Using open source learning techniques to enhance professional development opportunities for the early childhood education and care sector in Australia.

Abstract

In early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia, practice is situated largely across the health, education and community services sectors. Within these sectors, silos of practice exist (Press & Woodrow, 2005), which restrict the opportunities for knowledge exchange and create duplication of services and contribute to increased costs. Moreover, lack of knowledge exchange means that new ideas and approaches in particular sectors are often not completely understood in others, thereby increasing protectiveness of individual knowledge bases, limiting possibilities for leadership and integrated practice in the ECEC field and fostering suspicion that decisions about particular practices/approaches are not evidence-based (Cheeseman, 2007). Such factors undermine, rather than enhance, possibilities for effective leadership in ECEC.

This paper will report on an Australian Learning and Teaching Council grant, which provided possible solutions to these barriers. These solutions were enabled through the design of an open source learning environment, which allowed participants to better understand how these silos disrupt their practice and to develop some strategies for overcoming such barriers. Participants were also supported with a structured course within a learning management system to enable student interaction, facilitator support and consolidation of the theory/practice nexus via access to multiple resources.

Introduction

As mentioned above this paper reports on an open sourced learning project which was developed as part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council grant awarded to the authors of the paper. The project sought to enhance the possibility for leadership, capacity building and sustainability in ECEC by using previously successful strategies in multiple ways, to produce practitioners and professionals who think otherwise and engage in high quality integrated practice. To do so, the project took a grass roots, industry informed and evidence-based approach to support the development of resources to assist with the preparation of practitioners and professionals in the School of Human Services at Griffith University, Queensland Australia (Bachelor of Child and Family Studies (1095), the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies/Bachelor of Education (Primary) (1244)) and at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia (Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (E420), the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Honours) (E421) and other early childhood courses i.e. Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood. Furthermore, it offered professional development of practitioners working in the Logan and Beaudesert corridor (Queensland, Australia); practitioners and professionals in ECEC settings and those in the general community in Queensland, Victoria and across Australia. The criteria for the development of the resources were:

- flexible and accessible, that is, available for online, external, intensive and face-to-face delivery;
- comprehensive, that is, available to practitioners at undergraduate, post-graduate and professional development levels;
- focusing on the delivery of strategies that enhance the ability of professionals to engage in integrated practice;
- designed according to current theory and literature relating to understandings of high quality integrated practice in the early years; and
- user-friendly.

Project Outcomes and Impacts

Initial Project Outcomes and deliverables

The outcomes of the project are organized under three main headings as set out in the following table:
Outcomes Deliverables

Consolidation of Communities of Practice

- A RoundTable which focused on high quality early years integrated practice in ECEC settings in Australia and overseas.
- Networking opportunities that provide opportunities to undertake critical reflection processes across the children’s services sector, build leadership possibilities at all levels of practice in ECEC settings, provide opportunities for and developing and maintaining partnerships with managers of early years integrated practice settings to assist with the professional development of their staff.

Enhancement of teaching and learning opportunities for leadership in the ECEC sector

- Development of curricula to be used in learning and teaching in Higher Education, which addresses the ECEC sector needs with respect to the preparation and up-skilling of professionals to work in integrated settings.

Resource development

- Development of accessible professional learning, undergraduate and post-graduate study online resources for staff working within cross-disciplinary early years’ settings

The outcomes and deliverables are discussed in more detail below.

Consolidation of Communities of Practice

Roundtable

In 2009, our RoundTable entitled “Fostering Leadership and Integrated Practice in Early Years Settings” was co-hosted by Griffith University in Queensland and Deakin University in Victoria. The RoundTable was used as a means of consulting the ECEC sector about the issues that were surfacing as the moves to integrated practice were occurring. The feedback received at this RoundTable provided useful data that highlighted some of the constraints and enablers encountered by ECEC practitioners and professionals who were trying to engage with the policy reforms relating to the moves to a more inter-professional approach to practice.

The RoundTable participants (40 in all) demonstrated a passionate capacity to engage with the new reforms and to use this engagement to learn more about the practice of others. In fact, most participants now considered integrated (inter-professional) practice as their ‘core business’ and were looking forward to ‘using different lenses to view things’ and to ‘value adding to each other’. However, in order to practice in this way, the participants considered some aspects of practice vital to ensuring the success of ECEC inter-professional practice. These were:

- an open and honest willingness to accept the contributions of others;
- a willingness to ‘de-comfort’ ourselves;
- respect of the professional knowledge of others;
- an ability to feel comfortable with uncertainty;
- space to make each person’s experience explicit in a confident way;
- the importance of relationship building;
- knowing and being comfortable with each person’s limitations;
- sharing of each other’s knowledge base;
• a shared knowledge base; and
• strong leadership skills.

The participants at the RoundTable also had suggestions about how the above-mentioned aspects of practice might be facilitated in the ECEC workplace. Feedback suggested that this ‘shift’ in the culture of practice required:

• time – to build relationships with all stakeholders; to dialogue; to assist people to feel welcome; to seek funding to assist such a process.
• money and resources – to assist with time for relationship building and for conversations that facilitated the development of a shared mission and shared values; to assist each person to learn how to work as a team in this new practice space; and to acknowledge inter-professional practice as ‘core business’; and
• flexibility – to enable funding across departments; joint training; allowing space to make inter-professional practice overt in the workplace; to enable the establishment of formal partnerships; and to enable Memorandum Of Understandings to be put in place.

For all the RoundTable participants the main focus of their attention was ‘how’ – how is inter-professional practice in the ECEC workplace effectively and sustainably facilitated? As can be seen, the participants had their own views on the ‘how’, many of which are quite able to be implemented and that are indeed already in place. As previously mentioned however, what is of concern to the authors of this paper and to many practitioners and professionals in the ECEC field, is that much of the actual implementation of inter-professional practice in the workplace currently relies on the goodwill of the individuals on the ground. This point appears to be supported by data from the RoundTable participants, who highlighted the importance of time, flexibility and financial resources.

The ECEC sector across the disciplines of health, community services and education has demonstrated its tenacity and ‘willingness to expand their practice…and to rise to the challenge…and to achieve desired outcomes’ (Macfarlane, Cartmel & Nolan 2008) in the face of such policy reform. However, although such strength of will and interest exists, it will not be long before resistance to undertaking these extra challenges overtakes this strength, if governments do not also rise to the challenge in terms of providing extra support to staff in this respect.

One of the original intentions of the project was to develop a professional development network to provide a space where ECEC professionals could discuss practice issues related to working in integrated early years settings on a regular basis. The idea was floated at the RoundTable with the collective response being against such a move. The logistics of meeting on a regular basis was not possible. Therefore, a different model was required.

As it was the intention to draw from this group to inform the development of this resource, a reference group was formed via Expressions of Interest from RoundTable participants. It was the intention that the members of the Reference Group could then connect with their own networks to provide informed feedback and information about the progress of the project.

**Enhancement of teaching and learning opportunities for leadership in the ECEC sector**

Expressions of Interest to join the Reference Group were extended to all RoundTable participants. They were invited to contribute to informed discussions about the content and strategies that would be useful for professional development and undergraduate and postgraduate studies to support professionals for their work in high quality early years integrated practice settings. The Reference Group participated in videolink and discussion groups. They actively engaged with the literature about integrated practice and models of professional development. Consequently, they made informed responses to the focused discussions about transdisciplinary practice.
The development and use of Open Source Web resources to support Early Childhood Educators

Technology is probably the biggest thing to ever happen to education. It has changed the way we acquire and use information, the modes of communication we use, the delivery course content, student engagement, teaching and learning strategies and educational economics. Education is now a global investment, which seeks collaboration and dialogue with peers from around the world (often via communities of practice and free flow of ideas and information (Glassman, Bartholomew & Traves 2011).

The educational design of the above-mentioned resource is based on pedagogical processes, which are congruent with philosophies inherent in the open source model of learning. Open source education is an e-learning applications initiative by higher education institutions and is defined as “the open source software/product where the software/product is freely available for delivering education online” (Coppola & Neelley, 2004). It is a learning framework resource that can be freely used, distributed and modified (Downes, 2002; Glassman, Bartholomew & Traves 2011). Applied to this educational context this model invited feedback and participation from the project reference group as well as other developers, educators, government bodies, students and industry partners to exchange ideas, improve best practices and create a world-class educational resource.

Open source curricula are instructional resources whose digital source can be freely used. Open source projects offer benefits to learning and teaching contexts including an increase in educational opportunities for those who cannot access a classroom; the ability to see the value and quality of courses offered before making an application to an educational provider and access to supplemental learning materials (Coppola and Neelley, 2004).

Siemens (2003) suggests that the benefits of the open source model are increased quality, greater stability, superior performance, and improved functionality. Reduced vendor reliance, reusability, reduced costs, auditable security (users validating security), reliability, and rapid fixes to bugs/problems are among other benefits open source model can offer (Siemens, 2003). Higher education has long valued the collaborative production and sharing of knowledge. Thus, the rise of online communities powered by the near frictionless cost of the Internet and open source knowledge seems a natural fit for universities (Siemens, 2003).

Higher education has long valued the collaborative production and sharing of knowledge. The presentation of information in this manner allows course material to transform into an ongoing learning community project such as this one, focused on the search for, use of, and development of new information. It provides educational assets freely available online transforming pedagogical knowledge into commonly usable and with proper instructional support and guidance treats knowledge as a process rather than a commodity, moving students beyond the traditional boundaries of classroom experience to engage in problem solving within the larger information universe. The content remains free for re-use and source documents are made readily available to interested parties.

Student benefits to using open source and open access include:

- An increase in educational opportunities for those who cannot access a classroom;
- The ability to see the value and quality of courses offered before making an application to a college;
- Access to supplemental learning materials.

Resource development

The Early Childhood Care and Education: Developing and Sustaining Pedagogical Leadership website www.eccleadership.org.au was developed as a resource for this project. Designed by Griffith Universities Information Services (Learning and Teaching) Health Team in collaboration with the authors of this paper (teaching academics) who developed the curricula content for the site. The website is also available as described using the principles of open source learning as information available to the global community.

The website aims to stimulate thinking in relation to working across the early years with a focus on integrated practice. The site can be used by participants from the ECEC field or students studying in the afore-mentioned courses. Participants/students are directed to progress through seven modules located on this website. These topics aim to build leadership capacity for the early years’ sector and are offered at the professional learning level. The topics provided are intended to strengthen the participants/students’ thinking in relation to working across the early years with a focus on working in a transdisciplinary way. As they progress through each module
participants/students are involved in reflecting on practice and thinking critically about their role in the care and education of young children whilst at the same time considering perspectives of the other associated disciplines.

Teaching and learning strategies used include the provision of learning outcomes to inform participants/students so that they can achieve better clarity about what they want to accomplish from the program, and by what techniques they will use to achieve those goals. Specific learning outcomes in this case can also provide potential Students who access the site are also provided with further information about the courses they are studying, while those participants from the field are provided with an open view of curricula objectives.

Focus questions are used to engage the learner by clearly identifying the issue presented in the online material and are often accompanied by a learning activity. Ideally, these are open ended questions, which allow the learning to explore a situation or problem. Students can be directed back to the Universities Learning Management System to utilise discussion forums, wikis or blogs to discuss the focus question. The use of the Universities Learning Management System based in Blackboard© known as Learning@Griffith, enables students to form a learning community in a structured facilitated learning environment and to allow collaborative learning between student and facilitator by the consolidation of the theory/practice nexus via access to multiple resources.

The web public does not have access to this area of the site. Students access this using their university enrollment log in.

The seven modules are:

- Leadership
- Philosophy
- Pedagogy of listening
- Integrated practice with infants and toddlers
- Pedagogy of difference
- Social determinants of health

As the following diagram illustrates all topics are underpinned by the notion of working in a transdisciplinary way and will appeal to those wanting to think more about their own practice and leadership capacity or those working in inter-professional settings i.e. Child and Family Centres, Early Learning and Care Centres.

Each topic focuses on a specific aspect considered important to the notion that leadership exists in all facets of an organisation. It is suggested that you begin with the Leadership topic and then work your way through the remaining six topics - in any order. Each module will build your understandings of pedagogical leadership for early years professionals and for working in inter-professional settings.
Conclusion

While the notion of open source learning is not new the idea is new to the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. This paper has detailed the production of this open source site by examining the underpinning reasons and philosophy behind its construction. The authors also reported on the stages of the project that eventually funded the production of the open source site. At present the site is in operation and is being used by both students in the courses at Griffith and Victoria Universities and practitioners and professionals from the ECEC field. The site has assisted in enhancing opportunities for learning and professional development in this sector.

References


