

Changing a triangle into a circle: developing the new information professional

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Abstract

The capstone unit in the Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies course at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is ITN339 Professional Practice. While the overarching goal of this unit is to prepare graduates for their new career as an information professional, the traditional classroom environment presents a number of challenges for teaching staff in terms of how to encourage students to truly engage in professional issues. Innovative teaching and learning approaches have been introduced with the aim of supporting the graduate's transition from university into the workplace. The teaching and learning process is viewed as a tri-partite relationship between students, academic staff and members of the profession, all working together to develop a well-rounded, competent and confident new professional. The curriculum therefore covers not only discipline-specific issues, but also the development of the individual personal and interpersonal attributes which are required by students to be successful as they enter the workforce. This paper outlines the teaching and learning approaches used in the unit: student-run colloquia, fieldwork and a professional portfolio represent the assessment tasks which enable students to demonstrate the multiple dimensions of their learning. Extension activities are provided through a mentoring program and through their involvement in publishing an electronic newsletter. This unit has become an example of content and process coming together. The professional networking required to establish the program reflects the essence of the program itself – encouraging reciprocal professional development. Both new and established professionals become aware of the productive ties between members of the profession and that beyond the professional interaction, real friendships can evolve, so that professional development is interwoven with personal self-development.

Introduction

Professional education faces a number of major challenges at the beginning of the 21st century. Can academic institutions, which have traditionally prepared students for

professional life, continue to educate professionals according to the orthodox model of imparting propositional knowledge, filling the individual mind with universal theories and facts (Gonczi, 2001, p.7)? Or will the soaring increase in explicit knowledge and our new understanding of the creation of tacit knowledge drive us to develop new models of professional education which reflect situated learning theories to consider the way people actively learn in a specific social context (Laurillard, 2002, 13f.)?

This paper examines the educational needs of the library and information science (LIS) professional in the Australian context, focusing on the Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies (GDLIS) course at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). As the new LIS professional will be working in a rapidly changing, information-intensive working environment, he or she will need to not only have the ability to combine theoretical discipline knowledge with the practical application of this knowledge in a range of different situations, including situations in an unknown future, but to also embody a range of “holistic capabilities which represent the links between disciplinary knowledge and professional skills” (Bowden and Marton, 1998, p.12). The challenge for educators, therefore, is “to shift the focus of professional education from training the individual mind, to the social settings in which the individual becomes part of the community of practice” (Gonczi, 2001, p.8).

We outline some teaching and learning strategies that have been introduced in the Professional Practice unit of the GDLIS course to meet this challenge, involving direct collaboration between the university and the world of professional practice. We present the well-rounded, competent and confident graduate as the image of the circle, while in the Professional Practice unit the professional development process itself can be viewed as a tri-partite relationship between the students, the academic staff and members of the profession, represented by the image of the triangle. Accordingly we can say that we draw on the triangle to create the circle.

The curriculum of the Professional Practice unit is reviewed within the framework of four key questions:

1. What educational purposes do we seek to attain?
2. What learning experiences do we provide to attain these purposes?
3. How do we organise these learning experiences effectively?
4. How do we ascertain that these purposes have been attained?

It is valuable, however, to first place this unit in its academic context.

The academic context

The Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies (GDLIS) is a course offered by the School of Information Systems in the Faculty of Information Technology at QUT. While the GDLIS is an example of a tertiary education course that aims to prepare graduates for employment, the academic staff are mindful of the enormous range of employment opportunities available to ‘information professionals’. The landscape is extensive, from the broad levels of academic libraries, public libraries, State and National libraries, through to the narrower levels of special

libraries and information centres, such as law libraries, health and medical centres, music libraries etc. Opportunities also exist beyond this more traditional library context, with career avenues available within knowledge management, records management, Internet and intranet development and so on.

The course is offered as a one-year full-time, two year part-time study program, in a face-to-face teaching and learning mode, with seven core units and one elective unit to be completed. As the course itself is recognised by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), students are eligible for professional membership of ALIA upon graduation. On average, enrolments sit around 60 FTE, with a fairly even split between full-time and part-time students. In a postgraduate course such as the GDLIS, the student cohort is an interesting one, with a wide diversity in academic background, employment history, personal interests and life experiences.

ITN339 Professional Practice is regarded as the capstone unit for the course, with the overarching goal of the unit of preparing graduates for entry into the workforce as new information professionals. It is felt that one of the strengths of the unit is the synergy of the teaching team of two academic staff who work closely in other units as well. Within this context, it is critical to examine our educational philosophies and goals, how we structure the path of learning and how we evaluate the effectiveness of learning.

What educational purposes to we seek to attain?

Our key objective is to develop new graduates who are enthusiastic and confident about their new profession – a dynamic and exciting world of information management. In terms of curriculum content, this not only encompasses the need to acquire sound disciplinary knowledge, but also to develop the personal attributes and attitudes, which we refer to as ‘generic capabilities’, which will ensure a successful career as an LIS professional. At the highest level, we believe in the need for a holistic approach to student learning where the personal and professional dimensions are intertwined.

As a professional course, the GDLIS inevitably reflects some elements of the traditional or discipline-based approach to curriculum. We believe, however, that that our educational philosophy goes beyond this to incorporate elements of the cognitive view – “to develop the mind, to help (the students) learn how to learn and to provide them with opportunities to use and to strengthen their intellectual faculties” (Toohey, 1999, p.55). The students’ “intellectual, personal and social development” (Ratcliff, 1997, p.8) is especially critical in the Professional Practice unit.

We support Toohey’s views which highlight the importance of utilising the curriculum as a vehicle for students to acquire “the conceptual structures and thinking processes of a particular discipline” (Toohey, 1999, p.55). Bowden and Marton believe that the “acquisition of required skills and knowledge occurs as part of the developing familiarity with ways of being, ways of thinking, ways of seeing the world characterizing the (professional) group and with the context that is gradually and increasingly inhabited” by new members of that professional group (1998, p.57). We

believe that the curriculum can benefit from the incorporation of these philosophical concepts to help develop the desired mindset.

It is important to stress that generic capabilities have become a significant component of the holistic approach to professional education in the GDLIS course at QUT. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has highlighted the importance of these capabilities within LIS courses:

Methods of teaching and assessment should be designed to develop or enhance students' interpersonal communication skills, ability to work in teams, and time and task management skills. At the professional level, emphasis should be placed on developing students' analytical and problem-solving skills. (IFLA, 2000)

Preliminary findings from a QUT Teaching and Learning Research Project, which aims to identify the generic capabilities for information professionals, have been discussed in a series of focus groups attended by industry professionals. The specific capabilities of teamwork, and oral and written communication have been included in the curriculum, with students participating in tutorials and workshops to focus on the characteristics and the value of these capabilities, and the assessment tasks have been developed to include student reflections on their skill development. The involvement of practising professionals in the research project has added an additional element to the concept of the triangular relationship between students, academic staff and the profession in the course.

What learning experiences do we provide to attain these educational purposes?

The Australian education model reflects the dichotomy between mental and manual, theoretical and practical, mind and body. This dichotomy underpins much of Western thinking, from the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato through to Descartes. Traditionally, theoretical knowledge has encompassed beliefs, facts and ideas, which can then be applied by the practitioner to solve professional problems. Schulman (1987, cited in Ratcliff, 1997, p.16) has depicted the task of teaching as the need to reframe discipline knowledge in forms that can be better understood by students. We believe that, working within the given disciplinary context, the role of the teacher is to not so much to transfer specific knowledge, but to facilitate knowledge construction, to open the mind, to encourage passion for learning, to help students find out where they want to go and to help them reach these goals.

Consequently, the educational process should be viewed not as the linear transfer of knowledge, but ultimately as a multi-dimensional process. The interaction of theory and practice within the professional context should facilitate the development of real understanding through collaborative activities in the professional community rather than through individual actions. Within the Professional Practice unit, the teaching and learning approaches encourage students to become directly involved in the authentic world which they will enter once they graduate. Rather than having a distinct demarcation between the roles of student and professional practitioner, between the academic world and the real world, this unit aims to provide a transitional situation which will enable the student to move smoothly into their new career.

Accordingly the curriculum of the unit covers issues which are critical to the information profession, while at the same time offering a nurturing environment which will assist the development of the individual students' personal and interpersonal attributes which they will need to be successful in the workplace.

Our holistic view of LIS education means that students will be engaged in a range of teaching and learning approaches in order to encompass the full range of knowledge and skill development, critical thinking, generic capabilities and psycho-social self-development. From the outset, we endeavour to get to know and understand our students. At the beginning of the year we capture their expectations from the course, we subject them to a Myers Briggs personality test and we help them become aware of their personal learning styles. The diversity of students and, by extension, the diversity of learning styles, has contributed significantly to the development of academic program.

How do we organise these learning experiences effectively?

It is critical to recognise the importance of designing teaching, learning and assessment tasks that will support the multi-faceted concept of learning. Our goal is to build an engaging curriculum which offers learners opportunities to demonstrate, through the assessment tasks, the multiple dimensions of their learning accomplishments. We unequivocally support the views of Bowden and Marton who assert that "assessment should be such that students are motivated to undertake the kind of learning we espouse, ie, assessment should reflect what is to be learned" (1998, p.161).

The Professional Practice unit is subject to the traditional concept of contact hours: a three-hour session is scheduled on a weekly basis. Each week a guest speaker joins the class for an hour or so, followed by the student-run colloquium. There are three elements of assessment. Firstly the student is required to demonstrate evidence of his or her ability both to run a colloquium on a professional issue as a group activity and to participate in the class discussions throughout the semester. Secondly, the student is required to undertake two fieldwork placements, comprising fifteen working days in two separate libraries or information centres. Thirdly, each student develops a professional portfolio to provide insights into their emergent awareness about life as an information professional. It is valuable to explore these activities in greater detail to develop a clearer understanding of the central pedagogic issues.

The guest speakers

Each week, a guest is invited to join the class. We aim to achieve a balance between the guests who contribute to the practical dimensions of embarking on a new career through interactive sessions on job applications, resumé writing and drafting responses to selection criteria, and to those who discuss higher level issues such as library design and space planning, industrial relations, or managing your career. The students meet individuals who play a significant role in their own specific area of the information profession, who can both inform and inspire the students to think about the critical issues impacting on their professional lives.

Through the strong cognitive approach to curriculum we aim to structure the teaching and learning activities so that students have the opportunity to attain deep, rather than surface, learning outcomes, supporting the students as they develop the cognitive structures and thinking processes appropriate to the LIS profession. The importance of real world examples cannot be underestimated, as students need to appreciate the application of the theoretical structures within a range of diverse situations, given the individuality and often uniqueness of LIS institutions. Drawing guest speakers into the academic program is therefore an integral ingredient in this learning environment. It is through the direct involvement of practitioners that students grasp the amazing diversity of information problems and the range of possible approaches to solve them.

The colloquia

The colloquia are run by the students themselves. Early in the semester, the concept of the ‘colloquium’ is discussed in class, focusing on the potential learning outcomes which can be achieved. Students are made aware of their responsibility for running the colloquia, to identify members of their group, to determine the topic and to decide how to structure the activity to generate a collaborative learning environment. This framework helps students to construct their knowledge, often brainstorming and thinking conceptually first, then synthesising the disparate ideas and values. Bowden and Marton stress that, when constructing new knowledge “in every particular situation we make use of things we have learned earlier” (1998, p.46). Accordingly, we believe it is important to highlight the valuable contribution individual students can make to the overall learning process as a result of their own prior knowledge and personal experience. Having a cohort of students with a wide variety of undergraduate qualifications, plus the relatively high ratio of mature age students, provides a fruitful context for this discursive approach to learning,

The central tenet for the colloquia is that the groups to incorporate some form of group learning, either through discussion topics, quizzes or games etc. While some students have found the initial idea intimidating, pushing them out of their comfort zone, the supportive environment of the class has quickly encouraged initiative and creativity, with some exciting activities introduced to stretch, challenge and entertain. Different groups have introduced a range of media into the sessions, including music, visual media such as art and photography, children’s construction toys, as well as interactive online activities.

The physical environment itself is crucial to the learning experience: the traditional lecture theatre is viewed as counterproductive to the desired learning experience. Working within the limitations of the venues available in the Faculty, the colloquia are held in a medium-sized flat room with modular furniture and plenty of natural light. Students have the opportunity to arrange the furniture as they wish for their own colloquium, so that each group can consider the potential impact of the layout of the room on their activities. Importantly, students are encouraged to sit in different places each week to alter the group dynamics and to stimulate less personally predictable behaviour. This can be a positive aspect of the learning experience: “By people in a group...becoming conscious of others’ ways of thinking and experiencing different phenomena, each consciousness gets linked to others and a collective

consciousness arises, richer, more inclusive and, under certain circumstances, more powerful than any singular consciousness or the sum of them (Bowden and Marton, 1998, p.41).

Peer review is a key aspect of the colloquium process, with students determining what areas they wish to have evaluated by their peers and drafting the evaluation forms. At the conclusion of the colloquium, participants are asked to complete the peer evaluations. The group then undertakes both a self-evaluation of the colloquium – how it went, what went well, what surprised them, what they might do differently next time – and a reflection on the responses they received through the peer review. Students are thus introduced to the practices of self-evaluation, peer review and reflection on learning on both the individual and group levels. Within the group environment it has proved valuable for the group to think collaboratively and to exchange ideas about their learning. We have found that these processes help students become more engaged in and accept greater personal responsibility for their learning.

The fieldwork placements

Fieldwork is probably regarded the most popular part of the course. While the placements have traditionally been a part of the GDLIS, current students are asked not just to report on their work in a library or information centre, but also to consider the professional issues they have been introduced to, through the guest speakers and the colloquia, within the context of their new working environment, and also to reflect on the application of generic capabilities and personal attributes which they become aware of in themselves and their work colleagues. Importantly, as they are encouraged to learn to utilise critical reflective practice as a learning tool in itself, students are becoming increasingly aware of the interplay between their fieldwork experience and applying for jobs: they recognise the potential to draw on their reflections during fieldwork to understand the scope of the position descriptions and to develop responses to selection criteria. The emphasis has clearly shifted from regarding the fieldwork placement simply as a task to be undertaken to complete the requirements for the course, to understanding the developmental opportunities and learning processes embedded within the fieldwork program.

The professional portfolio

The idea of the professional portfolio is introduced to the students at the beginning of the first semester, to enable them (ideally) to work on it throughout the academic year. The portfolio is a highly personal piece of work which will naturally reflect the personality of each student. While there is increasing professional awareness about the importance of a portfolio for career progression as a tool to provide evidence of learning, there are inevitably individual differences in the perceived importance of such a document. Some students embrace the idea enthusiastically, keen to create a dynamic resource which will develop and grow as their own career itself develops and grows; others tend to reject the idea and see no personal value in the portfolio. Students therefore have the opportunity to determine the grade they wish to aim for with their portfolio: at the basic Pass level, all that is required is a resumé, outline of

their career goals and a synopsis of their proposals for continuing professional development. This is seen as building the foundation for preparing job applications. For students who wish to follow this path, a hypothetical job advertisement with key selection criteria has been included so that they can develop their skills in preparing relevant responses.

However, as critical reflective practice is encouraged for the attainment of higher grades, students can provide reflections on their own development, on professional seminars or meetings they have attended during the course of the year, or they can demonstrate their contribution to the profession through articles submitted to journals or involvement in committees or professional events. The portfolio can be submitted either as a hard copy or an electronic document. It has been interesting to note the growing interest in developing electronic portfolios and it is anticipated that in 2003 the Professional Practice students will participate in a university pilot project to test the viability of electronic portfolios for graduates.

While students are encouraged to 'think outside the box' throughout their involvement in Professional Practice, two particular initiatives have been introduced to provide professional experiences beyond the curriculum: mentoring and professional communication.

The mentoring program

The value of mentoring of new professionals is widely discussed in the literature: it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this topic in any depth. The mentoring program offered to students in the Professional Practice unit deserves to be highlighted, however, as an example of the innovative teaching and learning approaches within the GDLIS program at QUT. The program, known as the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program, has been developed as a collaborative exercise between the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee and QUT. 27 pairs were established – about 50% of the class – which underscored the value of the idea to both mentees and mentors from the profession.

The program itself has involved a number of social functions, as well as some professional development seminars planned for 2003, when the students will be free from the pressures of their studies. The mentors and mentees get together in their own time and in their own ways: some in the workplace, some more socially over coffee or lunch. Some students are also able to undertake one of their fieldwork placements in their mentor's organisation.

Mentoring is a natural part of life for information professionals, as noted by Field: "It is part of the ethos of our profession to share knowledge. We are not natural competitors like those within the business world. (Mentoring) is an excellent way for professionals to leverage their expertise and serves as a mechanism to continue their own professional growth" (2001, p.273). Mentors can also foster an understanding of the relevance and support the development of generic capabilities such as problem solving and critical thinking as well as lifelong learning, to be able to deal with a range of complex situations, ethical and moral principles. The program is therefore an example of a strategy designed to meet the need for more elaborate induction

programs for new professionals “with greater obligations on the professions to participate in professional education through coaching and mentoring programs – in association with universities” (Gonczi, 2001, p.2).

The significance of the program has been recognised through the award of a QUT Faculty of Information Technology Teaching & Learning Grant. The mentoring program offers a valuable opportunity for collaboration between the University and industry to align the students’ learning environment with the professional context in which they will be employed. It is hoped that the collaborative nature of the research project will not only encourage the involvement of professionals in the academic program and foster a critical and reflective research culture amongst practitioners, but that the current program itself can be developed as a model for other collaborative mentoring programs both within the LIS profession in general and within other courses at QUT. Further recognition for the program has come with the QUT Faculty of Information Technology 2002 Award for Innovation in Teaching.

Professional communication

The second recent initiative encourages students to become involved in the publishing of a newsletter distributed to all members of ALIA in the State of Queensland. Although *QUILL* was distributed in print format for many years, with the editorial committee based in regional Queensland, the opportunity emerged for the newsletter to be moved to an electronic format, based in Brisbane to draw on the resources and energy of the QUT GDLIS students. As students are encouraged to demonstrate involvement in professional activities as a component of their portfolios, they now have the chance to write articles or serve as roving reporters. By helping to gather news and stories, either face to face or via email, new professionals will be able to work together with experienced ones, thus offering further opportunities to network and to learn about the field they will be working in.

How do we ascertain that these purposes have been attained?

We indicated earlier in the paper that our goals in the Professional Practice unit, as the capstone for the GDLIS course, were to adopt a holistic approach to student learning where the personal and professional dimensions are intertwined. We specifically hope that the assessment tasks will support the students’ learning by encouraging them to “*perform* their understanding” (Biggs, 1999, p.35). The fieldwork component naturally offers students the opportunity to correlate theory gained in the classroom with the practical application of this theory in the workplace. The student mentoring program demonstrates the importance of constructing knowledge beyond the classroom or computer laboratory to be able to “behave” as an information professional (cf Biggs, 1999, p.36).

The unit is subject to formal evaluation through the Student Evaluation of Unit (SEU) process. In 2002, the students rated this unit at 4.9 out of 5.0, with some students commenting that their evaluation of this unit was the highest they had ever given for any university unit. While there were concerns about the amount of work, they praised the relevancy of it all, with many unconsciously recognising the nexus

between assessment and learning to truly establish their understanding of what it meant to be a 'professional'.

The guest speakers and the information professionals who supervise students in the fieldwork program or who have become mentors are fully aware of the contribution they personally make in the development of new information professionals. Involving so many practising professionals directly in the academic program, as guest speakers (13) or as mentors (27), has undoubtedly forged stronger links between the university and industry. One of the most immediate benefits is for these professionals to see what is happening in the GDLIS, which is already leading to increased employment opportunities (permanent, casual or contract) both for new graduates and for students yet to complete the course.

The QUT/ALIA mentoring program has been a very successful initiative, with professional and personal development benefits to both mentors and mentees. A tangible benefit for mentors has been full access to the resources of QUT Library – what an incentive for LIS professionals! ALIA itself has benefited in its own right, as the students have been able to experience the benefits of professional involvement and the interest of the association in these new information professionals. This has translated directly into new members for the association.

As academic staff, we have found the unit a very challenging, but ultimately highly rewarding experience. One of the exciting areas of working with adult learners is the way that some of these students become aware of the changes they experience within themselves, as noted by Marton, Beaty and Dall'Alba (1993) and by Marton and Booth (1997) as a sixth conception of learning, building on the original five outlined by Säljö (1979).

This is *learning as change as a person*, the most extensive way of understanding learning in that embraces the learner, not only as the agent of knowledge acquisition, retention and application, and not merely as the beneficiary of learning, but also as the ultimate recipient of the effects of learning. (Marton and Booth, 1997, p.38)

One student has personally commented that while she expected to learn a great deal about information work and libraries, she was amazed about how much she had learnt about herself during the course, underscoring the interplay between personal and professional development in the unit.

Conclusion

Through the key questions about our educational purposes, the learning experiences we provide and organise for the students, and the learning outcomes we achieve, we have reviewed the curriculum of the Professional Practice unit to highlight the contribution made to the development of a cohesive and collaborative profession. As discussed earlier in the paper, it is important for the curriculum to help students acquire “the conceptual structures and thinking processes of a particular discipline” (Toohey, 1999, p.55). As academic staff, we feel it is essential that students are exposed to patterns of professional beliefs and behaviour, so that even the way in

which we, the teachers in the GDLIS program, relate to other professionals - for example with guest lecturers or with fellow LIS professionals through the mentoring program - is perceived by the students as the direct impact of effective interactions within the profession. This style of behaviour then naturally becomes an example of authentic representation of the profession (Joseph, 2000, p.19).

It is also valuable to highlight once again Gronczi's views on the education of new professionals, recommending the interaction of the theoretical and practical aspects of education to "combine cognitive, emotional and bodily processes in the social and cultural setting of the workplace" (2001, p.1). This unit draws on the relationship between academic staff, practising professionals and students (the triangle) to blend the development of the professional knowledge and skills with personal and interpersonal attributes to create the holistic information professional (the circle).

The Professional Practice unit has undoubtedly become an example of content and process coming together. The professional networking required to establish the academic program in this unit reflects the essence of the program itself – encouraging reciprocal professional development. Both new and established professionals become aware of the productive ties between members of the profession and that beyond the professional interaction, real friendships can evolve, so that professional development is interwoven with personal self-development.

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