

Exploring WIL through a community development lens

As universities aim for transforming their traditional approaches to engagement based on shared understanding, collaboration and mutual benefit (Arden, McLachlan & Cooper 2009; Mulvihill et al. 2011; Butcher, Egan, & Ralph, 2008; Sinclair, 2011), the authors draw on a Community Development (CD) perspective to reflect on the processes by which Macquarie University has set out to implement the Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program at Macquarie University. Central to its vision of being a university of service and engagement, PACE offers undergraduate students WIL opportunities with local, regional and international partners. Through PACE, students work on mutually beneficial projects that both meet the partner's organisational goals and enable students to strengthen graduate capabilities while contributing to positive social change and gaining credit towards their degree.

The university has adopted a 'whole of organisation' approach, which aligns with that of CD, which can be defined as the process whereby people work together to find solutions to their common problems. Fundamentally, the notion of working *with* is implicitly connected to an ideology that depends upon participation and community engagement (McLachlan, 2014, p. 25). Models of practice have been influenced by social justice, self-help and social capital perspectives and more recently by strengths-based approaches that focus on developing the cohesive capacity and resilience of communities in dealing with contentious community issues in the increasingly complex global society. In such a context, participation and engagement hinges on the importance of collaboration and relational partnering – working together as a cohesive team based on communication, trust and confidence (Doloi 2009).

This paper draws on data from the *Student Experience of PACE Project*, which explores the extent to which PACE activities can be regarded as enabling experiences associated with incremental outcomes of awareness and effort to act in ways which align with the values associated with a 'socially responsible' & 'global citizen'. While the focus here is the student perspective, MQ researchers are conducting a larger body of research with partners, staff and community that will be incorporated into a larger work.

Theoretical framework

Adopting a 'whole of organisation' approach, incorporating ideas of working together, cohesiveness and wholeness, are central to both a CD and a systems thinking perspective, which Midgley (2003) argues, implies a complexity in the interconnection of components that are functionally associated. Systems thinking provides a useful overarching framework to assist in understanding the notion of nested systems, given the complex nature of CD work that aims to work across the 'whole of community' in order to build capacity and resilience. Current CD literature (Mayo & Craig 1995; Ward & Mullender 1991; Meekosha & Mowbray 1995; Cork 2009; Ife 2012; Kenny 2011; Burkett 2011; Eyben 2013) provides multiple methods for practice but few processes for practitioners to conceptualise this complexity. This is equally relevant when discussing Macquarie University and its 'communities'.

Viewed as complex social-ecological systems, communities consist of networks of people (individuals, groups, organisations, institutions) undertaking various activities that contribute to the social, environmental, cultural, economic and political arenas, creating unique cultural contexts. Individuals that make up those networks are motivated by

different world-views and values, adding to the diversity of community opinion and action. “Organizational theorists have called these networks "communities of practice," in which people build relationships, help each other, and make daily activities meaningful at a personal level” (Capra n.d., p. 5). In building its networks, PACE aspires to provide mutually beneficial, transformative learning experiences. The strength of the connections or the relationships between the various different components of networks will also affect the outcomes of any actions that arise (McLachlan, 2014, p. 164).

According to Barton & Selfa (2011, p. 50), “community development is fundamentally a process of building relationships, institutions and culture, which shapes the personalities, worldviews, and identities of community members”. So too has the PACE program aimed for building and shaping the relationships that it develops with its internal and external ‘community members’, through participation and community engagement.

Challenges to the ideology of genuine, as opposed to tokenistic, participation and community engagement are prevalent in the literature, stemming from concerns that these notions have atrophied, or been co-opted, due to the current conditions of globalisation and neo-liberalism (Westoby, 2012, Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). Participation has even come to be regarded by some as “tyranny” (Cooke & Kothari 2001, p.3). These contrasting views suggest potential limits to theories of participation and community engagement. Mohan (2001) however, suggests that the idea that those we view as powerless are not, and that from this ontological position we can construct transformative models of participation (McLachlan, 2014, p. 26)

Considering the PACE aim of fostering transformative experience from a holistic or systems perspective, there is a need to construct a comprehensive, shared understanding of both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors impacting on effective participation and engagement. In undertaking community-based research, conducting literature reviews and building on the work of other researchers in this area Arden, McLachlan & Cooper, 2009, p. 81) propose 13 critical success factors for university-community engagement, see table 1.

More Tangible Factors (Explicit)	Less Tangible Factors (Implicit)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Written agreement (MOU/Contract) <input type="checkbox"/> Clear and agreed purpose to the relationship <input type="checkbox"/> Results orientated to meet community defined priorities <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrated commitment of resources and leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Interdisciplinary (university) and broad community involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrated mutual benefit (university and community outcomes) <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Evidence of trust <input type="checkbox"/> A shared vision <input type="checkbox"/> Sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to learning <input type="checkbox"/> Acknowledgement and respect for 'insider' and 'outsider' roles, knowledge, expertise and perspectives <input type="checkbox"/> Effective communication

Critical success factors for sustainable university-community engagement (Arden et al., 2009)

In addition, theorists have developed typologies of participation (see Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995; Ife & Tesoriero 2006) that compare different approaches to participation that highlight the barriers to, and the consequences of, each model. Woolcock and Brown's (2005) review of community engagement literature also highlighted the importance of principles and values that guide the processes of participation and engagement. They identified 'Leading lights': Ife, Lodder, Smyllie, Dick, Kenyon and Black; within the community arena, who also talk of the tensions inherent in any engagement practice that is highly dependent on contexts of economy, environment, culture and society and are based on trust, goodwill and respect. (McLachlan, 2014, p. 26)

Methodology

Given the breadth of a holistic approach, the focus of this paper has been to draw on the perspectives of one key stakeholder, the student. While research has been conducted on student perceptions of the quality of learning & teaching (Allen & Peach, 2011) and in relation to career development (Reddan & Rauchle, 2012), the *Student Experience of PACE Project* provided ample research opportunities in territories largely unexplored to consider whether and how the PACE Program has transformative value for students enabling them to become more cognisant of their social responsibilities and conception of 'global citizen'. From a historical perspective it has long been asserted that global citizenship will strengthen the social fabric and foster social wellbeing. For more than a

quarter of a century educators have suggested that the challenge for education is to both affirm diversity and advance world unity (e.g. Henry Widdowson, 1989). Responses to this challenge have taken multiple expressions, but the adoption of ‘global citizenship’ as a key focus in curricula, has been noteworthy (see Wierenga and Roberto Guevara, 2013).

The study sought to answer four research questions:

1. How does the PACE experience impact on the development of graduate capabilities that are associated with social responsibility and global citizenship, if at all?
2. Does PACE offer any distinct motives for learning?
3. Does a transformative learning experience take place in the context of PACE?
4. What are the levels of satisfaction with PACE activities among PACE participants?

A mixed methods approach to collecting data included semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire survey of students enrolled in PACE units in Sessions 1, 2 & 3 in 2014/15. Due to time limitations and student availability the focus groups have not been conducted. This data sample includes interviews (N= 27) and surveys (N=389).

The demographic of students completing the survey included: students aged between 20-25 (71%), 26-30 (10%), > 30 (17%); female (70 %). The representation of students was: Arts (31%); Business (25%), Human Science (26 %) and Science (17%). Students completed their PACE unit in 3rd year (47 %) or fourth year (31%), with full-time students (80%) and part-time (20%).

The diversity of PACE experiences ranged from: internship (24%); professional experience with practicum (22%); project based learning (19%); community development project (7%); community/ industry reference panel (4%); volunteering (10%); with smaller percentages in mentoring and community based research.

Preliminary Findings and Analysis

As an indicator of the success of PACE, 79% of students reported that undertaking a unit met their expectations as well as providing distinct motives for learning. The reasons for this included the opportunity to apply skills in practice; learn new skills; broaden horizons; improve confidence; and engage in real life experiences that change perspectives; contribute to and make a difference; and establish a link between study and careers. This last point was important to students if they were unsure where their studies would lead. They wanted to gain insights into their liking for their chosen area, and whether or not they were suitable for the job.

...I don't think I was really very certain of where I was going with my degree.

*This unit really consolidated what I wanted to do ... I had a few different options in mind but I wasn't expecting to be so driven That's what I want to do
(student no. 0105)*

The significant minority (21%) that felt it did not meet expectations or provide motivations sighted issues with poor communication processes, poor planning and lack of integration between the academic content and experiential component.

I found the unit convener very unhelpful particularly when experiencing difficulties with my internship supervisor. As my internship was conducted

entirely via correspondence I would of really appreciated more organisation between the University and my organisation. There seemed to be major miscommunication between them which myself and fellow student were left to deal with (survey data)

Acknowledging that the concepts of collaboration and relational partnering require effective communication, planning and good leadership, correlation of the data around these themes was sought.

Students reported communication as a skill that was highly sought after by employees and one that was developed as a result of their placement.

I have developed many sought after skills by employers as a result of PACE project such as communication (survey data)

In identifying any barriers to learning, 58% of students answered 'No' and 48% answered 'Yes'. Communication presented as an issue along with the importance of successful planning of unit activities.

better organising of placements and host supervisors, better communication of expectations and goals for placement (survey data)

Underpinning these themes is a deeper level of values that hinge on trust, goodwill and respect, which is often dependent on the interrelated processes required for building long-term relationships. However, this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

... The one thing that makes a big difference is the supervisor-prac teacher relationship. In my first experience the supervisor was very controlling and less

willing to try new ideas, which I was fine with, but now my new supervisor and I get along extremely well and she is willing to try new things and respects my judgements so I have found the second experience even better (student # 103)

Questions relating to the integration of the PACE activity and the unit content showed 78% of students in agreement. Regarding the contribution of experiential learning to fostering the graduate capabilities associated with global citizens (critical thinking, communication, ethical, creative and innovative, skills and knowledge, socially and environmentally responsible), responses indicated that the majority of students had improved on each capability and that their confidence had also improved as a result.

Preliminary findings from a thematic analysis of the data suggest that the benefits of collaboration and relational partnering, as CD principles, are critical to the success of the PACE program.

Viewed from this perspective, the distinctiveness of the PACE Program is defined by its ambitious aspiration: ‘mutually beneficial learning and engagement’ (Macquarie University, 2013). With a demonstrable commitment to social inclusion and social wellbeing, the beneficiaries of the Program embrace at once students, staff, partners and the wider community (see Rawlings-Sanaei and Sachs, 2014), aiming for a holistic approach. In addition, the recently developed Learning and Teaching framework has a vision of MQ as a connected learning community, with three dimensions; a connected curriculum, connected learning experiences and connected people (Macquarie 2015). Adopting this from a systems or ‘whole of institution’ perspective, the aim is to, as Browne (2004, p.405) contends, “continue to work at all levels, connect the dots, develop

much broader support for learning communities that are inclusive and participative, help people create vital connections that change what's possible”.

Conclusion

This research explored WIL through a CD lens, focusing on the student perspective. In doing so it highlighted the importance of key elements of communication, trust, planning and good leadership that impact on the effectiveness of any collaboration and relational partnering. While the success of the PACE program is evident, the challenges of meeting expectations, ensuring effective communication and planning require further program improvement. The larger body of research work being conducted by MQ researchers with partners, staff and community is investigating the nature of the process and practices that are core to establishing the integrated, interconnected web that will sustain the vision of MQ as a connected learning community.

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