UWI SCHOOL OF EDUCATION BIENNIAL CONFERENCE









Adventures in building a learning community: Experiences in reformulating a course in educational foundations

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### Introduction

- Implementation of innovations in a first year M.Ed. course in educational foundations titled
   Education and the Development of Social Competencies.
- Social competencies are attitudes, dispositions and capabilities that teachers should know in learning how to be social beings as opposed to being antisocial



#### Introduction

- Dissatisfaction with the expected outcomes
  - enduring isolated individualistic stance,
  - emphasis on academic rather than lived experiences

led us to re-fashion the structure of the course.

The content remained the same but more emphasis was placed <u>on encouraging</u> <u>students to take more responsibility for</u> <u>their learning and developing their own</u> <u>competencies</u>



### **Previous Schedule**

#### 2010 and before -

- Sessions including overview, 9 lectures, tutorials and a wrap up session
- Each of the 3 disciplines had three
   1 ½ hour lectures followed by a
  - 1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hour break out tutorial session
- Assignment was an integrated coursework essay



#### New Schedule: The Innovation 2011 and 2012

- sessions including overview, 3 online and 1 wrap up session
- 3 one hour disciplinary lectures followed by two hour break out tutorial and scheduled unsupervised tutorial
- Assignments were a <u>dramatic</u> presentation and written <u>group</u> coursework assignment









# EDFA 6207. Calendar / Schedule of sessions; Mondays 4:30 – 7:30pm

Sessi on	Dates	Description of Sessions	Assignments
1	3 <sup>rd</sup> Sept/ 2012	Plenary in main lecture venue. Overview – SG Task given based on the overview. Bio data Form to be given out.	Related readings from the Foundation Areas put up on my e- Learning. Assignment 1 given out (15%)
2	10 <sup>th</sup> Sept	In break-out rooms & Tobago room, student groups meet managed by tutors to discuss Assignment 1.	
3	17 <sup>th</sup> Sept	In break-out rooms & Tobago room, groups meet on their own to develop their presentation for the next session.	
4	1 <sup>st</sup> Oct	Plenary in main lecture venue – with video conferencing. Student assignment 1 presentations with discussion and debriefing	



#### **Literature Review**

- Gabelnick et al (1990) curricular structures
- Lave & Wenger (1991) Community of Practice – social learning
- Wenger (1998) research based on Piagetian constructivism and information processing paradigms
- Leibold, Probst & Gibbert (2002) Curricular learning communities



#### **Literature Review**

- Taylor et al (2003), Price (2005) coherent curricular, high quality learning, to live in a diverse, complex global world.
- McNamara (2009) stages outlining the behaviour of group members, how the group evolves as it fulfills its purpose.
- Armstrong (2012) adults taking individual responsibility tend to remember things, however people put in groups tend to lose their individual responsibility.



#### **Research Question**

How comfortable are students and lecturers with the efforts at building a learning community (over the period 2011-2012 and 2012-2013) during the course Education and the Development of Social Competencies?



#### Sample

N=

- 3 lecturers
- 3 tutors
- Approximately 100 students (58 students from 2011 and 50 students from 2012)



## **Type of study**

 A qualitative case study approach/method, exploring experiences of a bounded group of persons incorporating feelings, perceptions and observations



## **Data Collection**

- Staff reflections (6)
- Student group evaluations, for 2 years (100)
- Student peer evaluations, for 2 years (108)
- Open-ended questionnaires, for 2 years (16)
- 2012 assignment II group reflections (13 groups)



#### **Data Analysis**

- Thematic analysis
   Codes
  - Categories









### Data Analysis

**Codes/Themes Statements Difficulties/challenges with groupwork** Logistics of meeting The main challenge was the synchronizing of time and deadlines of 50 7 professionals who work full-time, and who each have different work, study, family and social responsibilities. I had to actively listen to ideas being thrown out and try to 2 The wide variety of perspectives – understand what was being said from a different perspectives difficult to know how to move forward Members who lack communication 5 Slackers, free loaders, bullies. skills, who do not participate, who are authoritarian 'the workload was on the devotees'; The 2<sup>nd</sup> Assignment uncovered the 15 'some persons felt the end of the assigned task meant the end of challenges - some did not the assignment': work in a timely fashion, "The saying a promise is a comfort to a fool proved applicable as a some did not work, some only few members still showed little commitment"; focused on their parts Two members dropped out of the program early. Later on close to Dropouts 4 the 2<sup>nd</sup> assignment another member dropped out. It meant that the remaining members had more to do.

#### General experience of being in the group

Joy, fun, laughter, camaraderie	21	' a class to remember'
Collaboration	11	A good feeling when all co-operated to accomplish tasks; we shared a symbiotic relationship which in itself produced a synergistic relationship"
Assignment 1- everybody fell easily into the tasks; all-round participation and enjoyment	21	The first assignment was wonderful and everybody contributed unreservedly.



### <u>Findings</u>: Learning Community

#### Lecturers' & Tutors' Perspectives



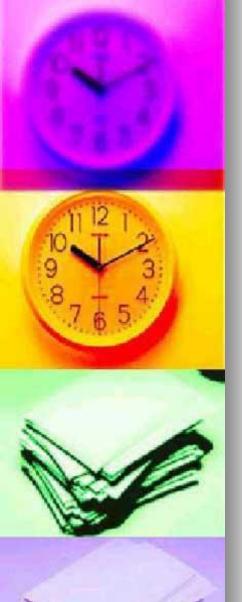
## Thrown in at the Deep End

serious mismatches that presented many obstacles to the stability of the group and sanity of some of the members

 to interact with new people of different ages and genders and backgrounds...this only stressed me out because I only wanted to be with my friends...Let people choose their own groups and the quality of work may improve

•It took us a while to understand each other and use each others' strength

• Things sparked because of mis-communication. There were cliques. Leaders need to listen too. At first I felt unaccepted and unappreciated.



## Finding yourself: Swimming!

- through e-mails, telephone and even Skype we innovatively had cyber meetings and so were able to get tasks done.
- drama was not my strength. But the group pulled me along ...
- the group emanated a positive attitude off which all members were able to feed and resuscitate themselves
- the group work was quite amazing. I believe we were able to put into practice what we were encountering in the [course] material
- I have come to have greater respect for group work
  - •a class to remember!



## **Getting into difficulties!**

- the workload was on the devotees
- the saying a promise is a comfort to a fool proved applicable as a few members still showed little commitment [after group meeting to discuss workload]
- we recognized the need for persistent teamwork despite the overwhelming temptation to succumb to feelings of frustration and helplessness.
- 'just breathe' and things will work out
- I learnt that I had more patience than I sometimes give myself credit for

I quarrelled with no one, which shocked me. Perhaps the greatest thing I learnt from the whole process is patience.







#### SOS

This particular experience raised some questions that I'm not sure I have the answers to: -

"How do you know when someone is actually giving of their best?"



"What do you do if their best just isn't cutting it – do you give them a bligh and let it slide, or do you take the hard line?"

A part of me says: "Keep the focus on the bottom line. If the requirement is not being met.....tough. Give them the axe. Nothing personal. If you're supposed to deliver "X" and you didn't deliver "X", you've failed – regardless of the reason."

However there is another part of my psyche – maybe it's the special educator in me – that says "I'm supposed to be a bit more understanding and accommodating".

There should be some way to assess people's potential, some exact science, a scale maybe, that determines what can reasonably be expected of an individual given a specific circumstance, so we can be sure that we're not judging individuals unfairly and that they're not using sob stories to get one over on us.



## Drowning

I really did not see much of the social competencies ...coming out. I saw group bullies in two forms the 'egotistic' and the very 'laidback'. I have seen the usefulness of social competencies in its absence.

I learnt that I hate it when people do not step up and do what they are supposed to do.

...some of the members of my group were simply looking for the easy way out. Although they did not want to do the work, they somehow miraculously expect to get good marks. I was never a fan of group work and this has not changed.

I was disappointed with the group. The leader did not consider the opinions of others. Two members became obnoxious and overbearing via email.



### **POST MORTEM**



### CONTENT

Students described "social competencies" in terms of -

- Knowledge "awareness of / understanding what social competencies are and how to use them"; "sensitize participants on educational issues"
  - Skills "problem solving", "role modeling", "cooperation", "communication", "team work", "strategies for developing competencies in students", and,
  - Attitudes/ Dispositions -
    - respectful relations with others e.g. students;
    - to develop in course participants, anti-discriminatory people skills particularly in relation to children in class;
    - to understand prejudice in self and others;
    - being a reflective educational practitioner;
    - tolerance and trust;
    - to empower participants toward self-propelled [professional] development.



#### **Content cont'd**

This course ...was not challenging enough for students at the Masters level...seemed to be revisiting things I learnt as a child such as respect and tolerance ....students used to make jokes about this course saying it was a "make up course" because of the lack of content.



#### **Content cont'd**

Having been a teacher for 21 years I have realized during my teaching career that having these important competencies helps build meaningful relationships with colleagues, parents and students that can have lifelong positive consequences...it paves the way for peace within families, communities and society as a whole.



#### Structure

- discussion sessions allowed application of theory to real cases, instead of just looking at abstract ideas...
- one of the best courses because of its relevance and practical nature
- mixing up the members by gender, age, ethnicity ... helped us to 'live' the course
- [Course organization] makes practicality a second function to content knowledge ...
- the manner in which the course was organized did not afford us enough time with our tutor



#### One student's summing up:

The journey came to a bitter sweet end as it was not until the end that group members became more aware of each other's skills, knowledge, attitudes and sensitivities







# What did students learn about self?

- I can suppress personal likes for the harmony of the group. A leader could be a follower sometimes. I developed technical skills.
- I am willing to extend myself to get the job done.
- Now I am more proficient at multitasking and I can maintain composure in challenges.
  - I developed tolerance.
- I can trust others without compromising my standards.
- I am empathetic.
- I have much to offer.
- I have a voice and my ideas are useful.
- I left my comfort zone and showed creativity.
- I am able to work with a variety of personalities and remain calm.



#### CONTENT/STRUCTURE

I have been worried about content being compromised in the swing toward practical workshop type activities since this requires lecture periods being replaced with tutorial and group activity sessions although there is some supplementing with online tasks



#### CONTENT/STRUCTURE

The removal of the plenary lecture (welcome though that is) seriously jeopardizes the amount of content knowledge that students will have at their disposal. One may suggest that we give them detailed sources about readings rather than just a list of texts but in general they do not read that much. They are teachers during the day and the course was conceived in such a way that they are required to do work on site and collaborate about working together when they are not on site exactly because they do not have much 'free' time in their schedules.



#### CONTENT/STRUCTURE

The major complaint I received from my students is that they were unable to efficiently differentiate the content as to whether it was psychology, philosophy and sociology. While in the past, three lectures were held in each area, students ... had a better grasp on the content and probably ...were able to integrate it better in the assignment and examination



#### Lecturers'/Tutors' Reflections Assessment

- Traditionally students were given an extended essay for course work. While this had some advantages for some students who preferred or were better at writing, it only tapped into a particular skill level.
- With the new format, students are provided with multiple avenues to express themselves in the new approach to assessment.
  - •... with the final assessment being a group activity, students move beyond a theoretical approach to addressing issues but have the opportunity to experience these challenges first hand and connect better with the ideas generated in this course.

 Unlike some of the other subjects that students are required to do, this approach allows students to experience firsthand the ideas generated by this approach.



#### The Peer Assessment

... in the few cases where several members of a group seemed to identify a loafer in the group, the loafer did not score themselves any lower than any other members in the group. What does this say for selfdiscovery, being true to self and developing the social competency of honesty and taking responsibility for your actions? Hmmm.



#### **Re-incarnation?**

Logistical issues
Implications for SOE
Implications for the wider system



## Thank You