

Chapter 15

Shifting Mindsets Within: Self–Study of Professional Learning

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ABSTRACT

In an educational environment focused on providing flexible learning options to diverse student groups—rural and remote, cross-cultural, mature-aged, and second-chance learners—there need to be effective capacity building strategies for the professionals who provide these educational services. People do not resist change; they resist being changed. This chapter describes the capacity building of early childhood educators redesigning curriculum for distance learning. They engaged in self-study using metaphor as a research strategy to investigate their own adaptive practices. The creation of a professional learning community was made possible by supporting personal mastery and reflecting on the shared vision. The process of focusing meta-cognition on one's own values and beliefs brought about a change in attitudes and perspectives relating to what could be achieved in an online learning environment. This chapter describes the research strategies and outcomes of an academic self-study professional development project. In addition, the authors suggest broader application of metaphor analysis as an elucidating strategy for capacity building.

A LEARNING JOURNEY

Learning is a journey—a developmental process. Our ongoing narrative journey of collaboration and pedagogical inquiry began in January 2009 when four new academics and an educational designer joined the existing team of five Early Childhood

Education (ECE) academics in the School of Education at the University of New England (UNE). Our collaborative project was to revise the sixteen units across the Bachelor of Teaching and Bachelor of Education Early Childhood degrees, migrating from paper-based unit materials to online teaching and learning. These programs service only distance learning groups; the vast majority of our students are ‘earner-learners’—mature-age early

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childhood teachers with full-time job responsibilities who also undertake study. Many also have family responsibilities. Our goal was to change our programs from remote isolated learning to cooperative and collaborative strategies, not only with our students, but also in reconceptualising ourselves as teacher educators.

Evidence collected by the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training (2007) suggests difficulties experienced in many teacher education programs are the direct result of pre-service programs that remained insular and unconnected. As a team, we wanted to ensure that moving to a more active online presence would enhance and reflect our philosophies of learning and teaching. Our collective goals in this curriculum redesign process were to ensure links, connectivity and consistencies across the two degree programs, and to facilitate an alignment informed by a strong, socio-cultural theoretical framework with an aim to open up more dialogic teaching and learning possibilities. A self-study through metaphorical analysis investigated the mindsets of ECE curriculum design staff in the early stages of exploring both the conceptual and theoretical framework, and the establishment of guiding principles for curriculum design. During this process, we engaged in rethinking what each academic wanted to achieve with students. We revisited learning outcomes and linked assessment tasks; we investigated appropriate strategies and relevant content for achieving those outcomes. Our re-conceptualization work evolved quickly into an unfunded self-study (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey & Russell, 2004) research project as we inquired into ourselves, and our higher education pedagogy.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW WE DON'T KNOW

The adoption of Internet-based digital tools and the implementation of interactive strategies involve

significant resource networks, both technological and human. Diverse perspectives of the role of higher education in society, and strategies for providing teaching and learning affect processes targeted towards pedagogical change using digital tools. These diverse perspectives stem from higher education stakeholders' firmly held beliefs of what was appropriate when designing, developing, and implementing degree programs. It was also impacted by their concepts of how students' engagement with the learning process impacted on the curriculum design process. These concepts and others (for example standards criteria, regulatory frameworks and quality assurance strategies) have often been created from outmoded educational paradigms. These then become set and eventually become immovable objects impinging on the ability of curriculum designers to envisage new and innovative learning paradigms. It has been suggested that many distance education practitioners adopt Black Swan thinking (Stewart, Khan, & Hedberg, 2011), which Taleb (2007) defined as visualising a highly improbable event consisting of three principal characteristics: (1) it is unpredictable; (2) it carries a massive impact; and (3) after the fact, an explanation is concocted that makes it appear less random, and more predictable than it was.

In distance education, the use of the Internet to support student learning was a Black Swan for members of the ECE team. It had been difficult to conceive how teaching and learning could be effectively provided using the Internet. In designing curriculum, we tended to concentrate on what we did and had done, rather than considering what we might design and facilitate differently. We often felt driven by the existing policies of the university and the need to conform to how units had been designed in the past. Through our own learning experiences, we had become hardwired to replicate rather than use our imagination to innovate. Our group-facilitated self-study research supported redevelopment of new professional mindsets. Throughout this journey, we moved from a posi-

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