

Learning to fly: Capstones across disciplines

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Capstone curriculum across disciplines



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Overview

- The final year context
- Student experience
- The goals and key concepts for transformational learning in capstones
- Some examples
- Time for discussion

The final year context

- A culmination
 - Representing an end and beginning
 - Achievement of major goals
- A 'critical period' (Gardner & van der Veer, 1998)
 - A last opportunity
 - Capability, knowledge and skills
 - Support and direction
 - Associated with quality and employability
 - Graduates are our best allies and advertisements
 - The stakes are high
- And yet...

The final year context

Final year students are '*a neglected, captive, anxious audience*'

(Gardner & van der Veer, 1998 p.7)

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Neglected?

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Captive?

The final year context

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Anxious?

A little more about the student experience...

The student experience in final year

- Excitement about achievement
- Uncertainty about identity change
- Anxiety and fear
 - Sufficiency of learning
 - Relevance of learning
 - Leaving support networks
 - The unknown future
- Misunderstanding and vague or high expectations*
- Potential for disorientation, confusion, paralysis

*(Chickering & Schlossberg, 1998)

And at graduation?

- Exciting and challenging, but it may feel a little like falling off a cliff.
- When we want it to be more like this.

Why capstones?

- The challenge is there
- Transition-out matters, curriculum matters
- Standards, benchmarking, employability
- High impact (kuh, 2008)
 - Demanding, time-consuming, immersive
 - Purposeful, engaging, meaningful
 - Life-changing
- An explicit curricula focus on the final year experience

What is a capstone?

*An opportunity for final year students to both look back on their undergraduate study in an effort **to make sense** of what they have accomplished, and **to look forward** to a professional existence where they can **build on** that foundation. It is during the capstone experience that students **complete the transition** from their primarily student identity to embrace their beginning **professional identity**.*

(McNamara et al, 2012 p.2)

- A culminating achievement
- An opportunity to integrate, extend and test boundaries
- An opportunity to clear up the gaps and misunderstandings
- An opportunity to facilitate independence and maturity
- A visible transition experience
- A shared transformational experience for a cohort
- A compass, a map and even a bridge
- Simple.

Simple.



Some key concepts

- What they have in common:
 - Authenticity and relevance
 - Complexity and scale
 - Agency and self-authorship
 - Dissemination and celebration

Authenticity and relevance

‘the notion of learning knowledge and skills in contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be useful in real life’ (Collins, 1988, p. 2)

- Making explicit links to the future
- Contextualising learning
- Ensuring students understand the transition they are making
- An opportunity to find out whether natural paths are the right ones

Dance students at QUT undertake an international dance tour, partnering with dance organisations and taking part in events across the world. They act as a touring group, preparing choreography, rehearsing and collaborating as a group to deliver professional shows (including dealing with the punishing schedules). Production students join the tours to manage staging, and film students take part as documentary-makers.

Complexity and scale

‘What is higher education for, if it is not about assisting learners to make sense of the complexity of the world in which they live?’ (S Marshall, in Healey 2013 p.3)

- A guided, (relatively) safe environment to test big capabilities
- Substantial, ill-defined and complex scenarios
- Complexity in the processes
- The bigger and more complex the better

*Journalism students at Gloucestershire operate their own news organisation with outputs in TV, radio and online news. They develop plans and test outputs over a 12 week semester (research, content, branding, management), then produce all news delivery in a professional, intensive, 40 hour week.**

Agency and self-authorship

‘active engagement in learning or work, taking initiative and responsibility for one’s learning or actions, reflecting on one’s sense of self, and participating in the mutual construction of meaning.’ (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p.8)

- Personal ownership and meaning
- Power and responsibility
- Decision-making, and consequences
- The building of self-efficacy and resilience

Bachelor of Arts students at VU (including students from a wide range of arts disciplines come together for an independent ‘graduating project’. They work in small groups to identify, devise and carry out a project. Students often work with a community group, school or volunteer organisation. Outcomes are reports and artefacts or events – but depend on the students’ choice of topic and decisions about the most appropriate means of addressing it.

Dissemination and celebration

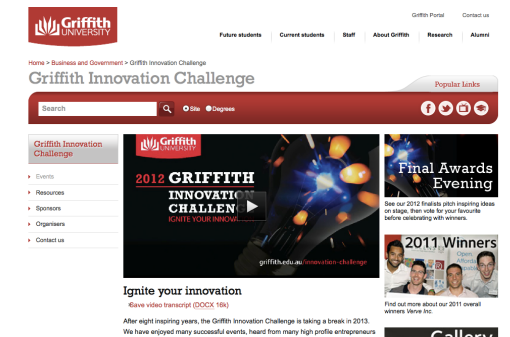
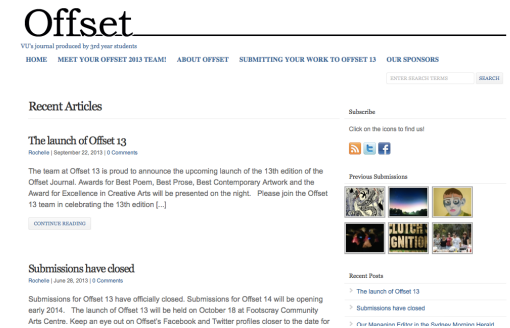
'...making work public is one of the simplest ways of raising the quality of work and acknowledging the amount of effort put into it.' (Healey, 2013 p. 74)

- Raising the stakes
- Building profile
- Acknowledging achievement
- *Reflecting confidence*

Engineering students at Swinburne enter the SAE car race

Harvard students take part in a UN-style debate

ICT students at Macquarie deliver a lecture series to peers



Reality check

- Diversity



The nearly last word

'Best experience of my degree by far, I got to see the relevance of the course... but also had the chance to do something I'm really passionate about.'

'So stressful, [working with] clients and teams. But I know how much I can cope with and how well I deal with problems. It's a bit like dealing with an emergency - I didn't know how I would react.'

'You can always see things afterward that could have been better, but really... so proud of what we achieved.'

- (final year student respondents to survey on capstone experiences, three courses represented)

The last word

'The pedagogical task is none other than the eliciting of a mode of being that can not just withstand incessant challenge to one's understandings of the world, such that any stance one takes up is liable to be challenged, it is the even more demanding task of encouraging forward a form of human being that is not paralysed into inaction but can act purposively and judiciously.' (Barnett, 2012)

- The period of transition-out is the most powerful, exciting and challenging (arguably greater than that of transition-in)
- Students are gathering a set of dispositions, identities and capacities that will, or will not, provide them a foundation for acting in and on the world
- If we are doing it right, students will work towards the experience for their entire degree, and when they get there, pay way too much attention to it

Thank you, plugs and references

- www.capstonecurriculum.com.au
- National survey, case studies and tools sought
- Thank you!
- Contact us
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