

Liz van Acker

Thanks everybody, good morning. Welcome to Brisbane. For those of you who are new to here, lucky you weren't here last week for the storms. That would've been an intense challenge for you. But this won't be so much of a challenge, I don't think. What I want to do is talk about a project that Janice and I ran, as Pierre said, from an ALTC grant. It was actually run quite a while ago now, from 2010 to 2012, and we have five partners, who I'll list at the end. We interviewed lots of different people. Different cohorts. So got the views of students about capstones, lecturers, associate deans, alumnis, so students who had done the capstone, and some who hadn't, and what they thought about that idea of doing one of these things. We also looked at course material. So when we say there that we did a website audit, what we did was just looked at all the business schools' course guides, and looked at what we thought was a capstone. Some things were called capstone, but we really thought they weren't really. Others were a capstone, and just looked at their criteria, their assessment, the learning activities, etc. And that was quite a useful exercise, to see what was going on.

If we had the time and energy and enthusiasm, it would've been good to do a follow up, and the money, a follow up audit now, because I think that there would be a lot more capstones, and probably a little bit more thought through, not that some of them weren't. Some of them were very good. But I think that they're much more common, 3 or 4 years down the track. In terms of outputs, we have the Good Practice Guide here [0:01:55.8] not going. They're on the thing here, I won't walk over there, but they're just, the book's there if you wish to take one, please do, they're free. And we have lots of them hanging around the office. So we're more than happy, I'm more than happy for you to take a few for your colleagues or whatever. We did a literature review of the theories of capstones and that's in the book as well. Journal articles, there's an article coming out, well it's out now in the latest edition of HERD that you might be interested in, called Capping Them Off. We also have a website, a page that's still live, and that has all of the things that I've been talking about, Good Practice Guide, planning a capstone course, about them if you're interested in the theory, there's some learning and teaching information as well. So please go and have look at that website if you're particularly interested in capstones.

So what I want to do is have a look at the experiences and types, and again there's much more information about this in the little books. Go through some of the features, some of the key findings from our project. Talk a little bit about capability and employability, though I'm nervous to use those words now, because someone's just tried to clarify the difference of them. And then some learning and teaching approaches. So we'll begin by looking at the different experiences and types. Capstone units are just one kind of subset of capstone experiences. But basically, it's about developing professional identities. And getting people to be confident and ready to face the workplace. So giving them some experience of what it would be like to work in a particular kind of job. And there are lots

of ways of doing that. Work integrated learning, internships, people mentioned here before. We teach that, I actually come from the discipline of political science in public policy, which is a little bit unusual in a business school, but don't ask, there are political reasons why that's the case, and we're happy to sit there. And I think that there's a role for government in, and business together anyway.

But we have internships in organisations where students have to go cold, to a political organisation, it could be a politician, it could be a non-for-profit group, or a political party. And they do work experience with that particular group for a semester. Again, as Pierre said, it's not about making a coffee, you get allocated a supervisor and do some project work. So it's very good networking opportunities, people learn skills on the ground. Non-profit groups get some free labour, these students are nearly ready to graduate. So everybody wins out of this kind of experience. We also have parliamentary projects where students can get semester following a politician around, basically, and doing some work for them. So that's just in my own discipline, an example of internships. And clearly, there's study abroad which obviously would be a fantastic opportunity.

Now, this is probably a little bit controversial, but capstones at the moment are in the final semester, generally speaking, of a degree. They could be on earlier, but you would need the support of your colleagues, and it would have to be fed into your degree program a little bit more, I think. And we're just talking, our little discussion there, is it too much to expect people to be workplace ready in just that final semester of their degree? Should we be developing those skills and capabilities from first year? So that's something that you might want to discuss. But our experience, and we did our project, was looking at capstones pretty much in the final year, and the final semester, of a student's degree. There are three different types, and this comes from the literature by Rawls et al. And those developed types are very useful in trying to track the progress and the trends and the practices of capstones.

So the most common one that we found in our study was the magnet. So that's discipline specific. So if you are a marketing major, you would all do the same capstone in that particular degree, the same program. If you were doing a mountaintop, it's much more challenging, because it's multidisciplinary. So you're bringing these different disciplines together, across the majors. And students would have to do the same course, the same capstone, in that one course. So you could come from accounting or law or humanities or whatever. And I know JC used some interesting work in this, as has Wollongong as well. Obviously for this to work, you need to get support of the staff and the students. Even administrative challenges will be very evident. Who's going to enter the marks, who owns the course. Who takes the credit for it, who gets the funding, who does the timetabling. But it's not to say that these things are not possible, because they are. And the final capstone experience is the mandate. This is something that we didn't really look at, because it's what's required by an outside body. So if you're an accountant, you have to do that practitioner registration exercise or whatever it is, get a certificate. So we're not really looking at. We're looking more at the magnets and the mountaintops.

So let's look at the features of capstone, or what we call professionals in training. That was one of the phrases that we came up when we were interviewing people and getting the information together. It's about getting, students to be very proactive. So one of the case studies we came across, when we interviewed a lecturer, was in the discipline of public relations. Where students would get access to a PR firm. Someone would, a practitioner would come into class and then students would become involved in boot camps, where they'd have to deal with clients, and develop a plan for non-for-profit groups. They might have to develop a quick message in 30 minutes, or write a brief for a client, or a media release. Something like that. But the idea was to draw together the learnings they had got so far in their degree, and prepare for the workplace. So it's all of these things that I'm talking about here. Consolidating previous learning, applying that as well. But also doing that little bit more. Doing the right side of the brain kind of thing. So the reflective stuff that someone mentioned a little while ago. Have I got leadership skills, what's my purpose here? Am I behaving ethically? So it's cognitive, but effective aims as well. And then I [0:08:56.8] bridge. And that's why we have the image there of Janus looking backward, but also forward as well.

Okay, so what we found in our research is that backward stuff is pretty much there. People are putting together different learnings, and students are learning a lot of information and content. It's the looking forward, that's the more challenging aspect of capstones. How do you really instil this idea of capabilities, and give students the confidence to do that as well. So one way of doing this is to do project based teamwork. We all know the challenges of teamwork. We know students resist it for a range of reasons. But it's a way of saying to students, you're going to probably have to work in teams in the workplace anyway. You're going to find people that are difficult or lazy or stupid, whatever it is, you're just going to have to work around that and deal with different personalities and different people. So it gives them the opportunity to tackle particular problems, to become independent learners, and to think on their feet. I think that's one of the challenges of a capstone, where they are put out of their comfort zone. It's not just ah look, Liz is giving a 2 hour lecture or we'll do a little bit of, she'll ask us some questions or, we'll do a bit of interactive work. But we'll kick back and look out the window and what I'm having for lunch, Facebook my friends. We know what they're like. And mind you, they still do that in a capstone, with no shame, I have to say. But they somehow are engaged in a different way. The onus is much more on them to take control or to be much more engaged in the course itself. So for my particular capstone, I have a couple of traditional lectures, if you like, and then the onus is on them to do the work from then on for the rest of semester. And that's an important way of getting them ready for that transition to the workplace.

One of the controversial things about a capstone is the idea of not having exams. It might work for your particular discipline, but it's not about testing what did you learn. So we tend to find that capstones don't necessarily have exams. There could be less formal contact time as I mentioned, and lots more informal activities. So when we did the audit, this is what we found when we went through the websites of the different courses. Thirty six percent of all Australian business schools had some kind of capstone for all students. And 51% had some, for some students. They were spread unevenly, and that's why I'd

love to do this research again, 'cause I suspect that as we're getting pushed by universities, it's in our academic plan at Griffith that you have a capstone, and I think that that's quite common, I suspect that there'd be a lot more support for them. There'd be a lot more lecturers doing really innovative things. Though they still have to fit in with what the requirements of their program tell them to do.

The key message, I think, that I'd like you to take away, is a very simple one. There's no one model for a capstone. I think it's important that the lecturers are enthusiastic, that they get support from their heads of school, or their teaching and learning deans, whoever. But there's no overly prescriptive way or plan for capstone experiences. And that's, the literature says that, our book says that. It's, so that's good, because it gives you the flexibility to do what suits you, you know your own students and their capabilities in the university environment, and what you think would work. Also, some key findings were that capstones were a good site for assurance of learning, if you're into all that administrative stuff that we have to do, unfortunately, these days.

Okay. So in terms of capability and employability, what we found in the course guides that we looked at, the course outlines, is that, as I mentioned before, there was an explicit [0:12:58.0] on the backward functions, integrating, etc. But less on the forward ones. So getting them ready for jobs. How can students really construct their own knowledge and examine real life situations. Solve problems, but that are really relevant, not just to the university degree, but to the workplace as well. So trying to give them more of that professional socialisation. So for my class, 'cause I teach a course called Solving Policy Problems, where they have to pretend they're public servants. Or in the second half of the course, they have to pretend that they're the cabinet ministers and I'm the prime minister, which is scary when you're trying to be Tony Abbott. But the students really get into that, some of them get dressed up and get into that whole mindset of what it's like to be a public servant. So, and what I tell them quite consistently is you can apply these skills even to, even into areas where you're not going to necessarily be a public servant. You might be working for a non-for-profit group or in a big private company. But you will still find the skills of learning to think on your feet, answering questions very quickly, gathering the research and presenting it in a clear and convincing way, arguing about the politics of a situation. Those sorts of skills will hold you in good stead no matter what you do.

So just to give you a couple of examples, and they're in the Good Practice Guide if you want a little bit more of in depth information. A lot of the capstones that we looked at, they will bring in practitioners to present live cases. So in my case, I have two public servants at a fairly senior level, who come in. One of them comes in in about week 3 and says "This is how you write a brief." Which is very important, because students have to do that, and then present it. They also have to present a cabinet submission. And that's when they pretend they're ministers of the crown. The first exercise with the brief they pretend that they're just public servants. But gives them that experiences of writing condensed pieces with a clear argument that they're trying to sell. Then I also bring in another practitioner in about week 8, and they say "This is what it's like to be a public servant. This is how I started, who would've thought I ended up over here." And all the

different things they do. Because of course the stereotype for public servants are sitting around in their grey cardis, no offence to anyone who wears a grey cardi. But, and just looking at the clock and waiting until their next [0:15:30.7]. Those stereotypes really need to be demystified. Because they're not true and public servants have a very challenging life. And very, do very interesting work. So it's good for students to hear that from the public servants themselves.

Other examples of innovation that we found were things like strategic marketing, you're probably all familiar much more than that. Financial planning, where students have to solve a problem in a fairly heavy duty way, where they have to design and implement solutions to a problem. They have to come up with a statement of advice, or financial plan that meets the individual or industry standards. They have to draw on relevant theories to do that. So that's the other thing that capstones have to do, is try and draw on the theories that you have taught the students in your particular discipline over the past 2 and a half years. Public relations I mentioned before, the mountaintop, one of our partners, Wollongong Uni, developed this computer simulation that was based on socially innovative commerce. And they used the UN Global Compact. So trying to apply commerce principles, but looking at environmental issues. And profits. And costs. So if you're a big greenie, you probably might have failed, because you wouldn't have made enough profit. If you want to know more about this particular issue, Belinda's here today from Wollongong, so she might like to talk about it. One of the people who's involved. I was going to put her on the spot but she didn't want to be. But she knows a lot more about what was going on in Wollongong than I do.

Okay, and then learning and teaching approaches. See the Good Practice Guide or the website, I haven't got time to go into all these different approaches. These were the main ones that we found from our research, from talking to people, looking at guides, looking at course guides, looking at the literature etc. A lot of it from overseas. And yes, there is some overlap between the different kinds of teaching approaches. But if you're interested, that's something you might want to chase up in your own time. And these were our partner projects, Linda Andrews from QUT's here today as well. People from Wollongong, Newcastle, Macquarie and obviously Griffith. So look, I'll leave it there I think Pierre, I don't know how long I've been talking, but probably for long enough.

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