

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Making Industry Real to Pre-Teaching Students

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For some time the three of us, as academics in an education faculty in a large urban university in Australia, have grappled with how we can meaningfully involve our industry partners- schoolteachers- in our faculty programs that does more than just pay lip service to their knowledge, skills and experiences. Typically, we have used industry people and practicing teachers in guest speaking roles, in which the expert talks to our students about a key practice, program or initiative that they may be doing in their professional practice. While this lecture can be highly informative and engaging for our students, we know this role is confining and offers only a narrow view of learning and engagement, almost like a master and apprentice model. Greater connection with industry is being encouraged in higher education and in particular in our university, often on the grounds that through such connection, our graduates will be better prepared for the world of work and our pre-teaching programs will be much more authentic and relevant ready. There is significant media focus upon the perceived "failings" of beginning teachers and teaching graduates from university schools are being asked to sit "suitability tests" that measure their competency to teach in public schools. As well, learning in which learners function within a community of practice is also being advocated by both the university leadership and the professional teaching registration bodies, as learning through such

environments is seen as advantageous, including the development of shared practice, collaboration, and joint enterprise.

A lot of us would agree that having meaningful learning environments in which learners jointly construct their learning and thereby foster life-long learning makes sense. It's how to do this that gets a bit tricky. We turned to research to guide our approach of co-design of learning between students and industry. A number of researchers (Taylor, Klein, & Abrams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010) have suggested that we need to create a hybrid, or Third Space, so as to redesign the structure and pedagogy to bridge the boundaries between spaces. In such Third Spaces, responsibility for teaching and learning can be shared and boundaries between can be blurred (McDonough & McDonough, 2014).

In our education and pre-teaching programmes, students are normally taught on campus in lectures and tutorials and undertake some field placement with a nearby school with an experienced teacher as mentor. This is their only exposure to "real industry" teachers, and is very hit and miss. If the field placement is successful, the student picks up an important range of skills; conversely if it is not successful and not a true learning relationship, the student gains little from the field placement.

In 2018 we implemented a new innovative program that aimed to provide greater connection between university lecturers and industry (practicing teachers), and between lecture halls and school classrooms. This initiative, called Masterclasses, drew on the notion of third space theory, as it aimed to blur the distinction between these fixtures to create spaces where student teachers and industry could co-learn and operate as a community. It aimed to provide a space to share ideas, and to use a range of formats including performance, provocation, a panel, a presentation,

a debate and a Q and A session to do this. Specifically, by introducing Masterclasses, we were aiming to:

1. 'Open-up' student learning experiences, by rethinking course design and delivery.
2. 'Widen' student learning experiences, by inviting staff from across the school, the university and the industry to contribute to the learning space.
3. Foster 'life-long learning', by involving both pre-service and practicing teachers in this learning space
4. Create 'third space' sites for learning via the co-design and construction of learning.

The faculty leadership was aware of the Masterclass plan and supported the idea of students and practicing teachers coming together to create a "third space" of learning. However, support is one thing, but making it happen an entirely different matter. As a group of three, we were able to pool ideas about how best to approach the practical problems of timetabling; which industry people to involve; which themes to present and which approach to take in presentation.

It was the ironing out of these issues and the debate around approaches to learning that created both the greatest challenges, but also the richest insights into why the Masterclasses were important. For example, one of the key discussions was around the issue of Masterclasses and assessment.

Would Masterclasses be formally assessed, or would they simply be a third space for exchange of ideas and approaches between pre-teaching students and high school teachers? If we agreed they were a space for exchange of good practice and sharing of ideas, what measures would we use to determine their success? As Masterclasses were a new initiative, there were questions about why we were implementing them. Would the Masterclasses be offered to any taker, or would they form part of a structured, sequential learning chain? Would Masterclasses

feature industry practitioners whose approach to teaching was not current or not mainstream in public schools? If Masterclasses were not formally assessed, how would we know students were learning anything? And finally, what would be our measure of success for Masterclasses, would it be industry attendance or student attendance or what? Was student attendance enough of a measure or should we measure depth of discussion of the classes? It was through debating many of these answers that we started to draw out the essence of what the third space of industry engagement in our programmes might look like and began to crystallize our thinking around the relevance and importance of industry involvement in pre-teaching programmes.

As the three of us started to embrace the ideas that were emerging between ourselves around industry engagement and third space theory, we decided to forge ahead. In theory we could introduce the classes over and above timetabled classes and see who came along and why. We implemented the Masterclass program in semester 1 and were not sure of what would happen. There had been some discussion from students about the new program, and emails from industry offering to join in, but faculty staff had been relatively quiet. A program was drafted by the three of us and then sent out to both students and industry.

The series of Masterclasses ran in the evening and in the city campus to enable ease of access for people to travel to and from a central location. We approached a number of staff, as well as industry personnel, and invited them to contribute an idea for a Masterclass, asking them to consider their format, but we were also mindful that Masterclasses needed to have wide appeal and relevance to diverse stakeholders.

The first few Masterclasses were challenging and hard work, outside of normal academic duties, but responses from the student body and a few like-minded academics were encouraging and we forged ahead. Creating a co-learning third space environment for some academics was

challenging. It was interesting to see in the first few Masterclasses that faculty staff, students, and industry usually sat in separate areas. We actually needed to encourage participants to work together, and in later classes, set the room up to encourage learning in teams, and invited those present to work across affiliations. The role of the presenter became crucial. There were also some issues around the different experiences and knowledge of the participants.

In the first few Masterclasses for example, faculty staff tended to want to dominate the learning space, talk about their own experience, and present the narrative of being “experts” in the field. Students tended to take a different tact, engaging with ideas being presented and wanting to explore how they could implement or enact. It was frustrating to see the dominance of academic staff, many of whom came once or twice and then never again, and who were unable to share in our vision of a third space for exchange of ideas and knowledge.

However we forged ahead, believing that having a range of presentation formats proved to be an important factor, so too having Masterclasses that challenged those present. We made it to the end of semester and tallied up attendance and feedback- which was steady, and complimentary. We noted from our simple feedback survey that faculty, students and industry schoolteachers who came once had enjoyed it and stayed on for the series. Being a voluntary feedback form, there were few negative comments.

Buoyed by this success we mapped out a programme for second semester with bolder ideas and feedback research. We also discussed the sustainability of the Masterclasses. We found that a number of issues were required to sustain our work. These included:

- A timetable that enables such an innovative student/faculty/industry practice to occur (easier said than done!)

- Inviting key university personnel and the Dean to be involved in the program, thus developing champions for the program, who would then seek to see it continue and thrive
- A team of faculty and staff to develop the series and who then own the program and are committed to its success- spreading the organisational and timetable load

We also learnt some lessons along the way:

- Get quality reportable feedback on each of the Masterclasses – especially around interest and engagement in the topic, the presenter and the format to inform ongoing practice
- Seek to increase sustainability by inviting graduates to be involved in the program in future, thereby fostering a culture of ongoing learning
- Credentialing the program so that participants receive a tangible recognition of their participation as well as an incentive to undertake more learning opportunities
- Start small, learn from experiences and then upscale
- Ensure broad relevance of topics to audience and create a space for learning to occur

Clearly the initiative relied upon the enthusiasm of the volunteer “three”- and there was a considerable amount of “heavy lifting” done by the three of us. We were driven by years of experience in guiding graduates and by a sense of what is needed in pre-teacher education after seeing students on unsuccessful placements. It also helped immensely to be able to talk the issues over and have a little community of like-mindedness nearby at all times.

We also all subscribed strongly to the relevance and importance of having industry feedback for students in a collaborative, shared space that was not threatening and where ideas could be exchanged and debated without hesitation and bias. Using research evidence to fuel our initiative

helped and not relying too heavily upon institutional support, which although present, does not really solve the day to day administrative and timetabling issues.

We felt the programme of Masterclasses was a huge success. Judging by numbers and engagement of industry, there were benefits and networks established that did not exist before and new opportunities arose for sustaining this approach to industry engagement into the future.

References

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