Getting connected: Principles and theories that mean any time anywhere works for students!

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Abstract:

New Zealand’s modern tertiary landscape is indeed a new world – Te Ao Hou – and tertiary teaching includes both career academics as well as those recruited for their content knowledge and expertise who may have little teaching experience or qualifications. Preparing early career educators effectively for the challenges of twenty-first century learning and virtual environments and an increasingly diverse student body requires professional development tools that deliver practical and useful guides. Goalposts, arranged as a series of ten one-page summaries, aims to distil the complex theories and principles that underpin the pedagogy of higher education teaching. This resource includes a glossary and interweaves practical applications that support evidence based teaching in any setting. Goalposts is designed to assist new teachers and those who support them to: design effective learning activities underpinned by theory; offer a resource for reflecting on and developing practice; and provide a starting point for further reading and study about learning and teaching.

In 2014, Ako Aotearoa has been offering workshops to disseminate this resource entitled Teaching Tips Two. To date ninety-four tertiary teachers and staff developers have participated in these workshops and the resource has also been sold independently in an online shop. This presentation will highlight our learning and reflection in developing and disseminating Goalposts, including early feedback from participants that will be of interest to teachers, staff developers, managers and leaders in the tertiary setting.

Developing the resource –A six year journey

Improving academic outcomes for all learners remains a high priority in the education sector, both on an institutional and a national level. In 2006, New Zealand’s Ministry of Education, established Ako Aotearoa, the National Center for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, as a specialist body to fund and disseminate research related to improving teaching and learning in adult and tertiary education. A Creative Commons licensing and publishing platform and a national register of educational research facilitates the
sharing of ideas and learnings across the breadth of the sector (see http://akoaoaotearoa.ac.nz/).

The *Goalposts* resource described in this paper was created following the development and evaluation of its forerunner *Signposts*; these development projects received three funding grants from Ako Aotearoa: first in 2008 to conduct a needs analysis for novice teachers, review existing options and develop the *Signposts* resource; second, one year later, to conduct national evaluation research, assessing the resource’s usefulness and current applications, and identifying strategies for its expansion and improvement; and third, in 2012 to develop a follow-on resource, *Goalposts*, to provide an introduction to the theories and principles underpinning adult learning and education. Each phase has been subject to rigorous peer-review as well as field pilots with the target audience of new higher education professionals, including tertiary teachers and managers, learning and academic advisors, and staff developers. Two key tenets of Ako Aotearoa’s vision are quality outcomes for learners and collaboration. Drawing on a network of regional staff developers, we began our partnership with eight team members from three institutions; by the evaluation phase of the project, other colleagues had expressed an interest in participating, and the project team expanded to include five Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs). Over the six years, further changes occurred with retirement, job disestablishments, restructuring and role change, so that the new team assembled to draft and review *Goalposts* in 2012 had just three original members among its 13 contributors, encompassing eight organisations, including universities and Private Training Establishments (PTE’s). This paper tracks these developments and challenges, our learning, and reflection following dissemination activities designed to assist new tertiary teachers to link theory to practice and ultimately improve the experiences for their learners.

**Responding to the sector and literature**

The purpose of *Goalposts* is to provide an introduction of the theories and principles of adult learning and tertiary teaching. There is a growing body of evidence in the literature that student success is increased when educators have some exposure to, and awareness of, the pedagogy of teaching and learning (Mane & Snelling, 2011; Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby, & Zepke, 2004). These authors state that part of
being an effective facilitator of learning means understanding students and how they learn best in order to design more meaningful learning experiences for them. Viskovic (2006) further observed that there has been little discussion of how teachers’ conceptions of learning and teaching or attitudes or practices have developed. She reports that new tertiary teachers appear to rely mainly on tacit experiential knowledge and do not have a strong theory-based understanding of their own teaching.

Lodge, Bosanquet and Mathews (2012) report in their survey of 522 early career academics that 40% had not engaged in any teaching development. This finding also supports Leach’s (2011) position in her paper *Tertiary teachers and theory avoidance*, noting that despite the role of theory in many courses that educators teach themselves, they avoid consulting/engaging with theory to inform and enhance their own teaching practice. She suggests in response that tertiary teacher educators need to, “make strong links between theory and their practice, emphasising the practical value of theory” (p.87).

To enhance the practical value of theory, Beckett and Hager (2002) identify that formal propositional learning (from taught courses) needs to be matched by informal learning in the workplace. Much ‘informal learning’ is facilitated in teams by more experienced members and by managers who may not be well versed with theories and principles of effective learning and teaching. Bolton, Petrov and Gosling (2008), and Quinlan (2014) all suggest that mainstream higher education research on leadership largely overlooks educational (teaching and learning) leadership roles of both informal and formal leaders in higher education.

Many smaller tertiary education organisations which may not have staff developers or equivalent roles, relying instead on managers’ knowledge and skill in tertiary teaching, need visible attention to teaching and learning leadership and models for new teaching staff.

There is a large body of literature internationally, including web-based information and packages, to support new tertiary teachers entering the sector. Their first contact with support is usually some form of employment induction. The purpose of induction is to help new staff identify the rules of their new workplaces and equip them to operate
effectively within it (Staniforth & Harland, 2006; Trowler & Knight, 2000). Many tertiary organisations in New Zealand require completion of a certificate (such as a Certificate in Adult and Tertiary Education) within one to two years of starting their new role. The current Targeted Review of Qualifications will lead to new programmes for this purpose (Ministry of Education, 2012). Often such programmes are not available at times suitable around teaching and other obligations and new teachers may not be able to get release time to attend (Baume, Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2005). Tools and resources such as Signposts and Goalposts can assist in bridging the gap until a tertiary teacher education programme can be accessed.

What is agreed in the literature is that effective new tertiary teaching development occurs when individuals work in teams, have opportunities to practice, reflect on their progress and receive constructive feedback and coaching (Fullan, 2001). Viskovic (2006) also found informal, workplace learning is a major factor in becoming a tertiary teacher. The Goalposts resource was proposed to assist this informal ‘space’ and create an introductory guide which would be self-explanatory and unintimidating and easily accessible through Ako Aotearoa’s website. Distilling the large and ever-increasing literature down to the 10 one-page primers consistent with the Signposts presentation was quite a lengthy process. Ideas about learning are continually evolving, and further, many of the commentators in the field have developed their own taxonomies. For example, Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2005) listed six principles; Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DoPietro and Norman (2010), seven; Calloway (2009), eight; and Cercone (2008), thirteen. As well as principles, there are concepts, models and philosophies related to adult learning and in particular, attempts to reflect 21st Century pedagogies, such as e-technologies, blended learning delivery, and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

Following an extensive literature review, recurring themes and central concepts were identified and organised into the following ten topic groupings:

- Prior knowledge and experience
- Importance of culture and the NZ context
- Respectful partnerships and relationships
- Autonomous and independent
• Goals and motivation
• Relevant and practical
• Learning styles and ways of thinking
• Critical reflection
• Environment for learning
• Change and transformative learning

Our first draft of the 10 one-page primers, along with a Glossary of terms and an Appendix of examples for practical application, was sent out for consultation to our original project team and through various professional communities to which the researchers belong. We developed a feedback matrix tool for our reviewers to assess the resource that included our own specific areas of inquiry as developers. In response we received very detailed suggestions from 13 colleagues from a range of institutions, both national and international. The overall feedback was extremely positive and included a level of detail about individuals’ preferred theorists and models that was so extensive that the collated comments ran to more than twice the number of pages of the resource itself.

Following analysis from our reviewers, we completed a series of revisions to the content and format including re-ordering the 10 one-page summaries and expanding the introduction. The resource was then piloted with 10 new tertiary teachers from four different organisations as representatives of our target audience. Again, feedback was consistently positive, and several members of the focus groups told us that they wished they had received this on their first day in the job and how useful it would be for quick reference. Two participants were especially positive in reading the brief scene-setting outline about the central role of Māori culture, te reo and tikanga in all public education policy, and told us that coming from overseas, it was often very hard to know where to start in developing their own understanding of responding to Māori student achievement. All agreed that the theory was important as they developed their own philosophy of practice, but that it was the examples of application and enactment in the Appendix which were most helpful. New teaching and learning practitioners want to make learning exciting and fun for their students but too often have little idea how to do so.
Finally, after some minor adjustments to accommodate the pilot participants’ feedback, the first edition of *Goalposts* was submitted to the Ako Aotearoa review panel, and following sign off, was published on their website. In 2014, Ako Aotearoa contracted the resource developers to offer a series of workshops called *Teaching Tips Two* around New Zealand, to further disseminate the resource and assist new tertiary teachers, managers and administrators in its use.

**What have we discovered from dissemination and conversations with tertiary teachers and managers?**

The two resources designed for early career tertiary teachers, *Signposts* and *Goalposts*, are part of the professional development (PD) programme currently offered by Ako Aotearoa as *Teaching Tips One and Two*. The intention of this PD is to help new tertiary teachers build confidence, and to become more reflective practitioners as they develop personal approaches based on their experiences, linking evidence from research literature. Disseminating these resources and getting feedback from participants about what they believe they will utilise in their practice, and then measuring possible student outcome, has been illuminating. The focus of the remainder of the paper is on the feedback from participants in *Goalposts* workshops facilitated by the authors as *Teaching Tips Two* in 2014.

**Workshop planning and evaluative data and comments**

Ninety-four tertiary teachers attended *Teaching Tips Two* workshops during the first semester of 2014. As facilitators we were supplied with pre-workshop material collected by the Ako Aotearoa Regional Hub managers from enrolled participants outlining their current issues and what they hoped to achieve from attending. This was used to guide our planning and delivery. In planning and creating the workshops we aimed to be as interactive as possible, including our own audio-visual snapshots of tertiary teachers in their learning environments. We recognised the wide scope of learning environments across the sector, from small groups to large lecture theatres. In the workshop, we utilise the ten *Goalposts* topic pages to engage participants in reading a focused part of the material. Following a general introduction, we then distribute the resource and allocate each of the ten one-page topics, pointing out the practice examples in the later section of the resource. Participants are invited to read their allocated topic,
summarise a point of interest or relate the topic to their own practice, and share with the group. Using large posters for each of the themes, we guide participants to present their area of interest/summary and inspire others in the group to add further ideas and examples of classroom applications. We plan to collect additional examples of practice relating to each of the ten topics to add to Goalposts at its next iteration and thus enhance the resource. To conclude we show a short video of students being interviewed identifying teaching practices that best supported their learning, to reflect on what we had gathered and shared during the workshop.

As is standard Ako Aotearoa practice, participants completed a paper-based workshop evaluation that was later collated and supplied to us as facilitators. The findings are as follows:

- 100% of participants rated the dissemination workshop “very high quality” or “high quality” while 94% rated it “very valuable” or “valuable”; only 6% rated below this.

The next feedback question asked, “What aspect of the workshop did you find most beneficial?”

- Participants answered very fully with comments that included: “new ideas”, “the Goalposts resource itself”, “sharing and networking”, “discussions, observations and practical examples”, “new techniques from presenters and participants”, “group work”, “videos and critiquing”, “reinforce what they already did/knew”, and “seeing and hearing students”. Participants also stated that they appreciated: feeling included with something to offer, up to date material, strategies to improve the variety in their teaching, listening to participants about how they dealt with scenarios, structure of workshop and facilitator’s knowledge and approachability.

When asked, “What aspect of your practice do you expect to change as a result of the workshop?” we received a range of responses. For ease of analysis these have been organised in key themes: Māori and cultural learning; preparation; student engagement; learning environment; and developing self to pass on improvement.

1. The Māori and cultural learning theme included comments such as, “being more open”, “invite Māori speakers to engage with Māori learners”, “improve my own knowledge.”
2. The preparation theme included more attention to planning, structure, organisation, multiple delivery activities, pre-lecture YouTube videos and more breaks. One participant commented “I plan to get as much theory as possible out and turn it into practical learning.” Another comment was “being more explicit with classroom structure – brain writing exercises, and capture attention.”

3. The student engagement theme included increased focus on prior learning, learning activities, more responsibility for active learning, presentations and group collaboration, effective feedback, and improving questioning techniques. Participants’ comments included: “I am going to prepare students for focused work – next 20 minutes we will focus on”, “lectures will be more engaging and I am going to use multiple delivery styles to target different learning” and “more student focus and less of me, small chunks of knowledge.”

4. The learning environment theme included using music, change of pace and trying new things (variety, humour, icebreakers, thinking activities and quizzes). Additional comments included: “my delivery, slowing down and not trying to put so much into students’ heads – video made me realise this” and “ensure hands on in all sessions some way.”

5. The developing self to pass on improvement theme includes comments such as, “to observe others and share myself, improve introductions with student and reflect on practice.” Further comments included “offer new ideas and strategies to other staff members to use”, “observing and listening to the practice of others”, “reframing my concept of adult learning and build on relationships”, “use more motivational techniques”, “keep trying new things” and “passing the 10 principles on to other tutoring staff.”

The final question relating to the workshop asked, “How will you measure these changes have resulted in learner benefits?”

The largest response of 51 (more than half of the participants) ticked “learner evaluations”, with 44 choosing “observation”, 36 “learner assessment results”, 19 “learner interviews/focus groups”, 18 “employer industry satisfaction” and
In this section “other” was also provided for addition measurement tools and single responses included “self-assessment”, “reflective practice” “more engaged students”, “online forum discussions” and “peer evaluations”.

This feedback demonstrates a strong reliance on student evaluation as an indication that “changes have resulted in learner benefits”. Prebble et al. (2004) suggest that student evaluation of teaching is a reasonable predictor of effective teaching, yet Jensen (2011, p.33) suggests that student evaluations are “controversial and difficult to interpret” and suggests other tools are needed. The link between student’s positive evaluation and learner benefit is moot, yet the strong response recorded here suggests that these participants (the majority being relatively new tertiary teachers) are focused and highly aware of the importance of improving their practice and receiving positive student evaluations.

**Where to from here, post dissemination?**

Follow-up mechanisms are needed to see if the changes noted by participants extend into their learning environments, are reflected upon and talked about in their teams and schools and ultimately improve outcomes for their students. Developing and evaluating resources to support new tertiary teachers has been professionally and personally rewarding. The opportunity for further inquiry and review to enhance and customise these resources remains an important aspect of continual improvement and reflection. Ako Aotearoa’s Creative Commons licence means that users “are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work as well as to remix, tweak, and build upon this work non-commercially, as long as you credit the author/s and license your new creations under the identical terms”. We know that colleagues have added pages to cover specific technologies, activities or techniques, and others have adapted the resource to the ethos of their organisation, for example a bible college.

Shulman (2000) suggests that the scholarship of teaching is communal in the sense of professional obligation to pass on what we have learnt as individuals. In facilitating the dissemination workshops we have had a highly effective opportunity to see the work come to life – interpreted and reinterpreted – which has assisted our reflection on the
ongoing improvement of this resource for new tertiary teachers. In further writing Shulman and Hutchings (2004, cited in Kahn et al, 2013), believe,

…by making one’s own work as an educator available to others through collaboration we are not only keeping with the original tenets of the scholarship of teaching, we can move from describing individual practices to surfacing theories and principles that are collective, shared and disciplinary (p. 902).

For managers and staff developers, Goalposts provides an excellent starting point for team/school discussions about collective and shared knowledge and contextual practices that support and encourage new tertiary teachers. In the same way, each page could form the basis of a mentoring conversation, or excerpts could be included as helpful tips in internal newsletters, with a link to the full resource.

**Importance of collaboration and relationships – Ako Aotearoa**

We close this paper by sharing some of our own learning as a result of involvement in three rounds of Ako Aotearoa funded projects, resource development and evaluation and dissemination. First and foremost would be the importance of a strong working relationship of trust and respect amongst collaborators and the national agency. Under the management framework of Ako Aotearoa, frequent communication and liaison with our Regional Hub manager throughout the proposal, feedback, milestone reports, submission, reviews, and publication and evaluation phases of the three projects has developed unique learning opportunities and capability in all team members. Further contributing factors to success include: a wide-ranging consultation and a readiness to seek feedback from colleagues across the sector; being prepared to write, and rewrite, and to keep sharing drafts to ensure accuracy – particularly around theories of effective Māori approaches including Te Kotahitanga and Kaupapa Māori; thorough testing and documentation of all stakeholder responses at different phases; and strategic partnerships within and external to our own organisation to ensure high visibility and interest. Opportunities to grow new relationships and to experience different approaches to the provision of professional development offer workplace satisfaction and personal gains in research capability and project management (Honeyfield & Fraser, 2012).
Conclusion
The primary objective of this six year journey has been to develop, disseminate and evaluate resources for new tertiary teachers to assist in improving outcomes for learners. The presentation of these resources is a deliberate attempt to provide quick reference guides which are brief, easily accessed and written in simple language – and which can be used by new tertiary teachers, managers and learning advisors directly and do not require a formalised delivery by a teaching and learning expert.

New tertiary teachers and those who support and manage them have to navigate increasingly complex and diverse student and organisational requirements and resources like Signposts and Goalposts assist them to consider theories, principles, dispositions and practices, and to contextualise these. At the same time, these resources were not designed to replace a formal tertiary teaching educational programme. There is evidence that, “through sustained programmes of educational development, that attends to teachers’ conceptions and links theory with practice, academics can learn to use these principles effectively in designing learning environments for students” (Simon & Pleschova, 2013, cited in Quinlan 2014, p. 33).

Tertiary education is increasingly complex and diverse, and initiatives to increase participation and open entry are seen as responding to the importance of the social goal of tertiary education to address social inequity. Our challenge is to better use these new resources for professional learning and development to grow the knowledge, skills and practices our students need. Above all, we must retain our focus on our early career tertiary teachers as they negotiate the complex field of learning and teaching knowledge, pedagogy and practice: they are our students and their whanau’s future.

References


