# synergy

# Centre for Teaching and Learning
# The University of Sydney

# Contents

# Assessment is a celebration of learning

*Lawrence Cram, Chair Academic Board*

"Assessment is a celebration of learning." The breathtaking optimism of this statement by Broadfoot (ACSA Report No. 1, 1991) has tickled my interest in the links between motivation and assessment since I first heard it.

Presumably, the quaint customs and academic jousting which surrounds the Cambridge Tripos, or our own Honours assessments in some of the more traditional disciplines, are extreme examples of this celebration. "Personal bests" in the HSC, and the individual delight so evident at our graduation ceremonies, are also celebrations of learning where the sweet taste of achievement is sustained in part by robust assessment practices.

Although there is little evidence of celebration in the cloisters outside Maclaurin Hall during exam weeks, it is doubtlessly true that well-motivated scholars relish an opportunity to display their learning to their teachers and co-learners. Fair, thoughtful assessment which evokes this response is an important part of the equipment of the skilled University teacher.

However, assessment practices can easily distort learning. One of the worst examples in New South Wales at present is the use of computer programs using Board of Studies data which predict student UAIs based on Year 10 performance. HSC candidates are encouraged by this practice to select academically less demanding courses to maximise assessment outcomes at the expense of optimally developing their intellect and preparation for University studies. Closer to home, I am not alone in feeling frustrated by the difficulty of assessing these learning outcomes exemplified by the Academic Board's Generic Attributes statement, within the straight jacket of end-of-semester examinations.

Even more challenging to conventional academic culture is the widespread existence of learning without assessment. My previous employer paid a lot to send me to courses in organizational and personal development which contained no assessment whatsoever. I found them exhilarating and rewarding, yet believe it would have been totally inappropriate and unnecessary to have any form of assessment. Similarly, I have attended excellent courses in computer programming in this University, and learned exactly what I needed to know without any trace of formative or summative assessment.

Weaving together curriculum, instruction and assessment produces a very rich fabric indeed. Within the context of assessment, the Academic Board is presently developing policies and procedures, coupled with practical recommendations, which aim to sustain rigour while supporting flexibility, and to promote innovation while respecting traditional expectations. I am confident that the University's standing as a learning community will be reinforced and enhanced by the Board's work in this centrally important area and look forward to the response to our project.

*Professor Lawrence Cram teaches in Astrophysics and has recently been elected as Chair of the Academic Board.*



*Lawrence Cram*

# University's New Principles of Assessment: one year on

*Mary McCulloch, Centre for Teaching and Learning*



*Mary McCulloch*

The University of Sydney's policies 'Principles of Assessment' and 'Assessment: Rights and Responsibilities of the Institution, Faculties and Departments, Staff, Students', were ratified by Academic Board, on 10th June 1998. I have recently joined the staff at CTL, with a remit for assessment, and in my encounters with academics I have been noting the considerable progress towards implementation of these policies.

The University's policies on assessment tell us that *assessment is for learning*, that it should be *fair, effective* and should *match the objectives of the unit of study*. We all know, and the literature on student learning confirms for us, that students' expectations of what they should learn and how they should learn it are inextricably linked with how they are assessed on that learning.

Academics in this and other universities have realised that there are some barriers to the practical implementation of the assessment policies, which for many academics will result in a change (large or small) in assessment practices. Many of these obstacles have been recognised in the assessment literature where there is an excellent source of solutions for different contexts.

Change is challenging, never moreso than in the arena of teaching, learning and assessment. I have heard some comments at the recently conducted CTL workshops on assessment along the lines of 'it is too difficult', 'it would not work here' and 'I don't have the time'. However, I have also heard of a great many examples of good practice in assessment and innovative assessment approaches within courses and units of study across all faculties. Sharing these experiences in assessment in forums such as professional development sessions within departments and schools, and through CTL seminars and workshops is a great stimulus to new ideas and ways forward.

Our students obviously have a large part to play in any changes we make in our assessment practices. By making students a part of the assessment process, informing them of all aspects of assessment policies and impressing upon them the objective that assessment is for the facilitation of learning rather than merely the achievement of grades, hopefully they will gain a greater responsibility for their own learning. This will give students a stake in the assessment process heightening their concerns for fairness, effectiveness and the appropriateness to the objectives.

My role within the Centre for Teaching and Learning is to support academics in implementing these assessment policies. I am planning a number of workshops on a range of assessment issues for the November workshop series. In addition, resources and information pertaining to assessment will be available soon through the CTL website. If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised here, or any other matters concerning assessment, please contact me at the CTL on 9351 5434.

The University's policies can be found at: http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/planning/policy/

*Dr Mary McCulloch is a recently appointed Lecturer in the Centre for Teaching and Learning supporting the effective assessment of student learning.*

# Pragmatic, Predictable, or 'Over the Top'? What are we really looking for in student essays?

*Nicholas King, Department of Pathology*

Last year I set my 2nd year Human Life Sciences students an essay question based on a fictitious narative in which Leonardo DiCaprio, while on the mock-up of the virtual sinking Titanic set, cuts his cheek on one of the ship's rails. His doctor recommends immediate cleansing and careful suturing of the cut, but Leonardo says that he has an important party to go to and doesn't have time to have his cheek sewn before the next afternoon, when he has recovered from his hangover. The students were asked to: "Compare the scenario where he gets it sewn up immediately and where he gets it sewn up the next afternoon. Discuss the processes going on in the wound and the factors that would contribute to the resultant outcome of the injury to his handsome cheek."

It seems only right to mark the responses to the question you set and one of the payoffs in this particular case was that I received a truly outstanding essay. The complete essay in far more technically graphic and witty detail, with excellent annotated figures drawn by the student can be seen on the CTL website, www.ctl.usyd.edu.au/Synergy/Synergy11/smith.htm

However, hopefully to whet your appetite, extracts of this essay are reproduced below with the permission of the student, Sally Smith.



*Sally Smith*

It is indeed unfortunate for gossip mongers, `girly mags' and gay men the world over that the truth about Leonardo Di Caprio's little accident has not yet been disclosed. Sadder still is that it will be revealed in a second year science essay, to be read by only a handful of indifferent professors. What follows is a thrilling, in depth analysis of Leo's darkest hour with exclusive insight into the processes of inflammation, tissue repair and wound management. Nagging questions about the mysterious circumstances surrounding the injury are for the first time answered, with the disturbing testimony of two eyewitnesses shedding light on Leo's "surgery anguish".

Leo, taking a quick catnap between scenes, foolishly sought out a wooden deck chair. Kate Winslet failed to see Leo as she plonked her beefy behind on the nearest chair. Poor Leo, trapped between young Kate's rather substantial behind and the wooden deck chair, not unnaturally squirmed, gasping for air, cutting his cheek in the process.

The 1 cm deep cut disrupted epidermal tissue in addition to dermal and subcutaneous blood vessels and tissue, resulting in haemorrhaging, necrosis, exposure to pathogens and tears from the director.

As Leo was being whisked off to the doctor on the set, noradrenaline was being released, which resulted in the constriction of all blood vessels (including capillaries) in and contiguous to the site of injury, stemming blood loss. At the same instant, platelets within the blood adhered to collagen exposed by the ruptured vessels and released ADP and thromboxane A2 causing nearby platelets to aggregate and form a " plug " to temporarily occlude the hole ... Whilst Kate indignantly denied the directors claims that she was conspiring to "ruin the film", margination was quietly occurring in Leo's venules … In addition, protease and collagenase were secreted which began to clear necrotic tissue in the wound.

Increasingly distressed by the furore caused by the damage to his beautiful countenance, Leo phoned his mummy. Whilst she sang him a soothing song the argument between Kate and the director continued. As the battle raged, the tissue space surrounding the wound became increasingly filled with fluid and plasma proteins from the blood serum. This process was mediated by histamine and several other factors released by nearby mast cells, basophils and platelets, causing vasodilatation, increased vascular permeability and oedema.

Leo's face was now red, painful, swollen and warm. The doctor decided that it was time for action and bundled the whimpering Leo into a waiting Rolls. As they made for the

surgery the doctor attempted to describe how monocytes would be entering the wound and transforming into larger wandering macrophages, but Leo, after shooting him a suitably disparaging look, continued to stare out the window.

At the surgery Dr Casch tried to explain to Leo the processes that will result in the healing of his wound: "The gap formed when the skin was torn and it filled with blood which upon clotting reinforced and stabilised the wound. Fibronectin present in the clot and the interstitial tissue was bound to cell surfaces ...." Leo yawned.

Dr Casch dutifully explained to his unresponsive client that suturing will ensure the initial phases of repair are shorter, and will decrease the risk of complication, infection, and most importantly scar tissue. Whether Leo did indeed heed the specialist's advice and have the wound sutured is unclear. Sources have given conflicting reports.

Leo's rather bitter model/med student girlfriend claims that Leo made a hasty retreat from the doctor's offices so he could attend an exclusive party with her that evening. "Leo came to pick me up from the party with his 'bevy of beauties' in tow. Unimpressed, I got in the car but refused to talk to him. When we got to the party one of the 'girls' began plying him with alcohol (not at all good for his face as alcohol impairs healing). He was soon quite sozzled. Taking pity on him I took him outside for some fresh air, but he was unable to stand and fell face forward on the gravel path. He began to cry for his mother and I was so disgusted that I left him there hoping a piece of gravel would lodge in the open wound and cause a nasty granuloma. He turned

up a few days later with a raging infection. I told him curtly that it was most likely a staphylococcal infection, and that I hoped it would develop into botryomycosis."

This exclusive account has focused on the initial inflammatory response in Leo's traumatised cheek, the processes behind tissue repair and epithelial regeneration and the benefits of suturing. Whether Leo has decided to do the right thing by his mother and fans to minimise scar tissue remains to be seen but Hollywood insiders fear the worst with rumours currently circulating that his next feature is to be "The Man In The Iron Mask."

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I found this essay outstanding not only because it covered the pertinent aspects of wound healing, but for its extraordinary integration of the spirit of the question, its humour and wit, and the depth to which the subject was plumbed. Catching your attention like an experimental result that you didn't predict, it raises the question as to why this does not happen more often, since it is just this sort of response that makes teaching worthwhile and just what we are looking for.

Or is it? Both teaching and research have become more of a time and volume trial. The requirement to get out large volumes of students in a short time increasingly limits our response to a reflex one, similar to that required in a video shooting gallery. The quicker your response needs to be to hit the target, the more likely you are to miss, but worse, the more likely you are to be wrong in your evaluation of the target. Something unpredicted takes much more time to process than something that is predicted. We don't have the time. We prefer the predicted. Thus the sad tendency nowadays

in teaching and research is to keep reloading semi-automatically and continue to blast away in the general direction of the problem. This method produces exam (and experimental) results bagged like so many ducks - very few undersized and all supporting the current paradigm.

Many students attempting this question assayed a brief initial paragraph or two in the spirit of the question but quickly forsook the approach in favour of the bare bones of pedestrian, textbook-based accounts of the amazing process of healing. They acceded to predictability, because we indicate that is what we want. And pragmatically, they submit. We dull the natural experimental and iconoclastic tendency of students and encourage them to behave in this mechanical and tractable way. Only a few indomitable souls come through with their inquisitive nature intact. And these we claim to have rescued by the brilliance of our teaching. We take time to think about these students since they are so rare and therefore we can afford to. And we ask why there are not more. And if these students survive the rigours of their commitment, we go on to curse them for the change that they bring. I publish this essay here with the student's permission. She was worried that she had gone 'over the top' with the way she had done it. Having read it, some of you may agree with her. However, I would venture to suggest that it is just this lateral synthetic brilliance that we should be trying to encourage in young students. Not just because it is increasingly required in this current climate of Research funding if we are to make real progress, but also because it is increasingly required for *normal* existence.

*Associate Professor Nicholas King has recently won an award for Excellence in Teaching.*

# Radical Teaching, Radical Democracy

*Lyn Carson, Department of Government and Public Administration*



*Lyn Carson*

How many of us actually 'practise what we teach'? Teaching political science can expose the wide divide between our espoused theory and our theory-in-use, particularly if we approach the topic as a lover of democracy— and I confess to being smitten by this bug. How to 'walk the talk'? How to be as democratic in the tutorial room or lecture theatre as we would have all citizens be? Some writers believe that democracy is a process, not a system—a verb rather than a noun—not something that we have, but something that we do. How does one 'do' democracy? Bernard Manin in his Principles of Representative Government reminds us that democracy has been seen as synonymous with representative government which it is not. C. George Lummis (1996) thinks that the word democracy has been worked to death and we need to return to its radical meaning— a word that joins 'the people' with 'power'. The university setting can be one site in which democracy can be practised.

Students share citizens' scepticism when it comes to talk of democratic processes— they've seen it all and heard it all before. We often speak of democracy but deliver something else. Mind you, teachers are hampered by institutional constraints— assessment policies, equivalence across courses and faculties, timetables, class numbers and so on. Despite this, I know of many colleagues in higher education who have successfully created democratic environments. Here is just one teaching practice that I've tried which allows me to keep alive my own democratic project.

Reciprocity is a prevailing theme in discussions about democracy. Carol Gould in "Rethinking Democracy" sees it as one of a handful of qualities essential to a democratic personality. The practice of reciprocal feedback that I regularly use, is an expression of this quality—it could even be likened to the secret ballot. At the end of each tutorial session (and sometimes, lectures), students are asked to respond anonymously to a prompt that helps them to either evaluate their learning or to comment more generally on the direction of the course. It's called 'reciprocal' because I feed back the results to students and also offer my own comments on their participation. In combination with self- and peer-assessment of students' participation, reciprocal feedback can partially shift the location of power. Here are a few examples of how it has worked in practice.

Last year, I offered social policy students scraps of paper (recycled A4 paper, cut into quarters) at the end of a weekly workshop. The question asked was "what issue would you like to have raised that you felt you could not?" One student bemoaned the study of theory and could not see its purpose. I came back to the group the following week and asked if this was a general reaction and it was for a number of students. I was inspired to write a paper "Why do theory?" which I passed on to colleagues who were teaching in the same course. They contributed ideas and it was then circulated to students. A couple of us also conducted debates during the following sessions on the importance of theory and the possibility of separating theory from practice.

On another occasion when I asked "What is something you need to know more about?" I exposed a hunger for information about how

to read critically. Again, I sought information from colleagues, then went back to students to ask them what techniques they used. In combination with some material from the Learning Assistance Centre, a paper on "Reading Critically" was developed which is now part of all my unit outlines.

Students begin to realise that their concerns will be responded to and to trust in the process, particularly if it is a regular occurrence. They note in their responses that they feel genuinely heard. When I feed back their comments they also realise that their anxieties and learning difficulties are not theirs alone. By using this technique at the end of a lecture one can establish whether or not a concept was understood or whether more time needs to be given to it.

One cannot indulge in strategies such as reciprocal feedback without a sincere willingness to respond to any problems. Some teachers may be wary of soliciting negative comments or unnecessarily heightening emotion in the group. I've never received an abusive comment but I have once encountered an ongoing absence of goodwill from one small group of students that was particularly challenging. The process is not all peace and harmony but passion and conflict are healthy ingredients of radical democracy.

Evaluating courses or teaching at the end of a semester is of little benefit to current students; we can so easily side-step the need to respond. However, regular informal feedback is one way of holding me, and the entire group, accountable. When I am truly attentive to the reciprocity that is possible using this technique I know it works best. Let me explain.

When the students' combined feedback is 'fed back' to them at the beginning of the following session it earns the label 'reciprocal'-but this can be taken further. Reciprocity can be extended to include the teachers' own feedback to students. An opportunity exists for learning facilitators to feed back their own expectations and concerns. This need not be a one-way process and the teachers' views can also be incorporated. This can fulfil a number of important teaching functions: confrontation, catharsis or acting as a

catalyst (Foley 1995). For example, when a group is becoming vulnerable to 'groupthink' (as described by Irving Janis) or becoming stuck in its 'storming' phase (a stage in groups identified by Tuckman, among others), I can use this feedback session to explain my own experience of the group. It is a chance to seek their reactions to my own observations and to explore the rights and responsibilities which accompany group participation.

Students have reported that they appreciate this opportunity to influence the learning process and almost all offer feedback even though it is not compulsory. It gives a voice to the timid, and an outlet to the witty, and provides an important moment for reflection on learning. I would say that reciprocal feedback has been one of the most useful teaching strategies that I have used. It has encouraged me to be more flexible and responsive to students and engendered in me a commitment to constantly monitor and modify my approach to teaching and learning should this be necessary.

Reciprocal feedback has helped me create a culture of evaluation as part of my professional practice. It has also meant that I have a stronger sense of interconnectedness with students. They offer comments, I respond, they comment on any changes and so one. As our representative governments become more conservative, the experience of 'people power' seems more remote. Perhaps universities can keep the dream of radical democracy alive-through radical teaching. Democracy is rarely easy but it sure beats the alternatives!

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Lummis, C.G. (1996) Radical Democracy. New York, Cornell University Press.

*Dr Lyn Carson is a Lecturer in the Department of Government and Public Administration. Contact Carson on (02) 9351 3089 if you would like a copy of a longer version of this article.*

# Flexible teaching and learning require systems thinking

*Mary Jane Mahony, Faculty of Health Sciences*



*Mary Jane Mahony*

Strategic plans at all levels show that the University is committing to the concept of flexibility in teaching and learning. Lessons from the long history of distance education highlight the clear message that this means systems thinking is essential as no part of the teaching/learning system can stand on its own.

Relevant curriculum design, identification of effective teaching and learning strategies, and appropriate selection and use of technology are all essential. Sometimes forgotten is the explicit consideration of student support mechanisms, practical recognition that students need to use information and expertise beyond the campus as well as on-campus, and sound, swift administrative systems. All form a complex system that supports each student's university experience. No part can be ignored in planning, design, development, implementation or evaluation. Such systems thinking should be considered organically rather than mechanistically for success. People—as learners, as teachers, as supporters—are the key components of the system.

The Faculty of Health Sciences aims to contribute to enhancing physical, mental and social health and well-being. It is guided by the Alma-Ata declaration of WHO which describes health as a fundamental human right. A position has been established within the Faculty of Health Sciences as an expression of the Faculty's commitment to meeting the learning needs of a wider audience and to acknowledging the changing needs of all students. I will be working with people throughout the Faculty with one overall responsibility: to assist the move towards using flexible approaches to meet the needs of students and the professions on-campus, throughout Australia and internationally. My role is expected to include contributing to the review and improvement of organizational systems and to quality standards. I will be working with groups and individuals in various ways in the design, development and/or review of distance and flexibly delivered programs.

The Faculty entered distance education some years ago and presently offers eight coursework programs using a range of distance education strategies, with more in the planning stage. Flexible approaches are also increasing being integrated into units of study in programs formally offered on-campus. As a result, on-going discussion on what is distance education, what is flexible learning, and how on-campus and off-campus students are delimited is lively, reflecting the larger one in higher education today.

*Dr Mary Jane Mahony has recently moved from the Orange Agricultural College to the Faculty of Health Sciences on a three-year secondment as Senior Lecturer in Distance and Flexible Education. She has more than twenty years experience in higher education, mainly in the distance education context.*

# Change in the Faculty of Veterinary Science - Impacts on Teaching

*Reuben Rose and David Evans, Faculty of Veterinary Science*



*Reuben Rose*



*David Evans*

The past six years of the review of the Bachelor of Veterinary Science course has been a reminder of the proposition that a discussion involving 10 academics is likely to generate 11 opinions! There has been a wide divergence of opinions concerning the nature of the changes needed to teaching and learning in the five year course. In developing the new curriculum, the Faculty has had to address current need for change, and at the same time look forward, and ensure that graduates are optimally prepared to meet future challenges.

A thorough review process identified many areas that needed improvement, and the need for change in the course has been generally accepted in the Faculty. The review has involved not only academic staff and students, but also members of the veterinary profession. We also have been helped very much by personnel from the Centre for Teaching and Learning and are grateful for the support and encouragement that they have given us.

One of the major driving philosophies has been greater integration of topics, and a need for more contextual learning in the early years of the course. At the moment the course is dominated by "basic sciences" in Years 1 and 2, and students do not begin to deal with real problems in veterinary medicine until Year 4, when they commence work in the University Veterinary Centre. The Faculty has therefore committed to earlier introduction of units of study that deal with animal behaviour, clinical problems and diseases and the integration of topics.

The development of a framework for greater integration of topics and contextual approaches to learning has not been an easy process. Many academic staff are under great pressure already, and the thought of changing approaches to lectures and practical classes is difficult for some. Declining funding and staff numbers in the Faculty have also complicated the process. However, an extensive strategic planning exercise was held during 1998, facilitating wide ranging review of the current problems in the course, and identification of the principal objectives of the revisions.

The revised course will commence in 2000, subject to approval by the Academic Board. In addition to the many changes to the units of study, the Faculty also has made a commitment to major change to the final two years of the degree program, where students will spend their final year in clinical practice activities, in what will be in effect, a transition year to practice. Currently, veterinary science students spend their 4th year in Sydney, where as well as receiving lectures and practical classes, they also participate in case management at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, where clients bring their sick domestic pets. In final year, the students live at Camden, where they are involved in large animal work and also participate in the activities of the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, which has a focus on diseases of farm animals and horses.

The new proposal will involve students completing their lectures and practical classes in 4th year, with the first half of the year at Sydney and the second half at Camden. There would be limited clinical case management during this year but the students would be involved in practical classes to gain expertise in medicine, surgery, radiology, anaesthesia and clinical pathology of both small and large animals. The final year would then be a practice based year, with periods of time spent in the University Veterinary Clinics at Sydney and Camden, as well as in private veterinary practices. We believe that this change will permit students to make the best use of clinical case material during their final year and to be able to take more case responsibility. Our hope is that these changes to the course will increase skills and confidence of our graduates, and so ease the transition to the sometimes very demanding work schedules and challenges involved in a veterinary practice.

One of the philosophical decisions taken in the introduction of the new curriculum has been encouragement and facilitation of independent learning. Learning outcomes for all units of study will be published on the faculty home page from 2000. Faculty has also approved a reduction in "face-to-face" teaching hours, in order to facilitate greater use of independent learning. Regulations concerning progression of students who fail a unit of study have also been made more flexible.

The Faculty is very aware of animal welfare based considerations and in planning the new course, we have attempted wherever possible, to reduce animal use. We have developed new student computer laboratories, and this has enabled a large reduction in the use of animals in teaching. Many laboratory classes that used animals have been replaced by computer tutorials. However, the Faculty remains strongly committed to use of animals on the University farms for development of skills in production animal handling and management.

The Faculty recognised the need for provision of more opportunities to evaluate their own learning, and to provide more frequent feedback on learning. Use of formative assessments has greatly expanded in 1999. World wide web software (Webmcq Pty Ltd), that facilitates student use of computer-based assessments with accompanying feedback has been introduced in twenty units of study, or almost half the course. This software enables students to undertake practice exams and obtain feedback on the content. This development recognises the need for support of continual student learning and self-evaluation, and the need for greater variety and flexibility in learning processes used in the course.

Feedback from students and graduates has been fundamentally important during the Faculty's deliberations on the course revisions. Continual re-evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the course will be facilitated by annual reviews of the results of evaluations of all units of study, with the assistance of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Annual surveys of graduands and graduates will also help the Faculty maintain a dynamic and innovative course that meets the needs of both our talented, enthusiastic students and the community.

*Professor Reuben Rose is Acting Dean in the Faculty of Veterinary Science and Dr. David Evans is Associate Dean for Teaching in the Faculty of Veterinary Science.*

# *Making informed decisions about Flexible Learning*

*Julie Gordon, Centre for Teaching and Learning*

My appointment within the CTL as a lecturer in educational technology was in response to the recommendations of the University's Academic Board Working Party to investigate flexible learning. From the academic perspective, flexible learning offers teachers the opportunities to re-examine current approaches to teaching and learning and reconsider previously accepted and often unquestioned practices.

At this stage academics may like to consider a range of approaches and technologies for improving the quality of the student learning experience. Yet in my experience some academics faced with moving from traditional lecture/tutorial domain development, to technology supported flexible learning environments; may at times and without support, experience difficulty in determining what, where and how to use educational technology to support this change.

Ellis et al, (1998) suggest that this is because of the linear information, presentation of didactic lectures development occurs through the generation of a lecture series that convey content but pay little attention to the objectives of the learner except in broad subject terms. For many academics the transition to flexible learning where a multi-dimensional, non-linear approach is required, presents them with difficulty namely, how to analyse the subject domain to achieve an effective solution. Although this is a frustrating point to be at, it is also a very positive one for me, because it is at this stage where I can provide support to colleagues who start to ask questions about flexible learning and look in other directions for solutions, further training, support and staff development.

On that note I have noticed that some academics are asking such questions as how do we go about getting started in flexible learning? Then at the same time launching enthusiastically into flexible learning, by putting their unit of study on the Web. This may sound simple enough, but they may have found that the reality has proved more difficult and time consuming than they first imagined, with the outcomes not always living up to expectations. For example, work loads increasing instead of decreasing, technological problems intervening, more training for academics in pedagogy and information management issues and students having difficulty in accessing the unit of study. The result in some cases has been a proliferation of unprofessionally developed and implemented web based courses, which are difficult to maintain and manage academically, technically and financially.

In considering these issues, one approach I have found that works well in designing a flexible learning environment is the development of domain specific educational strategies, such as explanatory notes, diagrams, exercises, quizzes, demonstrations, simulations, discussion groups, field trips etc. This is once the content has been specified and appropriate learning objectives and assessment tasks are identified. The important question for the academic is what strategy best achieves the learning objective? Not what learning objective can be used for this technology? How to effectively meet the objectives is more important at this stage than what technology might be available. Therefore, no specific technology should be

*Julie Gordon*

considered at this stage, bearing in mind that the learner, not the technology is central to the design. In my opinion and from evaluating many flexible learning environments this leads to an educationally satisfactory design rather than a technology driven solution which is often less satisfactory for the student. If you choose to integrate and develop new technology resources for your unit of study then the effect should be on what the students achieve with the information and resources rather than repackaging of existing materials. Godfrey (1996) also supports this notion by stating that technological excitement should not dominate over pedagogical issues. As university educators we need to be skilled managers and facilitators of electronic information. If the uptake of flexible learning and online technologies is to occur in a broad range of discipline areas, considering sound educational principles and if it is to occur relatively rapidly, it is clear that a substantial program of staff development may need to be provided to all faculties within The University of Sydney.

The working party report has defined flexible learning as a student centred approach to education, which offers the student increased choice in what to learn, how it is learned and assessed, and when and where learning happens. Flexible learning may be referred to as an educational philosophy and a set of methods, procedures and techniques for teaching and learning. It is not a distinct way of delivering information or an ideal condition for lecturers to attain. Rather it embraces, extends and complements a number of existing and evolving approaches to teaching and learning. Flexibility can be found within organisational arrangements such as:

- On-campus classroom learning (in its multitude of methods)
- Distance education;
- Open learning;
- Independent learning;
- On-line learning;
- Multimedia learning;

- Resource-based learning;
- Teleteaching;
- Computer managed learning and
- Computer assisted learning

Flexibility is also provided through the institution's administrative policies and procedures.

Increasing flexibility may not necessary be appropriate in itself. The significance of a flexible learning environment is one where increasing flexibility can improve the student learning experience. This may be achieved through flexibility in the curriculum, the unit of study components, how the learning is assessed and the functionality of the learning environment.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning is providing a service to support academics with flexible learning strategies and processes. I will be engaging in workshops and consultations at the CTL. In addition, a web site called Flexible Learning will support academics in making informed decisions about teaching and learning. The Web site will include examples of who is doing what in flexible learning at The University of Sydney for example, early adopters and enthusiasts. It is aimed at helping academics that may not have yet started to think about flexible learning with the provision of resources.

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*Dr Julie Gordon has been recently appointed as Lecturer in Information Technology in the Centre for Teaching*

# CTL Bookshelf

*The CTL Bookshelf presents a selection of materials on aspects of teaching and learning available in the CTL Resource Room. These include titles on personal and professional development, as well as quality and evaluation issues. University of Sydney academics are invited to visit the CTL Resource Room and to consult with our staff on their interests.*

**Peter Kandlbinder, CTL Bookshelf Editor     email: synergy@ctl.usyd.edu.au**

## Student Learning

Theory and Practice of Learning
*Jarvis, P. Holdford, J. & Griffin, C. (1998)*
*London: Kogan Page.*

*This book is an introduction to the research and modern practices that help people learn. It concentrates on the emergence of life-long learning, in response to what the authors see as the major changes impacting on education. They describe as influential concepts, student-centred learning; learning as process; and the shift away from liberal to vocational education with the corresponding importance of practical rather than theoretical knowledge. The book is divided into three sections: the how and why of learning; the basic theories of learning and the contemporary practices that relate to these practices.*

## Academic Leadership

Learning to Lead in Higher Education
*Ramsden, P. (1997)*
*London: Kogan Page*

*Paul Ramsden extends the concepts drawn from research into effective teaching and learning to the leadership of academic departments. Starting with the definition of learning as a process of change and describing the university system as undergoing dramatic change, Ramsden establishes six core principles for effective leadership. The second part of the book adds to these foundations to explore the process of building a departmental vision and securing staff commitment to that vision. The final part of the book discusses ways in which universities can foster an environment for leadership to develop.*

## Evaluation

Effective Evaluation of Training and Development in Higher Education
*Thackwray, B. (1997)*
*London: Kogan Page.*

*With increasing pressures of accountability, leaders in higher education are asking, does training and development have a value to their institution? Thackwray finds that little has been done to demonstrate the effectiveness of staff development. This book takes the perspective that effective evaluation of staff development programs can contribute not only to the quality assurance of programs but also add to their enhancement as well. Beginning with a review of the different perspectives of evaluation, it then introduces a variety of different instruments and strategies for evaluation. The final section of the book describes putting evaluation into practice and discusses a number of case studies of effective evaluation.*

# *synergy* Noticeboard

## Conferences, workshops

*For latest conference details http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/synergy*
*Information on CTL workshops and seminars is available at the CTL*
*Homepage: http://www.usyd.edu.au/ctl/*

## 1999

### DISTANCE LEARNING 99

15th Annual Conference on
Distance Teaching and Learning
4 - 6 August 1999, Wisconsin USA
Details: URL:
http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/

### NEW REALITIES - HIGHER EDUCATION RENEWED

The 21st EAIR Forum
22 -25 August 1999, Lund, Sweden
Details: email:
eair99@mail.evaluat.lu.se or
http://www.evaluat.lu.se/EAIR/

### ASSESSMENT FOR THE LEARNING SOCIETY

The 4th Northumbria Assessment
Conference
1- 3 September 1999, Newcastle
upon Tyne, UK
Details: email:
ED.NAC@UNN.AC.UK or URL:
http://hswe.unn.ac.uk/4thConf.htm

### IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH THE DISCIPLINES

7th International Improving
Student Learning Symposium
6t-8 September 1999, University of
York, UK
Details: URL:
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd
/isl/isltop.html

### RURAL EDUCATION: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

18-21 September 1999 Kalgoorie, WA
Details: Rosa Lincoln, tel: 08 9021
1344 or fax: 08 9091 2719

### OPEN, DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING: THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENIUM

1999 ODLAA Forum
27-30 September 1999, Geelong, VIC
Details: Jean Fisher, email:
ripvet@deakin.edu.au

### AHEAD '99

7th Australasian Higher Education
Staff Developers Conference
29 September
- 1 October 1999. Sydney, NSW
Details: Fiona Plesman, Ph: (02)
4570 1720 or URL:
http://www.pdc.unsw.edu.au/ahed99/a
hed.html

### 1999 AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE

5-8 October 1999 Fremantle, WA
Details: Conference Secretariat,
email: conference@idp.edu.au or
tel: 9373 2720

### PATHWAYS THROUGH THE FIELD

24th Annual POD Conference
13-17 Oct 1999, Pennsylvania, USA
Details: Laura Border, tel (303)
492 4902 or email:
border@spot.colorado.edu

### ISETA-99

The Twenty-ninth Annual
Conference of the International
Society for Exploring Teaching
Alternatives
14-16 October 1999, Arizona USA
Details: Shirley Rickert email:
rickert@pifw.edu or URL:
http://www.west.asu.edu/ISETA

### ACER NATIONAL BUSINESS EDCUATION AND RESEARCH CONFERENCE

14-15 October 1999, Perth, WA
Details: Peter Kenyon, email:
kenyonp@cbs.curtin.edu.au or
URL:
http://www.cbs.curtin.edu.au

### THE CHALLENGE AND DIVERSITY IN UNDERGRADUATE MATHEMATICS

21-24 November 1999, Laguna
Quays, QLD
Details: Milton Fuller, email:
m.fuller@cqu.edu.au or URL:
http://www.sci.edu.au/delta99/

### GLOBAL ISSUES AND LOCAL EFFECTS: THE CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

AARE-NZARE Conference 1999
27-28 November 1999,
Melbourne, VIC
Details: aare99@swin.edu.au or
URL: http://www.swin.edu.au/aare

### GRADUATES FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM: COLLABORATION AND INNOVATION

1-3 December 1999, Manly NSW
Details: tel: 9440 9555 or URL:
http://www.gradlink.edu.au/empfrm.htm

**Please send details of conferences
on aspects of teaching and
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*Synergy*
**Centre for Teaching and Learning
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