



CHAPTER 4

Protecting the learning space: reflective insights on the role of academic administration in extended programmes in the sciences

[Gwen Raitt \(University of the Western Cape\)](#)

Introduction

The different roles and responsibilities of those working in the university is typically divided using the rather simplistic distinction between administrators and academics. This rudimentary division, however, masks the interdependency of these roles and the activities of both administrators and academics for ensuring the academic integrity of courses and importantly, the quality of the student learning experience. Since the academic role attracts more status in the university, the significance and centrality of the multiple and complex administrative activities that occur in the shadow of any course or larger academic programme, especially undergraduate ones, often go unrecognised. Strong administrative and course-coordinating activities can sometimes hold the key to the successful implementation of curriculum and pedagogic innovation. In this chapter, I make a case for the significance of my specialised role as academic coordinator for one of the signature courses of the extended programme, *Introduction to Science*, in the Faculty of Natural Science at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

As the course coordinator, I inhabit a somewhat non-traditional position as I infrequently come face-to-face with ECP students in the classroom as a lecturer might, yet I play a central role in protecting the learning space for the more than 240 ECP students in the faculty. I offer a description of the course *Introduction to Science*, which attempts to support ECP students in their transition to the academic communication, literacy and cultural practices of the university and the specific disciplinary discourses of the science qualifications in which students are enrolled. I also explain the main functions and activities associated with my role before describing two critical incidents that highlight some of the complexities around staff relations which challenge my attempts to protect the learning space in the *Introduction to Science* course. By offering my reflective insights on these events, I highlight how the academic coordinating role is a fundamental element required to maintain the academic integrity of the course.

ECP in the Faculty of Natural Science

In the Faculty of Natural Science, the curriculum design of all the ECP offerings follows the augmented model where the students complete a combination of specialised extended and normal first year mainstream courses over the first two years of their degree programme. There are nine degree programmes with an ECP pathway and these are divided into the two main streams of Physics and Life Sciences. Table 4.1 below illustrates which degree programmes have an ECP component in the faculty. In the first year of study, students complete ECP-specific courses which are common depending on the chosen stream. When they reach their second year of study, students complete a combination of ECP and normal mainstream courses which are particular to their specific stream and degree programme.

Table 4.1 Overview of ECP degree programmes in the Faculty of Natural Sciences at UWC

Physics Stream	Life Science Stream
Applied Geology Chemistry Computer Science Mathematics and Statistics Physics	Biodiversity and Conservation Biology Biotechnology Earth and Water Science Medical Bioscience

Introduction to Science is the only compulsory course for students across all the ECP degree programmes in the faculty. It can therefore be regarded as a faculty, rather than departmental, course.

Introduction to Science: curriculum and pedagogic intentions

When the course was piloted in 2011, it was positioned as a means of addressing the ‘articulation gap’ between the schooling the students have completed and the expectations of the university regarding the academic practices, psycho-affective dispositions and social and cultural capitals seen as central for student integration and success within the university. In its contemporary configuration, *Introduction to Science* continues to promote the previous agenda of the ECP project to enable access and success for students. This occurs through the careful integration of core academic and study literacies alongside supporting students’ transitions. Giving attention to these areas is seen as enabling students who are completing an ECP pathway to develop the competencies, dispositions and practices valued both in the university and the science disciplines more generally. The main curriculum and pedagogic intentions of this course are to continue to provide students with scaffolded learning support.

The course content addresses five main topic areas: academic literacy, quantitative literacy, information literacy, computer literacy and life skills training

(see Table 4.2 for an overview of these topic areas). These topics are, however, presented in an integrated manner to avoid fragmentation or the creation of content silos. The organisation of the curriculum has therefore demanded strong collaboration between disciplinary departments to ensure the development and inclusion of relevant discipline-based content. The assessment strategies closely align with the integrated nature of the curriculum and great emphasis is placed on providing formative assessment opportunities in the classroom. Summative assessments are managed through transparent and clear rubrics. Furthermore, assessment feedback is conceptualised not as an afterthought, but as an essential part of student learning development. Written comments that offer the student guidance on areas of achievement while identifying areas requiring further development is a crucial part of the assessment approach. Students also complete an assessment portfolio. This portfolio acts as a repository able to track and represent a student's learning journey over the duration of completing the course. The portfolio allows students to record their learning experiences and their perceptions and reflections on what or how they are learning. This record-keeping function has the intended purpose of helping students to identify the nature of their learning and cognitive development. As the academic year progresses, the tasks for the portfolio become incrementally more demanding and students are required to take more responsibility for the quality of their learning activities. They must also provide increasingly sophisticated motivations for why and how their portfolio inclusions show that they are developing the attributes of a university graduate.

Table 4.2 *Content topics for Introduction to Science*

Academic Literacy	Quantitative Literacy	Information Literacy	Computer Literacy	Life Skills Training
Assist students to develop their critical academic reading, writing and communicative skills and abilities. Expose students to the core academic discourses and practices linked to science disciplines, e.g. annotation.	Introduce students to the use and understanding of quantitative data in science disciplines.	Introduce students to finding information using the internet and library resources, judging the credibility of sources and learning how to reference sources and avoid plagiarism.	Build students' confidence to work on a computer and other technologies and to use various software programmes to create assignments in different subjects.	Assist students to build resilience, develop positive study skills and cope with everyday stresses through addressing various psycho-social and affective topics. This aspect is facilitated by experienced counsellors.

Two distinct theoretical strains underpin the curriculum and pedagogic intentions of the course: social constructivism and reflective learning. As a result, attention is given to creating enabling social contexts for learning and encouraging students to take a more central role in their own learning, while the lecturer is given the role of the facilitator of this learning. Students are organised in groups and are urged to make sense of and construct their own understanding of knowledge with the help of the facilitator. Emphasis is placed on helping students to become independent and responsible learners able to seek out and effectively use the multiple resources available at the university. The curriculum aims to develop reflective learners through processes which promote awareness of meta-thinking and learning strategies. Reflective learning (Moon 2005) is incorporated pedagogically through reflective discussions that happen individually or in teams and through reflective writing, which is frequently a component of many classroom and assessment tasks.

Team teaching approach

The complex and integrated nature of the curriculum and the fact that it caters for students from multiple disciplines in the faculty has necessitated a rather innovative, non-traditional teaching arrangement. The pedagogic delivery uses a team-teaching approach and more than 40 staff members can make up the teaching team for the course, depending on student numbers in any given year. The different roles in this expanded team are organised as follows:

Table 4.3 *Overview of the teaching team roles and responsibilities*

Role	Employment contract	General responsibilities
Coordinators (2)	Full-time lecturer contracts	Administration, design of activities, setting tests and examinations, oversight and quality assurance for the entire course
Teaching Assistants	Post-graduate students on part-time contracts	Designing classroom activities, running classes, facilitating in classes, giving feedback on activities, marking assessments, overseeing facilitators and tutors and moderating facilitator marking
Senior Facilitators	Post-graduate students on part-time contracts	Designing classroom activities, supporting the teaching assistant, giving feedback on activities, marking assessments, overseeing facilitators and moderating facilitator marking with the teaching assistant
Junior Facilitators	Mostly post-graduate students on work-study contracts	Facilitating in Academic Literacy classes, giving feedback on activities from these classes, marking term assessments and portfolios

Tutors	Mostly undergraduate students on work-study contracts	Facilitating in Computer Literacy and Quantitative Literacy classes, giving feedback on activities from these classes
--------	---	---

The students

University students at UWC, like elsewhere in South Africa and indeed globally, are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of their academic and social backgrounds and academic needs (Boud & Molloy 2013). This limits the kinds of assumptions academic teachers can make about their student cohorts. As the teaching team for the course, we recognise that a student's ability to qualify and gain entry to their degree programme at university suggests their potential and that, with careful and responsible support, they have a rightful place as a university student who is capable of success. The ECP students in the faculty typically arrive straight from high school, although some are repeating the course. While students arrive from all the provinces in South Africa, the most prominent languages spoken in our classes are Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa. Like many students who arrive at a South African university for the first time, many of our students face a range of non-academic challenges associated with being at university, such as financial constraints, living away from home and various psycho-social issues which impact on their abilities to focus on their studies. As many of the schooling backgrounds of our students involved highly didactic modes of knowledge transmission, students find the interactive pedagogies used in the classroom challenging. They also often find the lack of specific content a source of discomfort and there is often a disconnect between students' understanding of the tasks and the expectations of the teaching team. These issues or points of challenge have the net result that frequently students are unsure why they are completing the course and become resistant to the teaching and learning approaches promoted in it.

Highlighting my role as course coordinator

In this section, I describe how my role is essential in creating a protective and engaging learning space where the curriculum ideals can be realised. These ideals focus on helping students to fully engage and make sense of new knowledge, develop the necessary academic practices of their disciplines and ensure that they can become independent, but critical and effective learners. My primary responsibilities thus cohere around managing the people and the academic material resources that constitute the learning environment that defines the course. Both of these responsibilities require an enormous administrative commitment and, in offering this overview of what it means in practice, I hope to highlight the complex, but central position of academic administration that defines my academic labour.

Academic administration and oversight functions

- Alongside my colleagues, as one of the two coordinators, I am responsible for most of the curriculum revision and redesign activities. Together, the coordinators provide the necessary guidance for the development of lesson plans and classroom worksheets, and ensure that the teaching teams are suitably prepared for the weekly sessions.
- As coordinators, we devise most of the formative and summative assessments. I also mark the major summative exams, act as moderator for the various subject areas covered in the topic areas and take responsibility for marks administration.
- I have an oversight role in the training of the junior facilitators and help to ensure that they can understand and appropriately implement the pedagogic approaches that underpin our curriculum.
- When required, I must be able to ‘stand in’ for any member of the teaching teams and, in these instances, I interact and engage with students directly in class. I also deal with most student referrals from the teaching team and where necessary am available for student consultations to discuss any concerns they might have about their learning or progress in the course.
- Alongside my colleague, I recruit the different team members, oversee teaching budgets, schedule part-time hours, ensure that a full complement of facilitators, assistants and tutors are present at all sessions and deal with all teacher-student problems that might arise during the year. I also have consultations with members of the teaching team and help them navigate the various pedagogic and relational challenges they find in the classroom.

An appropriate way to conceptualise my role is as the custodian of establishing, developing and then maintaining a community of practice (Wenger 2011) constituted by the teaching team. Without such a strong community of practitioners who share common understandings, values and commitment to the overarching curriculum and pedagogic approaches, it would be almost impossible to create the integrated but also deeply responsive and supportive learning environment for our students. To illustrate the complexity associated with my role and highlight the crucial function of team management and the extent of administrative oversight that helps to ensure the smooth running of this course, I describe two incidents involving junior facilitators and then subject these to critical reflection

Finding suitable teaching team members

One Monday morning just before a session, my colleague and I arrived at a classroom session to find only the Teaching Assistant and the Senior Facilitator present. All the junior facilitators assigned to this session had not arrived and not one had sent a prior apology. My colleague and I quickly had to step in for the missing teaching team members during this session.

Finding enough facilitators for the academic year and especially for the academic and information literacy topics has become an increasingly onerous task. Mostly, our primary selection criterion is the facilitator's availability to fit their study schedule into our timetable allocations. We have a probationary period for all new facilitators, but this has proven to be a less effective screening mechanism to ensure that we have a group of reliable and committed staff members. The probationary period is, however, helpful in that it allows the teaching assistant and senior facilitator to assess the competencies of junior facilitators while they interact with the students in the classroom. This is something I am unable to assess through the normal job interview process. Sometimes, the probationary period helps potential facilitators to reach conclusions for themselves about their suitability for working as part of our teaching team. Sometimes, the facilitator resigns once they realise that they are not comfortable with the pedagogic organisation and teaching approaches we favour.

On reflection, the characteristics most valued for teaching team members are their willingness to adopt a strong work ethic and to learn, a sense of responsibility, and an indication of their capacity to care for others. Failing to arrive at a session without notifying the coordinator calls into question these characteristics. However, and unfortunately as the above incident highlights, these characteristics are frequently only made visible over time. With this insight, I am prompted to reconsider the recruitment processes and how best to manage the probation period so that it better serves my needs for selecting suitable facilitators while giving potential facilitators a more accurate view of our pedagogic practices as well as the work ethic and commitment required from them.

Awareness of teaching team needs

Part way into the year, a promising facilitator resigned because he was unable to balance the teaching workload of the course with the deadlines for his own studies. He returned the term assignments that were his responsibility unmarked. These scripts were then divided between the other members of the team.

Subjecting this incident to further reflection, what became clear was the demanding nature of the team teaching, the pedagogic approaches of the

course and the impact of the workload especially on our postgraduate and part-time team members. This particular staff member had integrated well into our community and had ‘ticked all the boxes’ when it came to interaction with students. However, there were clearly issues external to the academic or work environment of the *Introduction to Science* course that impacted on his capacity to fulfil his responsibilities. I realised that I had not always paid attention to the needs of my teaching staff, especially with respect to their ability to manage their studies and the demands of part-time work in the teaching team. I employ students at different levels of post-graduate study and this affects their availability at different times of the academic year. For example, Honours students have rather compact programmes and little control over the deadlines they must meet for their studies. They therefore often struggle to meet the timetable requirements and teaching demands of *Introduction to Science*. Master’s and Doctoral students have greater flexibility as their key deadlines are usually at fixed periods in the academic calendar. In addition to finding team members who match the ideal characteristics, this incident has highlighted the importance of being aware of all the other external academic pressures my team members may be facing and how these might impact on their teaching responsibilities.



REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION: Constraints placed on the teaching team community of practice

The reflective insights presented above point to the complicated, yet central, staff-relation function the coordinator role has to manage. This complexity is further amplified when budgetary constraints and attempts to manage the workloads of team members enter the fray. While the suitability and fit of individual teaching team members can only be ascertained over time and often only once the team itself has been established, when team members do default and fail to uphold the expected work ethic and accountability, the knock-on effect across the team can be dramatic. Budgetary pressures frequently mean that we cannot readily appoint additional staff to stand in or offset problems caused, for example, by absenteeism. The resulting impact on workloads, however, threatens the stability of the community and, more importantly, negatively affects the quality of teaching and learning provision. As student to facilitator ratios increase, the capacity of the facilitators to provide the necessary level of teaching quality, especially regarding feedback, is challenged. A secondary consequence is that competent and more suitable facilitators are placed in positions of strain, and the demands of their teaching roles come into conflict with their own study workloads, again threatening their willingness to remain part of the teaching team.

Conclusion

Previously, I noted that my role as course coordinator could be conceptualised as establishing, developing and maintaining the community of practice made up of the extended teaching team of *Introduction to Science*. My reflective review of this conceptualisation has identified the challenges associated with each of these functions and their interdependence when considered in the light of some of the staff-relation challenges I had to manage. The responsibility for enhancing the quality of students' learning experiences is frequently placed squarely on the lecturer who has to design and deliver course content and manage the teaching-learning interaction in the classroom. Yet as this case study illustrates, a strong argument can be made for the centrality of the multiple and varied academic administrative responsibilities required to ensure these very same objectives.

The compulsory course, *Introduction to Science*, is a specialised, innovative attempt to attend to a concern about students' transitions to university, by addressing the 'articulation gap' alongside the students' emergence into their various disciplinary knowledge practices. The curriculum and pedagogic arrangements required to realise these intentions therefore necessitated bold reconfigurations of the traditional 'lecturer' role. These arrangements follow from the historical context within the Natural Science Faculty and UWC described earlier. The augmented curriculum model has allowed for these combined configurations which create the necessary nurturing conditions in the current form of *Introduction to Science*.

While I am a recent member of the coordinating team, this reflection on my work and role as custodian of the community of teaching team practitioners has reaffirmed the significance of my academic and administrative activities in protecting the learning space for the extended curriculum students in the Sciences.

References

- Boud D & Molloy E (2013) What is the problem with feedback? In D Boud & E Molloy (eds). *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education*. London: Routledge
- Moon J (2001) *Reflection in higher education learning, PDP working paper 4*. LTSN Generic Centre: University of Exeter. Accessed November 2018, <https://nursing-midwifery.tcd.ie/assets/director-staff-edu-dev/pdf/PD-%20Working-Paper-4-Moon.pdf>
- Wenger E (2011) *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. STEP Leadership Workshop, October 2011, University of Oregon. Accessed November 2018, <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/11736>