and/or Learning Advisers can be involved in assisting individuals and groups of students.

In the week sampled for this study, an electronic counter revealed that an average of about 200 people (Figure 2) entered the Learning Centre each weekday during semester library hours (8am-9pm Mon-Thur, 8am-6pm Fri) and 50 entered on the weekend (1pm-5pm). As I write this at 3.30pm on a Saturday (in my office with the door closed!) I can hear a Psychology Student Mentor assisting a group of students with a lab report. At present we have little data on the amount of support being given to students by mentors and groups of mentors – support which is being initiated largely due to the allocation of space that allows informal learning communities to evolve.

Figure 1. Learning Adviser Individual Consultations in Week 10, Semester 2, 2001

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 min LA consult</th>
<th>30 min LA consult</th>
<th>60 min LA consult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anth/Arch/Soc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNSW</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HamEng</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sci/Math/NursIn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus/Law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association
A total of 31 x 5 minute consultations, 38 x 30 minute consultations and 11 x 60 minute consultations were undertaken for students as shown above.

Numbers of users entering the Learning Centre both when it is staffed with Learning Advisers (9-5 Mon-Fri) and when it is open but not staffed (5-9pm Mon-Thurs and 1-6pm on Sat-Sun). Data recorded by counter also includes multiple entries by staff, students and student mentors.

The Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program both have an integrated virtual ‘position’ on the JCU web pages. This serves as a means of informing and regularly updating the wider University community about our services as well as providing some 20 Online Learning Support modules, where students have choices about the content they access and how and when they use the information provided. Organisational and orientation modules have proven to be most important to first year students accessing the resources, while modules involving generic skills such as writing and note taking are also widely used (Calder, 1999). Peer support has been integrated into the website in two ways. Firstly, a “Finding a Mentor” site allows students to find the email address of a student mentor in their faculty who may be able to help them. The student mentors participating in this initiative are regular email users and have undertaken to respond to queries within 24 hours. The main mentor website now provides news of latest training and social activities in addition to an online mentor application form. JCU’s move towards Blackboard as its main online learning environment will necessitate a well-designed student gateway to all learning support services including the Learning Centre and the Student Mentor Program.

The role of the learning centre according to key stakeholders

Abbott-Chapman and Edwards(1999) provide a convincing argument for all areas of a university to provide a coherent support framework for students, particularly those new to tertiary study. Others have likewise consistently suggested strategies designed to increase collaboration amongst academic and support services in order to ease transition and address retention issues (McInnis, 1996; Peel, 1999; Ashton and Beilby, 2000; Lintern, Johnston and O'Reagan, 2001). In order to reach out to all of the stakeholders in the Learning Centre - staff with a clear strategic interest in academic support - the Learning Advisers are undertaking an ongoing program of structured interviews with key personnel on the Cairns campus.

Fifteen JCU staff have participated in this exercise to date and they include six Academic Advisers, three Academic Advisers/Associate Deans, one Lecturer, two Student Association Staff, Library Manager, Personal Counsellor and the Director of Student Affairs. In most cases participants were emailed a draft version of the meeting notes and asked to check and change anything if they wished. All have had the opportunity to provide further suggestions relating to any issues, omissions or actions in the summary which follows.
1. What do you see as the current role of the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program?

All are clear about the role of the Learning Advisers and the Learning Centre in supporting students to achieve their academic goals and all recognise that this is a particularly important role for ‘at risk’ students in their first year. They see the role as primarily being in relation to the development of basic generic skills. Most know and support this role being undertaken through a combination of one-on-one help, structured workshops, informal ‘drop-in’ assistance and through close relationships with lecturers.

There is a general lack of understanding about the role of the mentors even though all acknowledged the program is a valuable component of the support the University provides.

2. How do you think this role should change in the future?

There is general satisfaction with the current role undertaken by the Learning Centre and the Learning Advisers within current staffing and resource restrictions. Four people say that the current role is good and should not change. Some refinements to current practices are suggested. These include more involvement and collaboration with academic staff regarding teaching and learning practices, employing more Learning Centre staff, offering credit bearing preparatory courses and more integration with other student services. An interesting recommendation by five people was that Learning Advisers should become more political and proactive and inform senior managers of issues and agendas relating to the academic needs of students.

Two people commented on the fact that perhaps the Learning Centre attracts regular and extensive use by mainly mature age students and they indicated that we should research the users and look at attracting more of the school leaver group. Lack of use by this group may be due to their perception that the role is remedial rather than developmental.

There appears to be a need to define clearly the role of mentors for all stakeholders and to improve mentor training and selection. It may be useful to have regular meetings between mentors, lecturers and other support service staff to ensure that all are supporting students within clearly defined frameworks.

There appears to be an ideal opportunity to welcome more academic and support staff involvement in the mentor program – particularly in the area of training where academic staff, student association staff, student services staff and Academic Advisers could provide support in the training of mentors and ensure that the mentors are equipped with the knowledge to refer and promote all University support services.

Steps have already been undertaken to improve mentor selection and training. New mentors in 2002 will be asked to provide a referee from their faculty as part of their application. There is now an online application form for this purpose. Additionally, when mentors conduct tours around certain parts of the University, they will do so with scripts prepared by the staff from areas they are visiting.

3. How might the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program better portray their roles?

The general view is that the publicising of services on this campus is difficult but that the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program have a high profile amongst students and academic staff. Current methods (Learning Centre News, Email, website, bookmarks and brochures) were thought to be effective, although other suggestions included targeted brochures and Learning Advisers visiting lectures early in the semester.

4. Do you refer staff or students to the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program?

All except one person referred students regularly while two encouraged staff to make use of the service and another sought assistance for a lecturer with teaching strategies. There is some reluctance to refer students directly to mentors due to the lack of knowledge of their role.
5. What do you think are the most pressing academic needs of students?

The responses tended to be influenced by the academic or support area in which the person worked but a common theme was that of a lack of generic skills – writing, IT, organization, and time management. Several people are concerned about students being admitted who lack the basic skills needed to participate in University study. This comment was made specifically in relation to IT, writing and general organisational skills.

6. How should the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program respond to these needs?

There is a general feeling that we are responding to these needs in the most efficient way possible given our staffing levels. Many of the issues relating to this question have been included in the summary of responses to question 2 above.

7. What is the relationship between your role and that of the Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program?

Almost all stress the closeness and collaborative nature of their own role with that of the Learning Centre and Learning Advisers – this is particularly the case with those academic and support staff in direct contact with students ‘at risk’ or in crisis situations.

Conclusions

The Learning Centre, Learning Advisers, mentors and all of the collaborative activities they are involved in, do combine to form a vital force at James Cook University and are worthy of continued institutional support. This study has outlined how the ‘space’ that has helped to facilitate these activities, has physical, organisational and virtual dimensions.

- The Learning Centre has a physical presence within an integrated academic learning environment, where there is an atmosphere of support and informality that encourages the formation of learning communities.
- The Learning Centre is positioned within the organisational structure so that it is linked explicitly to the University’s strategic goals.
- The Learning Centre has a virtual presence on the University’s web pages that provides ongoing and 24/7 access to resources as well as information about roles and services provided by Learning Advisers and student mentors.

The Learning Centre and Student Mentor Program must build on the collaborative relationships that already exist. Some connections are already are very strong, such as those with the Student Association, InfoHelp, Counselling, Equity, and the Academic Advisers who identify students ‘in need’ and actively direct them to our programs and promote our services. There are, however, areas where we need to improve our collaboration and in some cases simply improve our communication about what role the Learning Advisers, the Learning Centre and the mentors play in addressing the academic needs of students.

Finally, the "something exciting and something very useful” that has been observed at JCU is the way in which the dynamics of the delivery of learning support has changed. It is perhaps time to question the traditional role of support personnel and encourage more collaborative environments where support is encouraged through the use of space and where it involves working side by side with groups of students and mentors in the formation of active learning communities.

References


Lather, P (1986). Issues of validity in openly ideological research: Between a rock and a soft place. *Interchange*, 17(4), 63-84.


