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## ABSTRACT

Australia has no culture of freshman composition, general education programs, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), or Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC). This paper first gives an overview of the context for WAC and CAC programs in Australia. It then discusses government regulations and funding for tertiary education in Australia, explaining that over the past 10 years university budgets have been severely cut, with the result that WAC and CAC programs are seen as "luxuries." Major portion of the paper outlines the CAC program at the University of Melbourne. It states that Communication across the Curriculum began in 1997 with a 3-year internal grant covering 2 lecturers (i.e., assistant professors) in the CAC program and that the project is a casual one, with no senior executive interest, support, or oversight. The paper also discusses the successful, voluntary collaboration between the Institute of Land and Food Resources (ILFR), which used to be the Faculty of Agriculture, and the CAC program--the faculty have always offered a first-year course in communication skills. It outlines five features of the CAC/ILFR collaboration. The paper concludes with reflections on 5 years of the CAC program, including staff development and outcomes for the institution and for the students. (NKA)

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Key factors in a successful collaboration  
in a voluntary Communication Across the Curriculum Program

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### Overview

The context for WAC & CAC in Australia

"The changes in institutions and learning environments that WAC & WID programs and teachers find themselves shaping and accommodating."

A voluntary collaboration (CAC & ILFR)

Features of the collaboration

### The context for WAC & CAC in Australia

We have no culture of freshman composition, general education program, WAC or CAC.

In different institutions communication skills teachers offer direct teaching or support in communication skills, ESL, and academic learning skills.

When we talk about 'communication' it has a broad range including written, oral, graphic communication skills, IT, teamwork and a ragbag of skills and abilities such as critical thinking and leadership.

CAC can be linked with first year transition to study issues, with graduate outcomes, and with preparation for the workplace.

### Changes in institutions

The conference focus on "the changes in institutions and learning environments that WAC and WID programs and teachers find themselves shaping and accommodating" fits our Communication Across the Curriculum situation. Our work has been enormously affected by such changes.

#### 1. Government regulations & funding

The federal government of Australia directs and funds tertiary education. Over the last 10 years university budgets have been severely cut. Universities are required to generate increasing proportions of their incomes, rather than relying only on government funding. Universities are enrolling increasing numbers of students which leads to larger class sizes and teacher loads.

Effects for CAC: Too many distractions for top administrators. Teaching staff focus on disciplinary content. WAC or CAC are 'luxuries'.

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## *2. Increased accountability to the government, the public & students*

The federal government has funded several surveys of employers' satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with graduates' communication skills & other attributes.

Universities also concerned with students' satisfaction with their study experience, as measured by annual national survey (the course Experience Questionnaire). Responses - students feel they have little contact with their teachers.

### Effects for CAC:

Logically accountability should lead to small group teaching and to developing student communication skills. But incompatible with budget cuts.

## **Changes in learning environments**

Strong stress on developing students' IT skills and on using MM in teaching.

Effects for CAC: University of Melbourne focuses mainly on campus-based teaching and learning contexts. However, there is a tendency for teachers interested in innovation in teaching & learning to focus on IT & MM, so they have less time and energy for explicit teaching of communication skills.

## **CAC at the University of Melbourne**

Casual establishment - no mentor

Motherhood statements - no strong application

Works mostly at grass-roots level

Needs marketing

Communication Across the Curriculum at the University of Melbourne began in 1997 with a 3-year internal grant covering 2 lecturers in CAC. (Lecturer is like an Assistant Prof.)

# Casual set-up of the project with no senior executive interest, support or oversight.

# No University communication policy or requirement. Motherhood statements for individual degree programs (eg all engineering graduates should be able to communicate . . . etc.). Usually no specific means to achieve communication outcomes. ie osmosis principle

# Participation by individual faculty members and departments is voluntary & depends on their interest in doing something about the development of their students' communication skills. Ie grassroots work (rarely top—down).

# We constantly have to sell our expertise to colleagues across the disciplines.

## **Successful voluntary collaboration with the Institute of Land and Food Resources**

Institute of Land & Food Resources

Parkville campus (main University) with Glyn (a crop scientist)

Burnley campus (Horticulture college) with E (& later D) (horticulturalists)

The ILFR used to be the Faculty of Agriculture, has gone through a painful restructuring of its administration & curriculum.

But on the good side, the faculty has always offered a first year undergraduate subject in communication skills (very unusual in our University)

Our CAC collaboration has involved 2 agricultural academics teaching and coordinating communication subjects at two campuses – Parkville (main University, where we are located also) and Burnley (a previously independent Horticultural college. Campus in Melbourne, a few kilometres from the main campus).

The collaborations have run for 5 years.

(The table shows our work with the two lecturers)

### **Features of the CAC/ILFR collaboration**

Changes in institution

Changes in learning environment

How the collaboration began

Nature of collaboration

Cycle of collaboration

#### ***1. Changes in institutions***

*Mandatory amalgamations of tertiary institutions*

by the Federal government 12 years ago. Mergers between traditional universities and non-university tertiary institutions (like junior colleges). ILFR amalgamation with 7 very different rural agricultural colleges. Linked to falling enrolments in agriculture. Has resulted in serious debt for ILFR.

#### ***Effects for CAC:***

- Suspicion by the newly amalgamated campuses of us as representatives of the dominant main campus.
- Need to teach communication skills in large classes (100 students) – giving individual oral presentations etc. –led to successful innovation of the ‘conference model’ (see ref.)
- Travel - Some staff development & PG seminars at 3 distant campuses.
- 200-2001 - attempts at curriculum standardisation for the 8 campuses of a new first year subject *IT and Communication*. Confusion about who would coordinate it and so far only only Parkville campus & 1 other have complied.

#### ***2. Changes in learning environments***

ILFR is committed to combining instruction in IT with communication skills development. Glyn was already an early adopter of IT. Burnley less so.

*Effects for CAC:* We sharpened our IT skills in administering subjects through the Web, online marking, online materials development etc.

#### ***3. How voluntary collaboration occurred***

- (1) Initial contact was result of CAC publicity—our Centre (for CS & ESL) held an internal university conference on integrating communication skills into the curriculum.

E, the ILFR lecturer from Burnley attended. He later approached the CAC project to ask for our input on the syllabus for the existing Communication subject he was about to teach.

Glyn from the Parkville campus sent an interesting written response to the first call for participants (couldn't attend). Later, we approached him.

- (2) The contacts were with individuals (not Institute-initiated), who were teacher /researchers in their own discipline, but also teachers of communication subjects interested in upgrading syllabus and teaching of communication skills

#### ***4. Nature of the collaboration***

Nature of the collaboration—shaped by personalities of the individuals involved as well as by context.

Refer here to comment by Linda Bergmann (Dept. English, U of Missouri-Rolla at the Cornell WAC Conference) on collaboration. She feels that WAC staff tend to think of collaboration as working on everything together, in contrast to the engineers she worked with who saw collaboration more in terms of a team in which members work on distinct tasks appropriate to their skills. This is similar to our work with ILFR.

Our 2 collaborators differed:

- Glyn very innovative (see the table for the year 1999); interested in communication issues, receptive to new ideas, hard worker, put together a big team. Did not call a meeting of the whole team, but solicited reflections and suggestions. Always acknowledges our work when giving presentations, papers.
- Burnley lecturers had a more limited interest in curriculum & innovation.

#### ***5. The cycle of collaboration***

Our work with Burnley and Parkville - perfect examples of 2 possible outcomes of a voluntary CAC program—maintenance vs. continual cycles of innovation.

Cite the model for a voluntary CAC program described by Linda Driskill, Cain Project, Rice University (Email message posted on WAC-L). A 3-year cycle for collaboration, in which:

- year 1 involves heavy collaboration (reviewing course goals, analyzing student papers, course evaluations, staff training, Web-materials development , grading etc.)
- year 2 sees improved materials and training, less collaboration, more trouble-shooting and support by CAC unit
- year 3 - they fine tune, put the course on "maintenance support" OR "the faculty member is so pleased . . . that he/she comes up with something revolutionary and we're back to phase 1".

The alternatives in year 3 are spot on, with Glyn the constant re-cycler and E on maintenance support .

## Reflections on 5 years

### *Team- and guest teaching*

When academics are happy with our work, they keep us as part of the team, to do the expert teaching of communication skills.

### *Staff development*

We certainly developed Glyn and E's understanding and practice of teaching communication. But wider staff development did not occur (except for some seminars given one year at 2 of the rural campuses).

### *Outcomes*

#### *Outcomes—E and Burnley*

Revitalised the *Communication* subject, particularly getting rid of boring oral presentations for weeks on end. On maintenance.

#### *Outcomes – Glyn and main campus*

Revitalised the *Science & Communication* subject (content, assignments, assessment). We gave support and advice on constant changes.

G says "I'm so glad I met you Arts people!"

#### *Outcomes - for students*

Students - improved their IT, oral and written skills, teamwork skills.

Students are more serious about communication skills.

#### *Outcomes—CAC and implications for you here*

Chances to work with someone who puts innovations into practice in a disciplinary context.

Build up our own skills, interests

### **Implications for voluntary CAC – anywhere?**

- Sell, sell, sell (publicity, presentations, papers, do lunch etc.) No-one will do it for you.
- Individual relationships – grass-roots approach, find out how the University works
- Embrace change (Glyn is shortly leaving for Kansas – position in staff development)
- CAC teachers develop as a new breed of academic – team-teaching, guest teaching, teachers for hire within the University

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Communication Across the Curriculum	ILFR Parkville Campus (Melbourne)	ILFR Burnley Campus (Melbourne)
<p><b>Late 1996 and 1997</b></p> <p>Nov. 1996 University-wide conference hosted by Centre for Communication Skills &amp; ESL and the Learning Skills Unit on integrating communication skills into the curriculum.</p> <p>Jan. 1997 CAC program initiated with 3-year University of Melbourne grant. 2 full-time Lecturers appointed (Joanna &amp; Paul). Various projects.</p> <p>CAC runs debriefing session with Glyn &amp; E</p>	<p>Glyn makes suggestions about 1996 Conference but cannot attend. CAC lecturers notice Glyn's staff seminars on teaching with IT. Visit Glyn in 1997 to discuss possible collaboration.</p> <p>Semester 2, 1997 — Paul team-teaching with Glyn on 1st year obligatory subject <i>Science &amp; Communication</i>. Initiates a 'conference model' for teaching communication skills. Social constructivism as theoretical frame. Joanna contributes on writing. Students still have a semester-end exam.</p>	<p>E attends 1996 conference and consults newly-formed CAC program in Feb. 1997 about 1st year obligatory subject <i>Communication</i>.</p> <p>Semester 1, 1997 — Paul gives lectures &amp; advice to E on <i>Communication</i>. Joanna analyses staff &amp; student writing styles.</p> <p>CAC is sub-contracted by E to write report on use of new learning technologies in modules of the National Certificates in Horticulture for Office for Training &amp; Further Education (\$6,000 fee)</p>
<p><b>1998</b></p> <p>Various projects</p> <p>CAC hosts the national Australian Communication Skills Conference (key-note speakers Art Young, Donna Reiss, Cindy &amp; Dicky Selfe)</p>	<p>Use newly developed platform for Web (GLEn)</p> <p>Paul and Joanna lecture on communication skills.</p> <p>Paul helps with conference organisation.</p> <p>Start-up grant of \$25,000 for Teaching &amp; Learning Multimedia Educational Technology awarded.</p> <p>Exam dropped in favour of assignments only.</p>	<p>Paul institutes 'conference model'. Integrated team-teaching with E.</p>
<p><b>1999</b></p> <p>Both CAC lecturers given tenure</p>	<p>Change to Webrat (more convenient Web platform)</p> <p>Tim van Gelder's critical thinking software taught.</p> <p>Belbin Team Role Profiling applied to student conference organising teams.</p> <p>Inter-year mentoring on conference organising.</p> <p>No CAC help with conference organisation.</p> <p>Paul drops out.</p> <p>Joanna lectures on communication skills &amp; helps assess conference oral presentations</p> <p>Online communication skills materials commissioned from outside consultant (costs shared by ILFR &amp; CAC).</p> <p>Online marking scheme set-up.</p> <p>More focus on writing: fortnightly essays, revisions, writing clinic.</p> <p>Joanna advises on essay topics and marks essays in this subject &amp; in a 2nd year ILFR subject (Environmental Informatics)</p> <p>Joanna — research project on revision.</p>	<p>E is replaced by D. Paul continues team-teaching. The 'conference model' is now well-embedded and D runs a very successful student conference with visits to the campus from general public.</p>
<p><b>2000</b></p> <p>CAC funded for 1 more year by Faculty of Arts.</p> <p>More focus on Arts activities.</p> <p>More communication skills teaching in upper level subjects.</p>	<p>History &amp; Philosophy of Science content dropped from <i>Science &amp; communication</i>. Subject simplified.</p> <p>Students keep online journal.</p> <p>Students required to revise written conference paper.</p> <p>Joanna gains acceptance of marking criteria for written work.</p> <p>Joanna — research project on critical thinking in essay writing.</p> <p>Preparations for new standardised curriculum</p>	<p>Paul — minimal involvement (advice)</p> <p>Invited to conference.</p>



<p>2 Continued for 1 more year by Faculty of Arts. Fees charged for teaching outside Faculty of Arts. New 3rd year work-placement Arts subject (<i>Managing Work &amp; Projects</i>) developed &amp; taught by Joanna.  Paul teaching 3 subjects with media, communication &amp; IT components for Departments in Faculty of Arts</p>	<p>Unsuccessful application for an ILFR award for excellence in teaching for the teaching team.  Only Parkville &amp; Dookie campuses run the common subject <i>IT &amp; Communication</i> (lectures by video-conferencing to Dookie). Joanna lectures &amp; assesses oral presentations (fee charged).</p>	<p>Paul invited to participate but not interested. Turns over all his materials.  Burnley continues to offer own subject (does not teach the common subject <i>IT and Communication</i>).</p>
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