WEARING TWO HATS – TEACHER AND LEARNER

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ABSTRACT

The authors present their stories concerning the induction of a new staff member into an innovative program, and the learning she undertakes. Mentoring and transitional strategies and relationships assist her in developing confidence and competence. Implications for teaching and their application to the program are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

"Doceo ut discam" or "I teach so that I may learn" aptly states the thesis of this paper. The authors intend to present a small case study of the induction of one of them into the teaching team involved in an innovative first-year subject at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. We discuss how she joined the team and the learning process as she took on a new teaching role. The issues that emerge provide possible parallels between her experiences as a new teacher and the experiences of the students in the program. We present stories from both the new teacher and the subject convener, and follow with a discussion of the issues raised and how we might apply the learning and knowledge gained to our teaching.

Organisations and Management (O&M) is a first year core subject within the Bachelor of Business degree. The O&M subject outline states: "This is experiential learning: 'learning by doing'....The challenge for you as a student is to be able to take control of your learning...we ask you to take responsibility for your own experience in this subject" (Organisations and Management course outline, 2001, p.1). The program attempts to provide students with the opportunity to develop generic skills as well as content knowledge to enable them to continue applying the experience and learning gained during the course to their future experiences. It provides a forum that has the potential to broaden students' understanding beyond simply disciplinary content, cited by Candy (2000) as a criterion for lifelong learning.

The original model for O&M came from the idea of Class-as-Organization developed by Allan Cohen (1976) where the "objective is not to simulate an organization, but rather to create genuine organizational issues for students" (p.13). The students are required to work in a large group, with up to 80 members, on the primary task which is, "to create a forum in which members can self-manage their learning about the four core concepts (structure, strategy, culture, and external environment) through dialogue, and by exploring their roles in a large group setting" (O&M subject outline, 2001, p.5). The teachers are known as Divisional Managers – they are responsible for the design and implementation of the learning program, and may take up roles such as consultant, advisor, and process observer.

This method then requires a different role of the teacher as well as the student, with a shift of responsibility towards the student for undertaking the activity. It is this different role as teacher that can be challenging, confronting, and at times extremely uncomfortable, particularly for someone new to the experience. We use data gathered from the notes that both Janet, the new staff member, and Trevor, the subject convener, wrote about their experience of the process of Janet's induction into the program. The material provides a small case study, a method which enables the researcher to explore the 'how' and 'why' questions "about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (Yin, 1994, p.9).

We use a narrative form to explore the events and experiences of the authors, narrative being the "type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes" (Polkinghorne, cited in Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001, p.77). Thus the narrative allows us to present what we know and, in addition, provides for the "inclusion of actor's reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happenings" (Sarbin, 1986, p.9). Narrative then makes it possible to express "explicit recognition of the way in which the researcher's own subjectivity influences the research process, the outcomes and the reporting" (Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001, p.78). It is this very subjectivity that we were

interested in as we attempted to explore the underlying issues that influenced our behaviour and our learning.

Our stories therefore provide a personal account of the experience and allow us to explore in some depth the thoughts and feelings behind the process of induction into this program and the issues that emerge. Obvious limitations that arise from this approach include the inability to generalize from this specific example. However, we do not intend to generalize, but rather to use the data to raise questions that will inform our future research and our teaching. In this sense, we are using an action learning approach in the development of our teaching methods.

JANET'S STORY

I first became interested in the O&M program because the students I was teaching in a second year course often referred to their experiences in O&M. Trevor and I discussed my interest and agreed that I would sit in on one of the classes and observe for a semester. A rather luxurious position to be in! Being in the observer role also provided me with the opportunity to work a little with two of the other O&M managers, as I would attend their 20 minute discussion sessions at the conclusion of each class. These discussions provided me with a clearer idea of their aims and teaching strategies, as well as a chance to get to know them.

The following semester I was not involved in O&M but continued to work closely with Trevor on other subjects and maintained my overall curiosity about O&M. An opportunity for me to teach arose the following year when one of the members of the teaching team left. I remember feeling quite privileged to be asked if I would like to join the team as I perceived them as a very competent group of people as well as a closely bonded group. I was happy to accept Trevor's suggestion that I co-teach with the only other male on the team. I did not know him well but, as mentioned, I had faith in the competence of all team members and thought that he seemed open and friendly. I admit to some disappointment that I was not to be teamed with Trevor – he designed the subject and I perceived him as having a wealth of knowledge and experience. There was also a slight sense of relief as I was not confident that I 'could cut it' with Trevor.

I was surprised at how great a challenge I found teaching in the subject and how reliant on my co-teacher I was in that first semester. I found the whole model of teaching very confronting – it was difficult to entirely let go of the expert role, and it was extremely difficult to know when to say something or to intervene in the group, and also what to say. I empathised enormously with the students about the confronting task of learning to speak one's mind, without expert knowledge, to a group of 80 people. I found myself thinking that this was too great an expectation for first year students and that if we were to use such a structure we should at least ease them into it and provide them with more support. I felt like I was floundering and was absolutely sure that was what most of the students were feeling too. I found myself checking with my co-teacher to ensure I had his approval before I said something to the group. For example, I would write down what I was thinking of saying and wait for a nod or comment from him before I would say it to the group as a whole. I listened to his interventions and marveled at what he was able to say, wishing that I had that insight and could come up with such pearls of wisdom.

Interestingly too, in our discussions following the class, he would tell me how his style was different from Trevor's, and describe some of the issues they had faced when working together the previous semester. I found myself thinking that Trevor had created something that was too demanding and too rigid in its approach, although I also had a sense that if I could do it like Trevor I could make it work! During this semester the whole teaching team was also working with an external facilitator to address questions about how we were working together in pairs and what we were bringing into the large group. When discussing my experience I commented to the team on my sense that my experience was probably paralleling the students and my concerns about the difficulty of this course for young undergraduates. I felt a little like a traitor daring to question the wisdom of the program because I believed everyone else was totally committed. The facilitator raised the question of succession planning at one of the meetings with the clear view that I would take over from Trevor as I was the only other full-time staff member on the team. I remember having a mixed sense of panic and power: power in that I could change the program if I wanted and panic that I did not understand it enough to know what was good and what could be discarded. I very strongly wanted Trevor to stay on so that I could learn from him!

The following semester I worked with a different team member, and while I found I still

deferred to her greater experience, I was beginning to feel more confident about speaking to the group and intervening in the process. We both found this to be a difficult semester in terms of how the group functioned and our roles within it, and the experience almost confirmed my view that this was a very difficult process for students. I was also becoming much more aware, however, of my own role, and the need for me to increase my own learning in relation to this style of teaching. I attended a 3-day workshop on large group dynamics during this semester, along with three other team members, and found it both personally challenging as well as extremely beneficial in providing an insight into the teaching model. I was beginning to become more and more interested in the thinking behind the model and wanted to learn more about it. Trevor and I were working very well together by this stage on other subjects, and following a trip to Queensland for a conference, had moved to an even closer relationship where I felt there was mutual liking and respect, and a strong sense of trust and closeness.

The next semester provided the chance to work with Trevor and I was both excited and apprehensive as I wanted to learn from him but was still holding him on a pedestal in relation to his teaching skills in this area. I knew Trevor was not comfortable with the fact that I felt like this, as he talked about us as colleagues and refused to take on the expert label. This did not stop me applying it to him covertly! I think that when I commenced the semester with Trevor I immediately put myself back into the dependent role. For example, I reverted to writing my ideas on paper to seek his approval before speaking to the group. Trevor told me to say and do what I thought, and effectively refused to tell me what to do. I quickly realized that I was going to have to take some risks, and if Trevor was not happy with what I said then that was bad luck and we could talk about it later. I was fascinated to see how Trevor taught the subject and was generally impressed with his capacity, but I was also recognising times when I thought he did or said something that I did not think was appropriate. He was becoming a real person in my mind – with both strengths and weaknesses – rather than the untouchable guru. I felt like a child who had finally grown up! By the last half of the semester I was taking responsibility for my own statements and approaches, and on one occasion even told Trevor to stop talking because he'd already said too much!

TREVOR'S STORY

In mid-1999, I began to think about succession planning for O&M. In the event of my retiring in a few years a full-time staff member would need to take over the subject. Janet and I had been working together on the development of another subject, so I suggested she sit in on some sessions of O&M, particularly the Divisional Meetings (the large group meetings) to get an idea of the teaching method – she took up this idea and sat in on each meeting for one semester.

Over the next year we continued discussing other subjects and also Janet's reflections on observing O&M. I explained the culture and relationships in the O&M teaching team, which had maintained a constant membership of six people since 1996, with five of the six being sessional staff. At the end of semester one, 2000, we had our first change in membership with one of the team unable to continue teaching in the subject due to other commitments. My first thought was to approach Janet as a replacement team member. I discussed this with Janet and the other team members and all agreed that she should replace the departing team member.

Reflecting on my considerations about Janet as the possible 'next in line', both as future convener and as immediate replacement, the term 'kindred spirit' comes to mind. Soon after Janet joined the School of Business I felt comfortable with her, both personally and professionally. As a fellow teacher, using an experiential approach, I noted several things: her valuing the idea that teachers are just as much learners as teachers; her readiness to learn ways to improve both content and delivery in her teaching; her expressed desire to explore subjects that were pre-requisites to her own, with a view to improving the overall sequence of subjects; and her curiosity about the non-traditional approach used in O&M. I felt we were equals as teachers and colleagues, and at the same time at very different stages (obviously) of experience in the O&M class-as-organisation method.

The decision as to who Janet should teach with in her first semester seemed at the time to be resolved by timetabling constraints, and the fact that I wanted her paired with a male (mixed gender being my preference for Divisional Managers). I decided she would work with the other male, and both he and Janet agreed with this.

In 'allocating' Janet to the other male team member, I would say at the conscious-rational level that I saw him as a competent mentor. I was also reluctant to have two full-time staff together in case this was perceived as 'exclusive' by the part-time members. If there was a hidden agenda it may have been that I wanted to continue to focus my energy on my own learning rather than teach or mentor a colleague. I knew that Janet was in 'good hands', and I thought that we would be able to work together once she had a few O&Ms 'under her belt'.

Janet and I continued our discussions separately from formal team meetings right through the next semester when she was paired with one of the female team members (again due to timetables). In all our discussions together it was evident that Janet was finding the subject both challenging and rewarding, and was experiencing a steep learning curve. She readily went on a 'Tavistock style' staff development group, and now that she was converted (!) I was keen, and I think she was too, to co-teach, which we did in semester two, 2001, experiencing a satisfying partnership on a challenging journey.

In conclusion, I considered Janet as a prospective team member because first and foremost I saw her as a wearer of two hats: teacher and learner. This was important to me, as commitment to these dual roles underpin my whole belief system about education. Equally importantly, we had already formed a cooperative working relationship on other subjects. Throughout the whole induction process, we have collaborated more and more effectively as peers and co-learners.

DISCUSSION

A number of themes emerge from these stories that may enhance our understanding of the learning process for both new staff members and students in the Organisation and Management subject. The main areas we address in this discussion revolve around membership of teaching teams, informal mentoring and the induction process, the process of learning (from feeling dependent, to taking up one's own authority in the role), and the parallels between the experience of the new teacher and the students. We draw on a range of material to discuss each of these aspects and then address the question of how can we apply our learning from this exploration to our teaching and the classroom.

The collaborative teaching approach taken by the O&M teaching team provides an ongoing opportunity for the members of the team to constantly learn about their teaching and improve their knowledge and skills. The team had benefited from having worked together for five years before Janet joined, which made the method of induction perhaps even more important. Teams are likely to be more cohesive or united if the members like and trust each other, are satisfied with the group experience and agree on group goals, share common values and interests, and if the group is small with stable membership and relatively isolated from other groups, and if leadership focuses on both task and relationship (Tyson, 1998). These factors were all in place in the O&M team prior to Janet commencing so she was entering a highly cohesive group. Consequently, Trevor was very concerned to ensure that she would 'fit' so the group would continue to function effectively. From Janet's perspective, she recognised the above features within the team and, in addition, held her own perceptions of all members as highly competent individuals. She also perceived the group as difficult to become a member of so was highly committed to the group once she was accepted. Membership of this cohesive group provided a context within which Janet felt challenged but also supported.

The learning process was enhanced for Janet through the use of another team member as a mentor. We use the word mentor in the sense of "an experienced person who provides the mentee (a less experienced person) with support, encouragement and knowledge. In return, the relationship also fosters the mentor's professional activity and growth" (St. Clair, 1994, p.1). This seems an appropriate term to use in relation to Janet being 'allocated' to the other experienced male in the group for her first semester of teaching. He provided support – in fact, Janet believes she took too much of a back seat and observed him in his role whilst avoiding taking up responsibility for her own role. The role of mentor, whilst important, if over-used can be counterproductive in the sense that the learner remains dependent on the mentor and so limits their own learning. This also raises the question of how the mentor perceives his or her role: the team member who agreed to co-teach with Janet in her first semester was quite positive about taking on a training role.

Janet perceived Trevor as architect and convener of the program – therefore, in her mind, an expert – as well as someone she respected as both a person and a teacher.

Trevor, although not perceiving himself as expert or as mentor, also valued his working relationship with Janet, which is perhaps a "collaborative mentorship" providing the "opportunity for professionals to become directly involved in each other's learning and to provide feedback while developing along an agreed path" (Mullen, 2000, p.4). This was an informal mentoring relationship: at no point were we told by the organization to work together; rather, we came together due to our perceptions of the other as someone with whom we enjoy working. "In all types of mentoring relationships (i.e., formal or informal, peer, novice-expert, etc.) attraction or perceived similarity is likely to play a key role in the initiation and development of a relationship" (Kram, 1985, cited in Young & Perrewe, 2000, p.186).

Teaching and learning is not about reassurance but about facing the fears that not knowing can create. "Structure and control are identified as two critical defences traditionally used by teachers in order to take on the role of Expert in Knowing. Recasting the teacher as consultant permits the teacher to take up a different role, that of Expert in Not Knowing" (Raab, 1997, p.161). O&M certainly removes some of the defences for both students and teachers, and as a new teacher Janet was anxious about how to manage herself in this role. Janet found herself identifying with the dilemmas many of the students might have faced in dealing with their unmet expectations about structure and familiar roles. Mezoff (1979) raised similar concerns when discussing the Cohen model of "Class-as-Organization" commenting that "for first year students, the course design is so novel and unconventional that it is difficult to integrate with what they expected to find at a university" (p.25).

Reflecting on the induction process, Janet went through a process of more incremental learning (Candy, 2000) than was offered to the students. This raises some questions about the appropriateness of 'throwing students in the deep end', given that even the incremental learning process for a new staff member proved to be a challenging undertaking. Although this was not the first time in her life that Janet had needed to let go of the comfort of being an expert, it was still a challenging experience, and has caused us to discuss quite extensively the implications for understanding what happens for the students.

We believe this is relevant to the concept of lifelong learning for a number of reasons.

Firstly, as teachers we should not focus exclusively on the teaching of skills to our students to equip them for lifelong learning but must also be open to, and critical of, our own approaches. Candy (2000) states that "perhaps the most important finding about developing lifelong learners...is the influential role played by the intellectual ambience of the school or department; in particular, the extent to which the faculty members themselves are continuing lifelong learners" (p.13). One of the great bonuses of being a part of the O&M teaching team is the opportunity to work collaboratively with staff who are committed to, and passionate about, their teaching and learning. The sessions with the external facilitator provided an opportunity to learn more about our roles and approaches, and provided an excellent forum for exploring the program.

Another way to look at the learning process is to focus on the importance of "transitional objects" (Hirschhorn, 1988), which enable adult learners to experience their ignorance without feeling so overwhelmed that they develop defences to block their learning. Techniques can be "transitional objects", something for the learner to hold on to until they feel more competent to use their own judgements and "personalize their use of the technique" (Hirschhorn, 1988, p.116). Another transitional object can be the working relationship between teacher and learner, which enables the learner to "depend on the teacher to protect and help them as they develop their competence" (Hirschhorn, 1988, p.116). These transitional objects were offered to Janet in her induction into the program: she was provided with material explaining the techniques that were used, and had the opportunity to observe the techniques in use before trying them for herself; and she had a number of transitional relationships: with her co-teacher in the first semester of teaching; with the overall teaching team; and importantly with Trevor.

As the teachers in O&M do not provide the students with the transitional techniques or transitional relationships expected of university lecturers, the students have to rely on each other. It is common to see students check with the person sitting next to them before saying anything to the group as a whole. This behaviour appears to parallel Janet's experience with her mentor as she developed her confidence. It is interesting to note that the students expect the teachers to take on the role of expert, and that Janet also bestowed the role of expert onto her co-teaching mentor and onto Trevor in spite of the fact that it was never formally presented as a

mentoring relationship, and that neither Trevor nor the other team members perceive themselves as experts. It seems that when we take on the role of learner, we have a strong desire for the other to take on the role of expert. Learning as a process involving the struggle of not knowing creates anxiety which is "handled in traditional teaching...through the collusive taking up of role which enable anxiety to be contained but denied...for two reasons. First, being an expert in knowing is attractive for teachers because it reduces their anxiety about not knowing....The second reason teachers...become experts in knowing is that expertise is projected onto them by their students" (Raab, 1997, p.167).

It is worth noting that whilst on the one hand we had developed a collaborative peer mentoring relationship, within the context of O&M Janet continued to perceive Trevor as expert and herself as novice until she had taught with him for a number of weeks. Not only was she wearing two hats as teacher and learner in the classroom, but also in the relationship with Trevor – a situation he resisted – preferring to work on the collaborative model. Trevor did not collude with the 'not knowing', and as Janet had already been provided with transitional objects and techniques over two semesters of teaching, she was able to take up the authority of her position and feel competent and confident in the role of "Expert in Not Knowing."

CONCLUSION

The question that concerns us now is how we can utilise our learning to critically evaluate and improve our teaching. As discussed, Janet was provided with transitional strategies and relationships to support her whilst she developed confidence and competence in her new role. In spite of her training and previous experience, and a 'perceived similarity' with the teaching team, she experienced feelings of dependence and took a significant period of time before feeling confident in the program. How then, do students manage this transition? It is important to recognize that the students are in no way a homogenous group – and Janet's experience cannot be considered representative for all, or perhaps any, of them. The students are diverse in terms of age, gender, racial and ethnic background, educational experience, personality, learning styles, career aspirations, and much more. It becomes important, then, that we do not teach only to those who learn in the same way as ourselves. It becomes important in a program such as this to provide a variety of methods – transitional strategies and

relationships – to enable students to engage more effectively. In 2002, we intend to trial a program that includes reflective meetings every four weeks, where staff will take on a more directive role and discuss issues arising for the group. It is hoped this will provide a transitional strategy to help the students understand both the content and process, as well as allowing them to develop broader relationships with staff. We intend to monitor the outcomes of this method. In addition, we are working on the overall structure of the program as we have found that the inclusion of a new member has challenged not only the new member but also the ideas and approaches of the existing members. We believe one of the important outcomes from this paper has been our increasing recognition of the importance of critically evaluating our work and challenging each other's methods and ideas. We commenced this paper with the idea that "I teach that I may learn" and would like to conclude with the recognition that "I learn that I may be a better teacher".

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