Let's Make It Real! Approaching Engaged Learning from Authentic Contexts Across Disciplines, Emerging Case Studies from Southern Cross University

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Abstract

This paper describes the initial development of three models of engaged learning and teaching (MELT) across a range of disciplines and pedagogical approaches at Southern Cross University, arising from a co-design process as part of the Engaged Learning Incubator Project. What links these approaches is that they are all underpinned by experiential learning and learning that is situated in authentic community and industry contexts. There is a continuum of possibilities for student autonomy within these contexts. The integration of community and student engagement, and identifying the explicit skills required, is being explored in some units via the use of models of engaged teaching and learning during curriculum renewal. Existing MELTs have been drawn upon when developing these new models. This presentation will explore the next steps for the Collaboration MELT where Action Learning has begun to emerge as a way to engage students and community partners as co-learners in the collaborative process. While these MELTs are yet to be tested in the classroom, it is timely to explore our initial models with others and increase our co-design capacity for engaging others who may, as part of the 'Engaged Learning Incubator' project, want to develop their own MELTs.

Introduction

Southern Cross University has a long-standing policy around 'Community Engaged Learning'. Goal 4, Southern Cross University Strategic Plan 2016-2020: "We will create distinctive opportunities for engaged learning and research, as a hallmark of the Southern Cross University experience". Live Ideas (http://www.liveideas.org.au/) was launched in 2015 as part of a larger strategy to develop a scalable model for community, industry and student engaged learning at Southern Cross University. Live Ideas supports project-based learning as an inclusive form of engaged learning that accommodates experiential pedagogies across disciplines. There is an opportunity to further explore the scope of experiential learning pedagogies and support teaching staff to use these teaching and learning strategies to renew learning design within specific units and across degree programs.

What do we mean by authentic & engaged learning?

It is useful, in this context, to refer to the literature synthesising a range of pedagogical approaches to engaged learning, as there are numerous interpretations in use. Bowen (2005) suggests that "educators think of engagement in four related but different ways": 1. *student engagement with the learning process*; 2. *student engagement with the object of study; 3. student engagement with contexts of the subject of study* and 4. *student engagement with the human condition*. Many concepts of "engagement" cover ground similar to existing concepts prevalent in higher education. Bowen (2005) links the range of pedagogical underpinnings with 'engagement' as follows:

- Engagement with the learning process is similar to *active learning*.
- Engagement with the object of study is similar to *experiential learning*.
- Engagement with contexts generally is similar to *multidisciplinary learning*.
- Engagement with social and civic contexts is similar to *service learning*.

The Engaged Learning Incubator

In this paper, we introduce four units (subjects) across three disciplines that have been the focus of the 'Engaged Learning Incubator Project' at Southern Cross University (Table 1). The 'Engaged Learning Incubator' project is a collaboration between Southern Cross University Engagement and the Centre for Teaching and Learning working in a co-design process with teaching academics. All units in this project are underpinned by engaged learning, that is, learning situated in authentic community and industry contexts

2

(Figure 1) that aims to engage students (and sometimes real-world partners) with the authentic context and the learning process. Some units also have a social/civic context.

Table 1: Units (subjects) involved with the Southern Cross University Engaged Learning Incubator.

Discipline	Unit	Context	Using MELT approach
School of Arts & Social Science	**Community Engagement Project**	Student-driven community-based project	Yes
School of Arts & Social Science	**Introduction to Social Work**	Student-initiated short volunteering/service learning	Yes
School of Business & Tourism	**Sustainable Tourism**	Student-chosen case-study	Undecided
School of Environmental Science and Engineering	**Introduction to GIS**	Industry problem-based research	Not at this stage

Figure 1: A continuum of real-world possibilities for community engaged learning activities.

Through the 'Engaged Learning Incubator', assistance was offered to academics who were interested in making changes to their units to move from hypothetical learning activities to activities or assessments embedded in the needs of community and industry partners. There is a continuum of possibilities for student autonomy (Figure 2) with each of these authentic contexts. Integrating community/industry and student engagement using an explicit skills framework is being explored in two, and perhaps three, of these units via the development of models of engaged teaching and learning (MELT; after Willison 2012).

Figure 2: A continuum of real-world possibilities for student autonomy in community engaged learning activities.

Taking a Co-design Approach

The first stage of the Incubator project saw the delivery of a series of *"Let's Make It Real" - Authentic Curriculum Design Workshops* during September 2016, with a focus on support and resources for curriculum design in the areas of authentic problem and project-based learning. In October 2016, stories from these workshops were shared at a Southern Cross University Teaching and Learning Symposium, where we explored engaged learning, underpinning pedagogical approaches, links to student learning outcomes, and how to embed supporting processes for students, including the use of authentic assessment.

The 'Engaged Learning Incubator' project provided direct support to teaching staff in an engaged learning design process via open invitation workshops at the Gold Coast, Lismore and Coffs Harbour campuses. During these workshops, we worked in small teams to undertake engaged learning co-design incorporating the redesign or renewal of activities, topics or assessment items/s in up to three units (subjects) and

4

representing a spread of first, second and third year units to embed Engaged Learning pedagogies and the Live Ideas program (www.liveideas.org.au).

Teaching academics responsible for these units are currently moving through a co-design process (Radinsky et al. 2001) where staff from the Centre for Teaching and Learning and Southern Cross University Engagement are working collaboratively to redesign part or the whole of a unit, link to Live Ideas as a supporting mechanism for community-student engagement, and to renew content & update assessment where appropriate. Each of these units already has or is about to obtain ethics approval to undertake research with students.

Developing Models of Engaged Learning and Teaching

Whilst all units take a skills-based, community/student engaged learning approach, two of the units have progressed further in the articulation of explicit MELTs. After a workshop held with John Willison in May 2016, staff working on the 'Introduction to Social Work' and 'Community Engagement Project' units (Table 1) have both been working to make explicit the underpinning skills framework (Figures 3 and 4). In terms of their authentic/engaged contexts both of these units have characteristics of 'whole unit process' (Figure 1) with 'student driven collaboration' (Figure 2).

Existing MELTs have been drawn upon for developing "the Hug" and the Collaboration MELTs, including the Work Skill Development framework (Bandaranaike and Willison, 2010), Optimising Problem Solving pentagon for Engineering (Ritchhart and Perkins, 2008), and the Research Skill Development Framework (Willison and O'Regan 2007; 2008). The Hug MELT (Figure 4) is intended to 'wrap around' students, increasing their skills and confidence as first year student practitioners entering the real world of social work through this service learning unit.
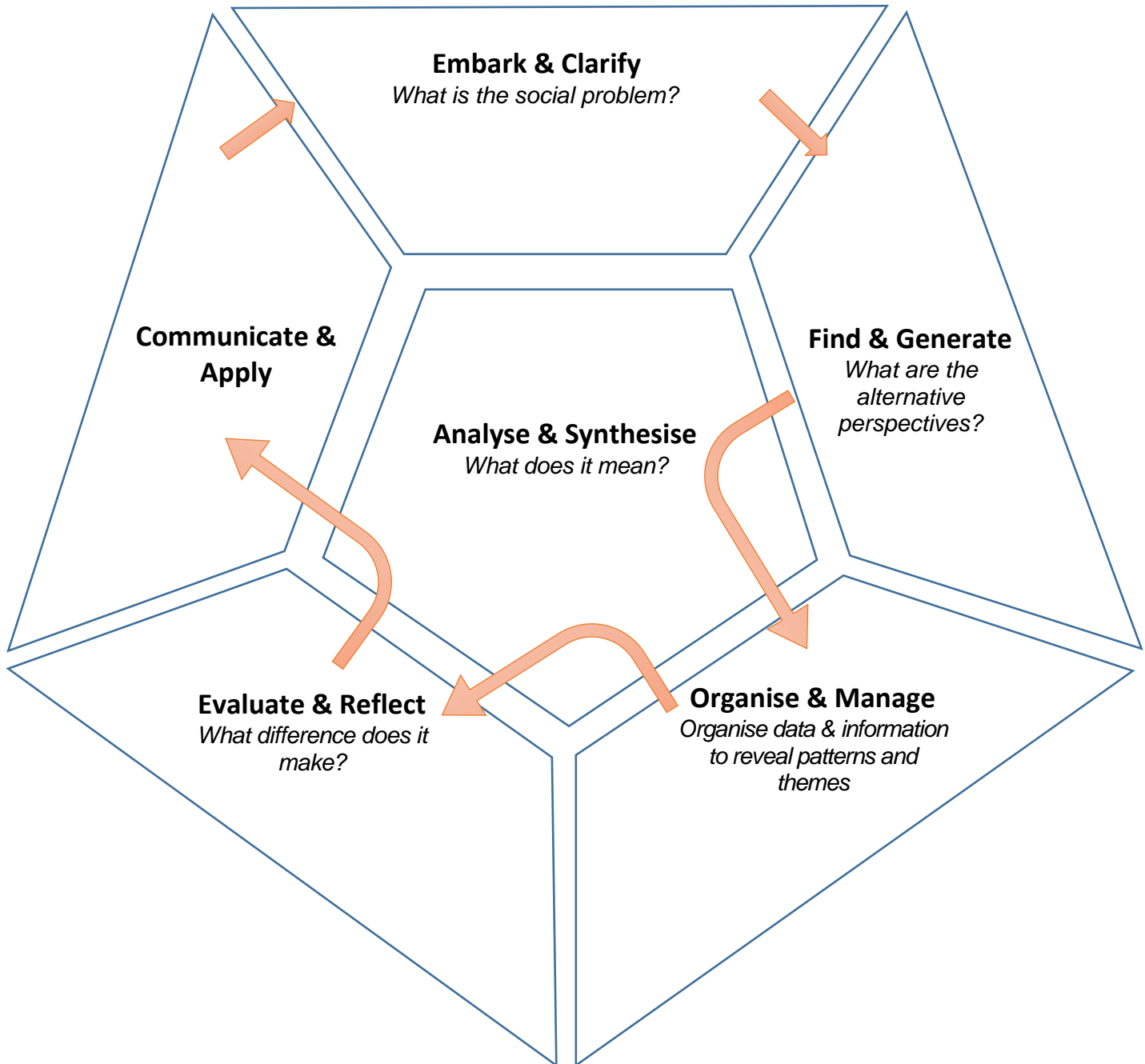
The Collaboration MELT (Figure 4) has evolved into Collaboration Principles (Figure 5) for guiding both the engagement of student and community partners in this unit. Action Learning (Dick, 2017; Dick and Dalmau, 1999) is emerging as a way to engage students and community partners as co-learners in the collaborative process. Specifically, we see the action learning process as a way to engage students and partners in developing their own guiding principles. The Collaboration MELT is being integrated into assessment rubrics where student self-assessment will be encouraged. Challenges for this unit include its online offering and the collaborative assessment.

While the Hug and Collaboration MELTs are yet to be tested in the classroom, it is timely to explore our initial models with others. We welcome ideas and feedback from conference participants to help frame our future practice, as well as to increase our capacity for engaging others who, as part of the 'Engaged Learning Incubator' project wish to develop their own MELTs.

Critical Analysis "hug" MELT

'When in doubt, analyse & synthesise'

Embark & Clarify
What is the social problem?

Communicate & Apply

Find & Generate
What are the alternative perspectives?

Analyse & Synthesise
What does it mean?

Evaluate & Reflect
What difference does it make?

Organise & Manage
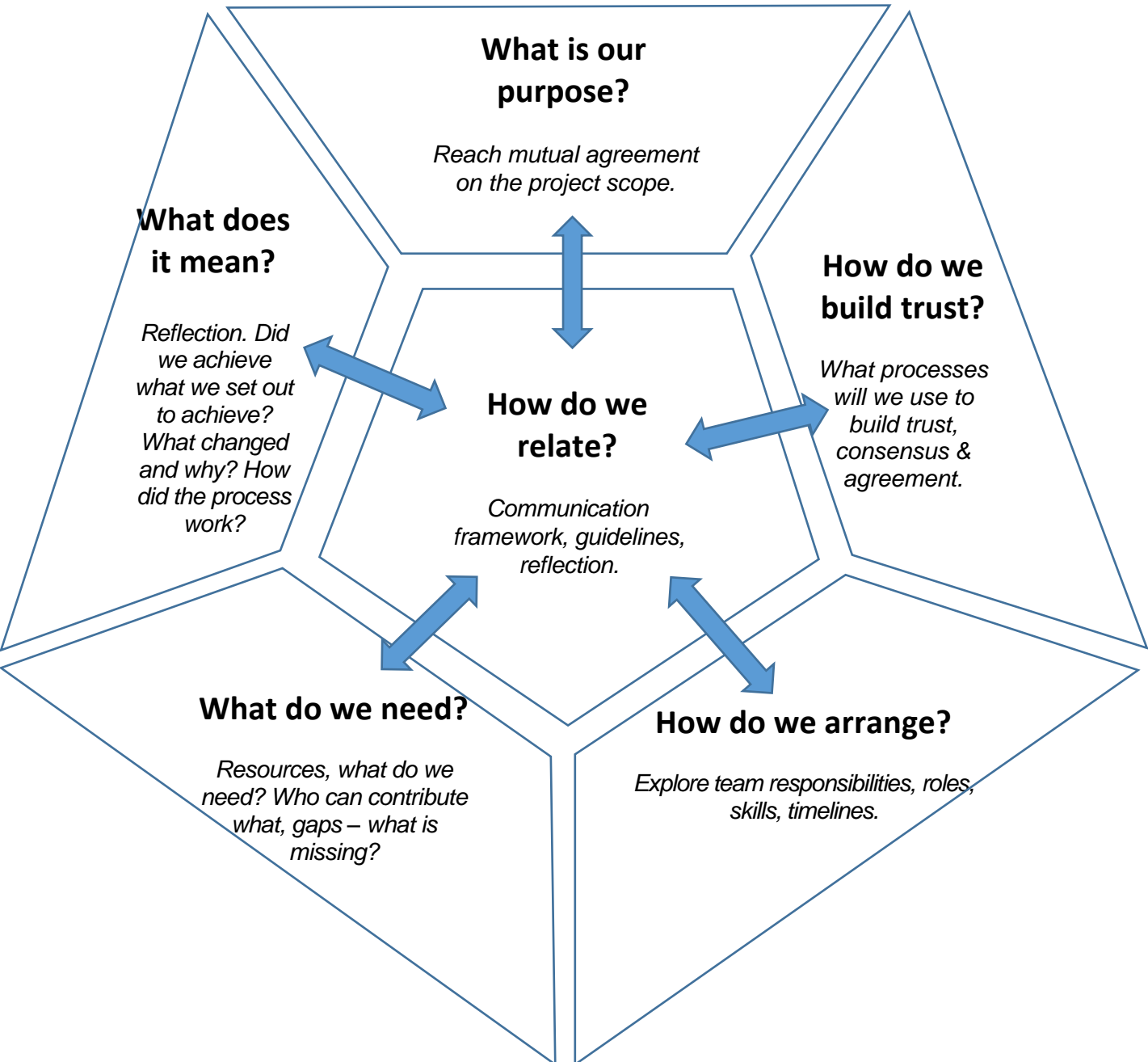*Organise data & information to reveal patterns and themes*

The Model for Engaged Learning and Teaching (MELT) pentagon is based on the six facets of the RSD as modified for Optimising Problem Solving (OPS) pentagon designed by Mechanical Engineering Communications Tutors, University of Adelaide, 2014. See www.rsd.edu.au for full version of RSD and http://www.adelaide.edu.au/rsd/framework/frameworks/ for OPS john.willison@adelaide.edu.au
The MELT Pentagon may be used as a Thinking Routine (R. Ritchhart & D. Perkins, 2008).

Figure 3: Introduction to Social Work - The Hug MELT.

THE COLLABORATION MELT

'When in doubt communicate'

What is our purpose?

Reach mutual agreement on the project scope.

What does it mean?

Reflection. Did we achieve what we set out to achieve? What changed and why? How did the process work?

How do we build trust?

What processes will we use to build trust, consensus & agreement.

How do we relate?

Communication framework, guidelines, reflection.

What do we need?

Resources, what do we need? Who can contribute what, gaps – what is missing?

How do we arrange?

Explore team responsibilities, roles, skills, timelines.

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Figure 4: Community Engagement Project - The Collaboration MELT.

COLLABORATION PRINCIPLES

What is our purpose?

Establish mutual agreement on project scope and deliver on process and outputs as agreed.

Who do we trust?

Build trust, consensus and agreement to be able to work together.

How do we relate?

Establish a communication strategy, with guidelines, as well as incorporate self-awareness and reflection.

How do we arrange?

Explore roles, responsibilities and timeframes.

What do we need?

Identify who can contribute what? What is missing? Do we need to redefine scope and purpose?

What does it mean?

Reflect on our experience to understand what the process of collaboration means for ourselves. Give feedback to help build mutual understanding with others.

Figure 5: Community Engagement Project - The Collaboration Principles for Students and Project Partners.

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