

## Training for transformation

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### ABSTRACT

The Community Development and Engagement Courses in the Graduate Certificate of Community Relations (Resource Sector) aim to facilitate a transformation in the community relations practice of the participants and ultimately to support a shift to emergent community relations practice within the resources industry. This paper outlines the approach taken to the design and delivery of the courses to enable this transformation. The feedback from students during the courses and formal evaluations has indicated that for many students the courses have been instrumental in changing their approach to the community and to their role in the company.

This paper examines the factors underpinning the success of the programme as well some of the key learnings and changes to the curriculum made in response to student feedback. The key design elements of the programme include robust and supportive group and individual dialogue; integration of theory and practice and attention to practice methods and frameworks prior to focusing on techniques and skills.

A number of key learnings have emerged. These have resulted in changes to the courses including adapting workload to match the capacity of students; developing new on-line tools to build learning relationships and capacity for self reflection and the provision of tutorial assistance especially for Indigenous students.

Areas for further development of the programme have been identified including the importance of long-term evaluation of the impacts on the quality of community relations practice in the resources industry as a whole.

The paper argues that tertiary training of community relations practitioners in the methods of community development and engagement are fundamental to the transformation of company-community relationships for mutual benefit.

## INTRODUCTION

The Graduate Certificate in Community Relations (Resources Sector) commenced in 2008, as a result of an agreement between the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA) and the University of Queensland (UQ). The MCA provided initial funding to develop three courses for the Graduate Certificate and in 2009 provided further funds to extend the programme to Diploma and Masters level. These graduate programmes in community relations are designed to provide an avenue to professionalise the skills and knowledge of community relations practitioners working within the resources sector.

The graduate certificate programme is comprised of four courses including:

- Community Aspects of Mineral Developments
- Community Development for the Mining Industry
- Community Engagement for the Mining Industry
- Mining Projects and Indigenous Peoples (offered by a partner University, Australian National University)

The focus of this paper is the two courses on Community Development and Community Engagement. These courses are one of few online postgraduate qualifications in community development in Australia and the first on-line training in community development and community engagement for the Resources Sector internationally. Community development is a relationship centred discipline with effective two way communication and dialogue at the heart of the practice method. This poses challenges for teaching the discipline in an on-line environment where most of the communication is through writing and there is no chance for students to practice their face to face relationship skills in the classroom. Despite these challenges the courses have received very positive feedback from students and industry, with students reporting significant change in their community relations practice. Feedback from students and staff has highlighted the ingredients that have led to these positive outcomes as well as areas for further development.

“Here is my final assignment. It has been an emotional journey as you will read. I have never before experienced such a synergy between my work, study and family life, as I have completing this project. Thank you for the experience.” (Student working in medium sized Resource Company, Journal, 2010.)

The student’s stories of the challenges of practice in company settings highlight the importance of trained community relations professionals to support the momentum for change in company-community relations in the Resources Sector.

## METHODOLOGY

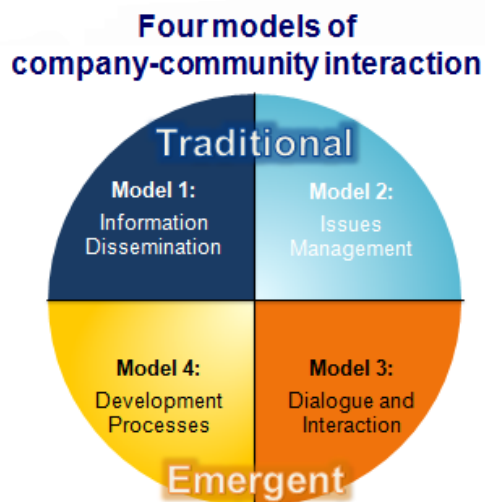
### Course content

The courses, Community Development for the Mining Industry and Community Engagement for the Mining Industry, are taught over two 13 week semesters.

### *Community Development and Mining*

Community Development course is taught in Semester one and is the foundation course. It focuses on Community Development Methods and Frameworks including helping students to understand the difference between Community Relations and Public Relations; people centred and growth

centred approaches to development. Figure 1 (after Kemp, 2010) illustrates the differences between traditional and dominant community relations approaches in the resources sector based on information dissemination and risk management with the more emergent approaches built around dialogue with the community and support for sustainable development.



**Figure 1** Four models of company-community interaction (after Kemp, 2010)

Traditional approaches (models 1 and 2) are driven by and for the company primarily to reduce risk. The aim of the traditional approach is to “protect and promote corporate reputation and goals” (Kemp 2010:5). Emergent approaches (models 3 and 4), on the other hand, moves the company from traditional approaches to work in an interdisciplinary fashion with the community beyond public relations. Further, the emergent model (model 4 in particular) allows communities to make their own independent development decisions based upon their needs, values, desires and goals (Kemp 2010 and Kelly and Burkett 2007). Emergent approaches engage the community through dialogue and two-way communication. However, the complexity of community relations within the resources sector essentially means community relations practitioners are required to be cognisant of all four models and constantly move between the traditional and emergent approaches.

The courses support students to transition from traditional to emergent approaches to company community relations. This can be both an uncomfortable and rewarding personal and professional journey as students begin to understand where their company is positioned along this continuum of company-community relations and why their engagement efforts have not always been effective.

“The Company purchased a Brownfield site in 2004 and at the time their community engagement model was strictly traditional; the only concern was simply meeting the necessary regulatory requirements for permission to construct the facility. There was no concern about meeting and maintaining over time, the social licence to operate. Had the Company used a more emergent model, we would have slowed down the communication process, we would have identified stakeholders and mapped a communication engagement plan for same to engage in healthy

dialogue, communication and feedback on matters that were important to the community; we would have conducted a socio economic baseline assessment and a proper stand-alone social impact assessment.

Because the Company did not develop stakeholder engagement plans and communicate proactively with all residents, especially the marginalised, communication was very reactive to issues and to those persons who shouted the loudest. The youth and females therefore tended to be excluded from the dialogue process, felt neglected and did not participate. Construction activities were shut down quite frequently as the residents realised that this was the only way they would get the Company to listen to and address their concerns.” (International student with Global Resource Company, Journal 2010)

### ***Dialogical Community Development***

While a number of Community Practice traditions are explored the course concentrates on teaching the Dialogical method of Community Practice developed by Anthony Kelly (Kelly and Burkett 2007).

The Dialogical Method of Community Practice outlines the importance of balancing development from the inside utilising the existing community assets with the more traditional approach of development from the outside which focuses on meeting needs and addressing deficits. The framework gives priority to enabling communities to lead their own development with support from companies who are committed to managing their impacts and sharing the benefits from resources wealth.

The dialogical approach to development outlines the primacy of micro communication skills in building relationships with people in communities to enable individuals, families and small groups to participate in shaping their own development supported but not controlled by or dependent upon the company. Dialogical community development inverts the dominant model of development from the outside with its focus on the primacy of economic growth by emphasising the importance of starting with the needs and resources of the people. For many students this leads to a significant shift in their practice approach.

“I found myself considering my actions from the community’s perspective and as such thought ‘who is the person, who has turned up, raised expectations and then disappeared again?’. It is easy to see how many CR practitioners face a hostile reception where they go. They are not invited, they believe they have speaking rights, and they often have no buy in to the community. I have been part of our community for nearly 5 years, and I am sure in another 20, I will have attained the rank of ‘Johnny-come lately...’ As a result I began to develop empathy for these communities that are often dramatically influenced by organisations who really have no understanding where they have come from, where they are going or really care what it is they truly need in order to prosper. I guess this led me to changing my view of the world.” (Student working in medium sized Resource Company, Journal, 2010.)

### **Community Engagement and Mining**

In Semester two the Community Engagement Course aims to assist students to work effectively within their companies by applying the dialogue and participatory skills they acquired in Semester one. There is also a much stronger emphasis on community practice techniques and skills. This includes the elements of a CR strategy such as social impact assessment and social baseline studies,

community engagement plans, participatory monitoring and evaluation, developing partnerships and community investment strategies. The course highlights the importance of integrating these elements to ensure that social and economic impacts are addressed and that there is enduring benefit to the whole community from the mining operation over the life of the mine and beyond.

The course assessment includes marks for:

Active participation and high quality submissions to an online tutorial (Discussion Board);

Participation in a Reflective on-line Journal which allows for one to one written dialogue with the course lecturer; and

Planning, implementing and evaluating a practice project which integrates the community development methods, analysis, skills and techniques taught during the semester.

The purpose of the Discussion Board and Journal is to encourage students to read the course notes and readings and to learn to reflect on their practice of community relations personally and with their colleagues. The Discussion Board and Journal help to create a learning community by modelling the key dimensions of community development and engagement including participations, capacity building and empowerment. The practice project aims to test the student's understanding of the course content and to assist them to successfully translate theory into action.

### **Pedagogical approach**

The course seeks to use the teaching and learning tools available in the online environment to create a dynamic, supportive and purposeful space for students that enables them to transform their current CR practice as well as take steps towards a professional qualification. Key elements of the pedagogical approach include:

- Building a trusting and honest relationship based on confidential dialogue with the course lecturer primarily using the Journal as a place for reflection and feedback. The Journal helps to create a discipline of reflective practice which is essential for transformative community relations practice. The Journal has become a mentoring space for many students where they can express the difficulties they face implementing community relations in the workplace and discuss openly how they can put into action the course content in their day to day work. Many students have expressed the view that the Journal has been a very valuable learning aid for their practice.
- Providing course content that leads students to identify gaps that may exist between their own practice and the company's current practice approach to CR. Students are exposed to content that places them at the point where they need to be to meet growing community and government expectations of the Resources Industry. When a student can identify the deficit in their current approach, a variety of reactions from despair to anger or excitement occurs. Whatever the reaction both courses are designed to use this new awareness as a motivator for change rather than a pathway to despondency.

"I am learning a lot from this course; every week the topic and discussion is very interesting, relevant and practical. It is good to take a step back, to look at the process and programme being used and questions its purpose and intent. Why are we doing it this way? Was it fully researched, was it just someone's idea or is it just because we have always done it this way?" (Student, 2009)

- Using the Discussion Board as an on-line tutorial to establish a learning community between students and the students and lecturer where learning from each other is encouraged. This approach recognises that the programme attracts self-motivated adult learners. This is a highly successful component of the course method and it establishes the value of participating in a community of practice (CoP) with other community relations practitioners in the Resources Sector. The Discussion Board also provides CR practitioners with access to a diverse group of international practitioners with varying experience and knowledge.

“Last discussion board - how sad. Although it’s been hard combining a busy work, family and social lifestyle with this study I will definitely miss the discipline of studying a different topic each week and the stimulation of reading comments from my peers all over the world!” (Student, 2008)

- Requiring students to undertake a practice project that tests their understanding of the course content and their ability to put the concepts and skills into practice. Community relations is a hands-on discipline where theoretical knowledge is useful only to the extent that it can be implemented in practice. As students experiment with the methods and techniques of community development awareness of their skills and their weaknesses emerge. This newly found insight builds confidence in their day to day practice and helps students to identify areas for improvement. As much as possible practice projects are designed around existing work commitments to reduce workload and to ground the project in the day to day realities of their work.
- Because community development is a relational practice it can be challenging to deliver in an on-line environment. As noted by Kulig in the Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology “It has been important for instructor to be learner-centred, reflective about their teaching style and creative in developing process and content that reflect the ideology and principles of community development. The text-oriented, web-based format may require adaptation of activities and assignments to facilitate participation, empowerment and capacity building” (Kulig, 2007).

## Student Feedback

An evaluation of the Community Development Course (MINE7023) occurred at the end of semester 1, 2009. For this evaluation, an online survey was conducted amongst the participants of this course. Of the 21 course participants, 16 took part in the survey, representing a response rate of 76 per cent.

There were three main components to the evaluation. The first set of questions asked students to rate the assessment load, staff feedback of assessment, the effectiveness of Blackboard (the on-line learning environment) in terms of accessibility, the relevance of course readings and whether the course was intellectually stimulating. For each of the areas mentioned here, the course received very high ratings.

The second component of the evaluation asked student to express the most positives things about their experience with the course and which aspects of the course should be priorities for improvement.

On the issues of positive outcomes, in relation to the learning achieved students had this to say:

“I appreciated the assistance offered by the course lecturer either by phone or email. The postings on blackboard offered excellent real life experiences to further enhance learning abilities and use others ideas. The learning guide attached to the required readings was extremely useful as it provided the reasons for the unit and the expectations required.” Student 13



“The interaction via online with many other similar work practitioners in CR/CD. I learnt a lot by reading through the postings of individuals.” Student 7

Regarding priorities for improvement, students relayed how the course could be better managed to suit external remote students relying heavily on the Blackboard interface for their learning:

“Learning dialogue online is very difficult. I have no real practical suggestions for improving this - only that it is hard!” Student 8

“Sometimes internet access from remote mining locations is very difficult. This was one of the major issues we had as international students in another country.” Student 9

Further comments related to the balancing of work and study throughout the semester and challenges of ‘catching-up’ on workloads:

“Although the discipline of needing to take part in online discussions is a great learning tool; work deadlines sometimes made this difficult and the ability to “catch up” without penalty would assist those of us with poor work/life balances.” Student 5

Finally students were asked to rank the course overall on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). The course satisfaction overall was rated good (37%) and excellent (63%).

### **Key learnings and changes**

The programme is now in its fourth year and we have made a number of changes in response to student feedback and our own reflections.

The on-line environment does not suit all students. Some students from cultures with strong oral traditions find the on-line environment with the predominant focus on written communication quite difficult. Some students have limited academic backgrounds while others do not have English as a first language. Until this year the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSRM) had provided some tutorial support for students who were experiencing difficulty and this year we have been able to access funding to employ tutors to provide additional support to our Australian Aboriginal students. The tutors will provide comments on student assignments and Discussion Board entries and offer general advice on course content.

The course material is provided in four week blocks to enable students to plan and work ahead.

Some students find the community development and community engagement content very demanding as they are encouraged to examine their beliefs and values and to participate actively in the learning process. Unlike face to face education where students can be anonymous in the class room student participation in these courses is compulsory and assessed. Some students find this daunting especially if they have limited background in the discipline or they are struggling with English as a second language. On the other hand a growing number of students describe the course as extremely helpful for, if not transformative, of their practice. To this end we are continuously exploring ways to support students to feel more confident in the on-line space including by providing more face to face course orientation and by utilising on-line tools such as recording role plays and case studies.

Students are strongly encouraged to complete the Community Development course including the practice frameworks before undertaking the more technically oriented Community Engagement. Students are also encouraged to do the entire programme (4 courses) over two years if they have significant other life and work commitments.

### Future opportunities

Ultimately the effectiveness of the courses will be judged by improvements in the effectiveness of community relations practitioners and also by sustainable improvements to the way the resources industry interacts with host communities. We are actively seeking opportunities to evaluate these outcomes.

Plans to expand and develop the programme into Latin America and Canada in partnership with local institutions based upon industry demand for high quality practitioner training are currently underway. To capitalise on the lessons learnt from delivering an on-line community development course, the emphasis in this expansion exercise is to retain an association with the University of Queensland programme.

Further, both teaching staff and graduates of the programme have identified a genuine need for specific training for the supervisors of community relations staff to assist them to understand the frameworks being taught in the course. This would enhance and support graduates upon returning to their community relations roles enabling the creation of management systems and programmes better able to respond to community aspirations.

One of the initial barriers when designing the course content has been the absence of documented case studies of effective community development practice in the Resources Industry. After three years of programme and course delivery there is now a collection of case studies written for student assignment that could be edited and published. This material will be very useful for community relations practitioners in different contexts across the globe.

### CONCLUSION

This paper examines the community development and engagement courses in the graduate certificate programme aim to support a transformation in the practice approach of the participants and ultimately to support emergent approaches to company-community relations in the resources industry. The paper explores the factors underpinning the success of the courses as well some of the key learnings and changes to the curriculum made in response to student feedback. The key design elements of the programme include robust and supportive group and individual dialogue; development of a learning community; integration of theory and practice; attention to practice methods and frameworks prior to focusing on techniques and skills and constant adaptation of the course materials and teaching methods to enhance student outcomes.

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