STRENGTHENING PSYCHOLOGY THROUGH VENTURING BEYOND TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

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Background

- Merging of the former School of Psychology with the former School of Social Work and Social Policy

- Led to considerations of the ways undergraduate education in Psychology could be enhanced through inter-disciplinary collaboration

Impetus for venturing beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries

- Student learning is not optimised by traditional disciplinary structure

- Industry needs and generic skills are cross-disciplinary
  - ❖ Develop and recognise connections, apply knowledge
  - ❖ Writing, speaking, analysis, synthesis, teamwork

- Real world problems complex and multi-faceted

- Mode 2 knowledge production

- Benefits to teaching

Impact on the discipline
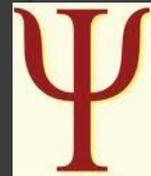
- Enhanced teaching and student learning helps to advance the status of the discipline through attracting and developing skilled students who then enter the workforce and represent Psychology

- Complement existing strengths with strengths of other disciplines, improve overall education

Addressing traditional shortcomings

- 3-year graduates
- Applying theory
- Job-readiness
- Higher-level skills
- Neglect of societal influences
- Understanding of policy environment
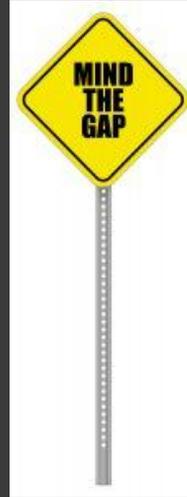
A case study from UniSA

- Purpose of current study was therefore to look at how Psychology education could be improved through collaboration with, and drawing upon, the strengths of Social Work and Social Policy

Process

- ⦿ Participatory
  Action Research

- ⦿ Two Stages
  - ➢ Identifying strengths and scope for improvement
  - ➢ Discussion of benefits and implementation ideas

- ⦿ Phase I- 10 participants
- ⦿ Phase II- 7 participants
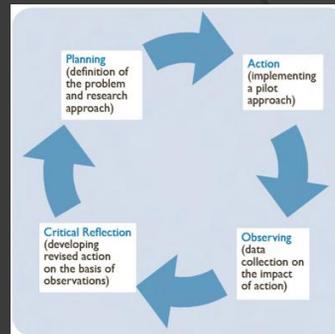
Focus Group Questions-Phase I

- ⦿ What do you feel are the strengths of your discipline and the teaching within it?
- ⦿ Is there anything special or unique about the way you teach your courses?
- ⦿ How do you think undergraduate training within your discipline could be improved?
- ⦿ What do you know about what the other discipline teaches and how it is taught?
- ⦿ What do you perceive to be their strengths and areas for improvement?
- ⦿ How do you think their strengths could facilitate teaching within your own discipline?
- ⦿ Why do you think this collaboration hasn't happened in the past?

Phase I Findings

	Psychology Perspective	SW/SP Perspective
Psychology Strengths	•Research training •Critical thinking •Understanding of individual behaviour	•Research training •Scientist-practitioner model •Clinical understanding of how humans 'tick"
Psychology Improvements	•Job-preparedness and professional identity •Understanding of politics and government departments •Appreciation of other perspectives	•Individualistic/Introspective focus •Gloss over gender, race, culture and social construction •Quantitative focus loses contextual richness
SW/SP Strengths	•Understanding of policy environment •Work experience, job-preparedness and professional identity •Influence of systems on individuals	•Outward looking (structural/material factors that shape lives, advocacy) •Exploring and respecting different perspectives/constructions of reality •Qualitative skills
SW/SP Improvements	•Evidence-base for practice and theoretical grounding •Teaching research nexus •Quantitative skills/SPSS familiarity	•Skills in stress management and making quick decisions •Critiqued as 'wishy-washy' •Engagement with topical issues

Phase I Findings

- In relation to how staff teach their courses, there was recognition of a far greater emphasis on practical skills and placements within the Social Work program.
  - Lecture vs tutorial balance

- Assessment practices also varied between disciplines, with research reports and exams predominant in Psychology compared with essays and graded practical components in Social Work and Social Policy.

- Surprisingly, staff revealed very little pedagogy behind their teaching practices and very little understanding of what the other discipline taught and how. By the end of these initial discussions however, staff were beginning to see some ways in which each discipline could benefit through collaboration.

Focus Group Questions-
Phase II

- Did you get any useful insights from the previous focus groups? Has this resulted in any changes in your perspective regarding the worth of inter-disciplinary collaboration within the school?

- What other ways do you see in which disciplines could collaborate to improve undergraduate teaching? Are there any specific things you feel you can learn from or implement?

- How might this collaboration work in practice? For instance, would you be likely to teach across disciplines or borrow content and ideas from the other discipline to be taught within your own discipline?

- What might be some of the barriers that would prevent collaboration?

- How likely do you think it is that these discussions and opportunities will change your teaching practice in the future?

Phase II Findings

Interpretations and
recommendations

Phase II Findings- An Overview

- Recognised lack of understanding about what other discipline does

- An air of enthusiasm apparent
  - "made me want to learn more"

- Identification of:
  - Scope for interdisciplinary course development
  - Areas for inter-disciplinary guest lectures
  - Generic skills to be developed further through collaboration
  - Benefits to teaching practice through inter-disciplinary collaboration

Scope for inter-disciplinary course development

- Research
  - Research methods derived from research questions
- Real-world problems
  - Bridging the gap between theory and application
  - Teaching research-nexus
  - Problem-based learning
  - Deeper-levels of learning
- Counselling
  - Common ground or bridge between disciplines

Scope for inter-disciplinary course development

- ◉ Benefits of inter-disciplinary team-teaching
  - ➢ Allows teaching to individual strengths
  - ➢ More engaging for students
  - ➢ Broadening of conceptual frameworks
  - ➢ *"Seeing problems as discrete but interconnected, developing the strategies, techniques, tools, knowledge and experience needed to solve unforeseen problems. It means learning which appreciates the importance of context, the significance of different interpretations and revision on the basis of looking again" (Brew, 2003, p. 14)*
  - ➢ Teaching depth rather than breadth facilitates retention
  - ➢ Improved teaching practice through peer-coaching, learning new techniques, as well as sharing ideas and experiences

Using inter-disciplinary guest lectures to fill 'gaps' in knowledge and skills

- ◉ Person in society to complement individualistic focus
- ◉ Understanding of policy environment and government departments
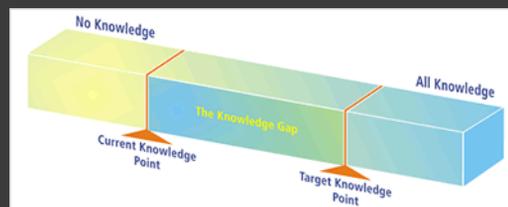
- ◉ Appreciation of diverse perspectives
- ◉ Constructions of reality
- ◉ Gender, race, and cultural influences

Improved generic skills training from inter-disciplinary education

- Oral communication
- Written communication
- Critical thinking
- Working in teams

Better preparation for graduates entering the workplace

Improved teaching practice

- Inter-disciplinary discussions and considerations about the how and why of teaching in addition to what is taught
  - Shifting away from lecture dominance
  - More authentic assessment
  - Balancing theory and practice

- Desire to learn more about the other discipline and ways to improve teaching
  - Innovative practice examples at bi-monthly forum
  - Use of studio for peer-feedback
  - Promoting a community of practice surrounding teaching
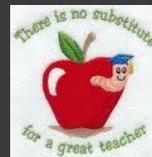
Where to from here?

- Important these suggestions move beyond recommendations to an implementation phase

- Commitment to critically reflective practice to improve student learning outcomes vital

- Although early in the process, valuable insights have been attained already

- Although our example relates to Social Work and Social Policy, similar benefits could be attained through exposing Psychology students to other inter-disciplinary perspectives, i.e. Health Sciences.

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Thank you

Questions or comments?

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