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Title page

**THE CHANGING FACE OF COMMON TIME: MOVING ON WITH AN
AWARD-WINNING FIRST YEAR STUDENT RETENTION INITIATIVE.**

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THE CHANGING FACE OF COMMON TIME: MOVING ON WITH AN AWARD-WINNING FIRST YEAR STUDENT RETENTION INITIATIVE

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolutionary changes in Common Time, an award winning student retention initiative within Griffith University with a focus on the information literacy component. The challenges faced within a changed environment and strategies for the continued success of Common Time are discussed and evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the original conception of Common Time and some factors contributing to its success and track the path of evolution over time identifying factors which contributed to undermine the efficacy of Common Time in achieving the initial objectives. Through reflection and analysis, significant factors in success and challenges to the success, of a first year information literacy program will be examined.

COMMON TIME PROGRAM – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Common Time program was initiated by the School of Human Services in 1999 in response to the broad issue of first year student retention and as a direct result of student feedback about the student experience of flexible learning. This feedback highlighted the need for greater contact with peers and staff and support of the transition to university life (Fowler & Branch, 2000) .

Logan campus of Griffith University was established in 1998. The campus was conceived as a model for the implementation of flexible learning at Griffith University. Every program and course taught at Logan campus was delivered in flexible mode, with significant ICT enhancement through fully developed multimedia course web sites.

COMMON TIME PROGRAM AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING

The educational philosophy underpinning flexible learning at Logan campus was documented in the Griffith University Flexible Learning Policy, as "...an educational approach using a variety of student centred teaching and learning methods, resources and flexible administrative practices that responds to the needs of a diverse student population, enabling them to achieve vocational and professional qualifications and the goals of a university education" (Griffith University, 2004, p.4). In this context flexible learning was not associated with distance education.

Flexible learning was adopted as an educational approach focussing on student-centred learning, with teachers involved in facilitating the transition of students from dependent to self-directed learners, capable of independent and lifelong learning.

In this educational environment, learning support became a key driver for student success. This was especially the case at Logan campus where the first student cohort often came from the Logan region, characterised by lower-socio-economic areas and from families without tertiary education experience. Expertise with technology was an additional issue for many students, in particular, mature age students, faced with the challenge of accessing course materials online and engaging with communication technologies such as discussion forums.

The first year experience was another significant factor in the initial flexible learning environment at Logan campus. This experience is characterised by a significant social, academic, technological and personal adjustment to the university culture and community. The transition from “the known” to the “unknown” is often marked by feelings of stress, anxiety and personal inadequacy (McInnes, 2000). Social isolation is often experienced and can lead to student disengagement from the university (Zimitat, 2003).

In combination, the flexible learning environment with less emphasis on face-face contact, and the “first year experience”, created the need for a program to provide supported transition to self-directed learning and to contribute to integration with the university culture and community. This need was reflected in a survey of the first cohort of students, conducted by the School of Human Services at the end of 1998. Students comments indicated a perceived need for an increase in the amount of contact with academic staff, greater opportunities for peer interaction, and increase in learner support (Fowler & Branch, 2000).

COMMON TIME PROGRAM – FRAMEWORK

The Common Time program that evolved, comprised a program of structured activities designed to provide ongoing orientation and foster the development of academic skills such as library research, critical thinking, time management and academic writing. Unstructured time provided for informal interaction with staff and students, providing a mechanism for developing informal peer networks and study groups and encouraging collaborative learning (Fowler & Branch, 2000).

This program of activities, (both structured and unstructured contact), occurred within a Learning Centre at Logan Campus. The Learning Centre comprised a “state of the art” facility providing maximum flexibility in teaching and learning activities, by the integration of computer rooms, group project rooms and a large teaching/tutorial space. This venue was a very significant component of the original implementation of Common Time.

The Common Time program introduced by the School of Human Services in 1999 was based on a framework of structured sessions around a particular learning objective and unstructured time where students could interact with their peers and teaching staff. Modelled on the university academic semester, the program was designed to support students through the academic semester, scheduling activities according to student needs and demands expected throughout the semester. It is significant that the structured and unstructured activities were contextualised within Human Services and were designed holistically to address the needs of the “whole student”.

Sample Program for Semester 1:

- Week 1: Introduction to Common Time
Getting Started with Computing
- Week 2: Flexible Learning
What is Human Services
Referencing for Academic Assignments
- Week 3: Developing Information Research – Using the Library Catalogue
- Week 4: Developing Information Research –Developing Search Strategies
Using Library Databases
- Week 5: Essay Writing 1
- Week 6: Reading Effectively
- Week 7: Developing Information Research Using Specialised Information
Sources
- Week 8: Essay Writing 2
- Week 9: Developing Information Research Using the Internet
- Week 10: Exam Preparation
- Week 11: Stress Management

COMMON TIME PROGRAM AND INFORMATION LITERACY

In designing the information literacy component of Common Time, it was considered important to design a program that considered the issues of student retention and supported the overall objectives of Common Time, in particular, developing information skills within a supportive environment that recognized the need for support, whilst at the same time encouraged the development of self-directed and lifelong learning.

In order to ascertain an appropriate curriculum, the type of assessments the students were required to complete in their first year courses were surveyed and the information skills implicated were identified. Through this exercise a range of workshop topics were drafted to scaffold students' learning. Students were taken through a program of workshops from an initial introduction to basic computing in a university environment to the use of research tools including the library catalogue, library databases and the internet with a focus throughout on a first year Human Behaviour assignment. This assignment was intellectually challenging and required the use of information literacy skills in appropriately researching the assignment topic. Through the use of an actual assignment topic, it was possible to identify closely with the students learning needs and give information skills a real-life focus rather than being perceived as an add-on as it traditionally had been in library workshop programs.

In evaluating the design of the information literacy workshops a number of strategies were employed, including student feedback (both during and at the end of the workshop program), peer assessment and critical self-reflection.

The majority of the student evaluations affirmed that the design of the workshops was on track. Consistently positive responses indicated that the workshops met both students' objectives and stated learning outcomes with a score of 8-10 on a 10 point satisfaction scale.

COMMON TIME PROGRAM - EVALUATION

A formal evaluation of Common Time was conducted by the School of Human Services at the completion of the first year of its implementation. The degree of satisfaction for staff and students who participated in Common Time was extremely high. This was substantiated by the high attendance rates consistently maintained throughout the year. "The fact that over 100 students attended a non-compulsory program on a weekly basis is strong evidence of client satisfaction" (Fowler & Branch, 2001)

A new staff member commented on Common Time, "Its well organised and is always directly relevant, immediately pertinent to students. Students see that and identify those benefits for themselves. I find the program a most satisfying teaching and learning process"(Fowler & Branch, 2001).

Common Time responded to 'perceived issues of low academic and social involvement of students' in the Human Services programs. The importance of the Learning Centre, the original venue for Common Time, cannot be overstated, as it allowed for either structured processes or informal contact facilitating access to staff and other students (Fowler & Zimitat, 2004, p.11).

COMMON TIME PROGRAM - EVOLUTION

By 2004 however, the student cohort had outgrown the Learning Centre, and factors including staff changes within the library and within the school meant that there was no contingency plan in place to cope with the increased student numbers. This year was a low point for Common Time, and at the end of 2004, a review was carried out by all staff involved with a view to rectifying some of the issues that had arisen.

Several decisions were made regarding the 2005 program. It was deemed vital that there should be no confusion surrounding any facet of the program and that, unless absolutely necessary, it would not be altered once it had been advertised to the students. Sessions would be held in the auditorium, the largest teaching space on campus, and the student body would be divided into two groups. In this way, a lecture style information literacy session could be delivered to all students in two sittings of one hour each. Students would have access to academic staff in smaller tutorial rooms when not attending the auditorium sessions. In this more organized and stable environment, students would be surveyed three times throughout the year to evaluate Common Time. On the basis of student feedback, a plan would be formulated for its future.

Many teaching librarians at Griffith University either hold, or are working towards, qualifications in Higher Education teaching, and are therefore aware of pedagogical limitations of teaching in lecture mode. Although information literacy is much more than a set of practical skills, there are skills to be learnt, and lectures are not very effective for this purpose (Light & Cox, 2001, p.98). Teaching information literacy in lecture mode has little to do with enabling students to transform and construct knowledge and more to do with the logistics of processing a large number of students.

Student numbers dropped off significantly throughout first semester, but this was difficult to quantify as it had happened in previous years as well, although not to the same extent. The first of three student surveys was carried out at the end of first semester, and at this time another review was held with the Common Time convenor.

The decision was made at this point to emphasise the relationship of information literacy to the workplace and lifelong learning, in order to create a perceived need on the part of the students. The first workshop focused on locating statistics to use in a funding submission, while the second concentrated on locating policies and legislation relevant to the agencies the students would visit later in the semester on practicum placement. Observation and interview data indicated that these workshops were considered more interesting and useful by the students than those held during first semester.

The presence of the Common Time convenor at these sessions was particularly valuable as the discussion moved seamlessly from information literacy questions to workplace-specific questions. Information Literacy was presented as an integral part of the continuum of lifelong learning, taking students beyond the immediate academic setting. That these sessions appeared to be more meaningful may also have been due to the fact that the 'information fog' was beginning to clear for these students, and they now had some prior knowledge of using the databases upon which to build, making for a more meaningful learning experience (Biggs, 2003).

COMMON TIME PROGRAM – MATURE AGE STUDENTS

There appeared to be quite marked differences between mature aged students and school leavers in 2005. The students who attended these non-compulsory sessions religiously through the year were, almost without exception, mature age. Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis (2005, p.72) note that mature age students have clear goals and enjoy the challenges associated with learning.

As part of the evaluation of Common Time, five mature age students were interviewed about their experiences with the information literacy component of Common Time. Analysis of the interview transcripts suggests mature age students were initially motivated more by confusion and panic rather than a positive intent to develop their information literacy skills. However, by the end of their first year, many of the mature age Human Services students who had begun university with such trepidation, were achieving high grades.

This finding highlights the need for all staff to be more cognizant of the particular challenges new students face. We must acknowledge that they will achieve academic independence more quickly if we provide a holistic support model that addresses social, personal and academic needs. This was the model originally conceived in the Common Time program.

COMMON TIME PROGRAM – SCHOOL LEAVERS

School leavers often appear to attend only the first few Common Time sessions. They have a more pragmatic approach to study, aiming for the 'piece of paper' at the end of

their program rather than the whole learning experience. Relating this to the information literacy sessions, there are several possible reasons for this lack of interest. They may have developed adequate research skills at high school. On the other hand, their research skills may simply consist of the ability to 'google', but they believe this is sufficient for a pass, so see little incentive to invest time and effort developing higher order research skills. Perhaps the peer group is meeting most of the students' information needs. Another possibility was revealed by a study by Lizzio and Wilson (2004, p.1), in which first year students from a variety of disciplines were asked to self-assess their level of capability from an inclusive list of generic skills. The responses indicated that young students experienced difficulty with the reflection needed to self-audit, therefore they were not able to identify needs in areas such as information literacy. Or perhaps it is that librarians' conception of research as an end in itself is out of touch with young students' 'racing model of research', where students 'browse on the shelves, flip through journals, or pick the first few citations in a database they have used before' (Brandt as cited in Veldof & Beavers, 2001, p.9). More research is needed in this area, but clearly there is a disjunction between our information literacy offerings and the students' perceptions of their information literacy needs.

COMMON TIME PROGRAM – THE PRESENT

Increased student numbers, now three times those of 1998, have contributed significantly to the loss of those qualities that made Common Time so valued, including the informality, flexibility and sense of community engendered within the Learning Centre.

Planning for 2006 is currently underway. In an attempt to address some of the issues revealed in the 2005 surveys and recapture the opportunity for students to mix informally with peers and staff, arrangements have been made for a shift back to the Learning Centre for Common Time 2006. In Orientation Week, a baseline survey will be done based on the surveys carried out in 2005. Students will be asked to rank certain topics in terms of their perceived importance, and evaluate their own mastery of these topics. In this way we hope to gain a better understanding of our commencing students, and we will use the knowledge gained from this exercise to inform the planning of future information literacy sessions.

A library session will be held in week one, when students will be provided with a context for the information literacy sessions, stressing their relevance for the program, and also for their future careers. The compulsory Library Research Tutorial, currently linked to one of the first year courses and worth 5%, will be explained to students at this time.

After Easter, when numbers traditionally begin to drop away, staff will again gather for informal Common Time sessions in the Learning Centre and students will be able to request assistance as required from academic staff, the librarian, the learning adviser or other support staff. Information literacy workshops will be planned based on the experience of past years as well as feedback from the Orientation Week surveys, however there will be flexibility to respond to new issues as they arise.

Ongoing evaluation of the Common Time program has identified factors valued by students, and by ensuring these are incorporated in planning future Common Time sessions, it is hoped to regain a strong sense of community and engagement with the activities offered. Continuing to provide an information literacy program strongly linked to real world contexts and lifelong learning will be necessary for future success.

CONCLUSION

Common Time as it was introduced in 1999, was a recipe for success in the context in which it was presented. The right context was an environment of a newly established campus, a small student cohort of largely mature age students, a flexible learning environment and a strongly cohesive and collaborative community of teaching and support staff committed to student success and student-centred learning. The strong sense of community supported and nurtured the continued engagement of students in a non-compulsory program.

Over time the context changed significantly and the original program design was no longer workable or sustainable with the larger student numbers, competing demands and space issues. The sense of community facilitated by the use of the Learning Centre as a venue for the activities was eroded. The integration of activities as a whole program was lost and students became less engaged with information literacy as a separate set of activities not necessarily perceived as relevant to their immediate and future needs.

Information Literacy needs to be integrated and contextualised within the student learning experience. We need to provide an authentic learning experience, providing active learning where students no longer see information literacy as a separate set of skills but a seamless part of learning and lifelong learning.

A rejuvenated Common Time program based on past successes is vital if we are to honour our commitment to equip students with the necessary skills for lifelong learning. This challenge needs further research to identify the way forward to move information literacy beyond a skills-based add-on to an integral part of learning.

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