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STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN NEGOTIATED ASSESSMENT IN A TEACHER EDUCATION COURSE

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Sue: The class was abuzz with on-task chatter as students collaborated in small groups to negotiate their course assessment on day one of semester. However, as I began to scan their whiteboard musings, my smug satisfaction was replaced by anxiety. My integrity demanded that I commit to the student-selected assessment regime in spite of my professional instinct about the direction they were heading. I had handed over my power to the students and that was incredibly scary...but scary is good, right?!? As it turns out, I wasn't the only one feeling anxious.

Sarah: As part of this course, we were offered the opportunity to develop our own assessment. At first, being handed this huge responsibility was a little daunting—apart from one previous occasion, we hadn't experienced this level of control. However, this was soon replaced by a feeling of empowerment when it hit home that we really did have a say in what we were learning and how we were being assessed. The open dialogue between Sue and the students really gave us a positive perception of the development of student-teacher relationships and rapport.

Lauren: Being given the opportunity to decide on assessment tasks, due dates, and assessment weightings for EDUC2010 came with a number of emotions. At the beginning, I was thrilled to provide input into the subject we would be undertaking for the next 13 weeks. It was such a novelty to be able to consider assessment tasks that would be achievable over the semester, beneficial to our future careers as teachers, and possibly even fun! However, as talks commenced it became apparent that there were many options and combinations that could be chosen. Considering that these tasks would form our grade for the subject, the importance of our decisions began to make us feel concerned and little a stressed.

Sue: I'm definitely not an expert on Students as Partners. But as an experienced teacher, I am confident and resilient enough to make mistakes as I attempt new teaching strategies with my relatively small class. We, Sarah, Lauren and I, have combined our personal reflections that focus on the process of, and our reactions to, negotiating assessment in this teacher education course. We unanimously concluded that the process was worthwhile but emotionally charged, constrained by students' past experiences, and subject to institutional barriers. We have provided suggestions to improve this process in the future and hope that it empowers others to try a Students as Partners approach.

Background and Context

EDUC 2010 *Literacy and Numeracy in Health and Physical Education* is a compulsory teacher-preparation course for Bachelor of Health, Sport and Physical Education (Hons) (BHSPE) students at

The University of Queensland (UQ). Typically, EDUC 2010 is a second-year course. However, due to a change in degree requirements in 2016, almost half of the class also included experienced fourth-year students. The total enrolment was 65 students. The classroom was a flat-floored collaborative teaching space containing nine large tables, multiple projection screens, and whiteboards covering all four walls. I had specifically requested this space with teachers-as-partners in mind. At the time of writing this essay, this class was still in session.

At the beginning of 2016, EDUC 2010 was reviewed and subsequently re-designed to better meet the needs of students and their future careers in teaching. The review process considered student voice and professional input through:

- i. A large group *Think Tank*. This face-to-face forum allowed the 2015 cohort to provide feedback and suggestions for an improved student experience and learning outcomes.
- ii. A crowd sourced *Ideas Jam*. This online (Facebook) platform asked alumni to provide examples of their practice and comment on the realities of teaching literacy and numeracy in HPE (Health and Physical Education).
- iii. A small group of *student co-creators*. Volunteer students helped re-design content and learning activities in as active community of practice experience.

The focus of this essay will be on our assessment negotiation in the current 2016 iteration of the course, which occurred over three weeks. We have broken this into a series of steps so we can comment on each phase: what we did, how it felt, and what we learned.

Step 1: Notify the Students

Students are alerted to the upcoming negotiation in the week before classes began.

Sue: I encouraged students to consider their pending negotiation via an email and a brief “Welcome to Literacy and Numeracy” PowerPoint video published in Blackboard (e-learning portal). I identified the ‘negotiables’ and ‘non-negotiables,’¹ and offered some other assessment ideas. I’m unsure how many students actually engaged with this information. (Note to self: turn on the data tracking in Blackboard next time.) But put it this way: I wasn’t holding my breath because it was still student holidays.

Lauren: We had received an email from Sue before semester commenced. This was helpful because it allowed us time to think of various assessment possibilities before we went into this discussion. However, some students may not have taken the time to read this email.

Sarah: If I’m entirely honest, I didn’t read through the email very thoroughly before the beginning of the class. I think this was due to being accustomed to the traditional idea of turning up to class and being given the semester schedule, assessment and all. I also think that most other people’s inexperience with co-construction of curriculum between students and lecturers may have led them to not take the email with as much consideration as it was intended.

Lauren: An online poll or other brief communication method may prove more effective at ensuring students think about assessment tasks before they need to make a final decision.

¹ The ‘non-negotiables’ were based on the strong recommendations of *Think Tank* and *Ideas Jam* feedback from past students and practicing teachers. Although these tasks were fixed learning activities, students still had the responsibility for deciding if and how to grade them, what percentage to allocate, and when they were due.

Step 2: Set the Scene

On the first day, students undertake an introductory activity to establish a safe and supportive classroom climate.

Lauren: The class needs to have good rapport for each student to be able to confidently voice their opinions.

Sue: Even before I officially welcomed students, I used a basic ‘ice breaker’ that required students to introduce themselves to someone they didn’t know. They then discussed a non-threatening, content-focussed, general knowledge question. This was repeated a number of times so that each student met multiple new people by the end of this short activity. Admittedly this was a token attempt to establish an effective group dynamic in 15 minutes. However, it did set the conversational tone for this first class.

Step 3: Discuss in Groups

Small groups consider their assessment ideas, relative weighting, and submission dates. Two small groups then combine to debate and refine their proposal. These groups present their ideas to the whole group. The lecturer mediates a whole group discussion to determine a resolution.

Sue: Following numerous discussions with my student-as-partners-advocate colleague (Dr. Eimear Enright), I thoughtfully planned how I would present this session. Despite this, I was really unsure of how students would respond, how long it would take, or what the outcome would be. I envisaged chaos but this was not the case.

Lauren: Combining small-group discussion with another group before a whole-class discussion was good as it further narrowed down ideas and allowed us to consider the opinions of others, rather than first hearing them in a whole-class discussion. The setting was informal so it did not feel like there was any pressure to rush or that anyone was being forced into a decision.

Sarah: The hour-long class discussion in our first session was very valuable as it allowed us to discuss our ideas in groups and then debate our ideas against another group. This was an exceptionally important part of the process as we weighed up the strengths and weaknesses of each option put forward. Prolonged discussion of the techniques was also a good way to explore potential future assessment ideas for us as teachers.

Lauren: As a fourth-year student, I felt that I had to stimulate discussion and suggest ideas because the second-year students seemed shy and uncomfortable voicing their opinions. Throughout these discussions, I felt for the second years. They had come into this lesson not knowing each other, let alone knowing any of the older students or Sue, so the situation may have felt quite intimidating — reducing their confidence to speak up. This resulted in the fourth years putting forward the majority of the assessment ideas. The second years might have a stronger voice if they debate their assessment ideas with people from their own cohort, rather than mixing with the older students. That way, opinions of all students could be presented more equally. It might also be useful to have a poll running during the class or an electronic comment board on the screen where students can comment anonymously.

Sarah: During this initial discussion, Sue mentioned a few examples of assessment pieces we might consider. The cohort immediately locked onto these suggestions without thinking outside the box. I think the second years in particular sided with the traditional assessment ideas (regular quizzes, essays). To avoid skewing the options, I suggest that the lecturer either give no examples whatsoever, or provide a comprehensive list with basic task descriptions to create clarity (this is the better option).

Lauren: I felt obliged to include Sue's example as part of the assessment for the subject. I agree that it would have been beneficial to have some pre-prepared outlines so we could have visualised what tasks would look like before we voted for them. I also found it useful having one piece of non-negotiable assessment. This gave us some guidance as to what was expected of us throughout the semester, and what other pieces of assessment might compliment the non-negotiable.

Sue: Although I had a couple of assessment ideas, as a first time EDUC 2010 Course Coordinator, I hadn't actually penned the tasks. *Think Tank* feedback had also convinced me that the previous assessment tasks would never see the light of day again, so we were truly starting from scratch.

Lauren: Overall, I felt very positive about the discussions that took place in the first lesson of the subject, and we all came to a relatively mutual decision that seemed to work best at the time.

Sue: I left our first class with five pieces of assessment to construct. The students had provided me with the relative weighting and a general idea of when they would like to submit them. I'll readily admit that I was dubious about five tasks (I would have preferred three) but students justified this because they wanted to spread the impact across a number of tasks.



Figure 1. EDUC 2010 students negotiate their assessment in week one of semester.

Step 4: Write and Reflect on the Assessment Tasks

Course Coordinator writes the assessment tasks. Students consider the tasks and provide feedback.

Sue: I produced and published the draft tasks within two days and asked for student feedback by the following day. This was done in the name of brevity rather than good practice. Official UQ policy requires our assessment to be 'locked down' in our Electronic Course Profile (ECP) by the end of week one. The ECP constitutes our learning contract with students and is a serious document. In class-as-usual circumstances, finalising assessment is sensible to ensure that students are able to make considered elective choices and know the course expectations in a timely manner. However, in the case of EDUC 2010, this short turnaround meant that the pressure was tangible. Anticipating this, I had communicated with my faculty's decision makers well before semester began. The returning correspondence noted that I would have to apply for special permission to adjust the ECP. I alerted the students to the lockdown policy as the reason for hasty feedback.

Sarah: I believe the week-long reflection gave us time to step back from our decisions and revisit them with fresh eyes and an understanding of what was expected in other courses. This was invaluable. Within the week we realized we had overestimated how much assessment was reasonable for the course creating almost a sense of panic. I believe this serious reflection was hastened, in part, due the idea of our choices were being locked down without the opportunity to change them. I guess that we would be less inclined to actively think about and reflect if we didn't have this pressure.

Lauren: When I went home and read through the assessment pieces and looked at the due dates, I began to feel overwhelmed about the sheer amount of assessment we were going to have to complete for that one subject. After talking to a number of other students in the course, we all had similar concerns. We began to feel much more at ease when there was the possibility that we could argue for the assessment to be changed.

Step 5: Re-negotiate the Assessment Program

Students debate the merits of their previous decisions. Lecturer to follow-up administration as required.

Sue: At the beginning of class in week two, a delegation of students approached me to reduce the number of assessments. I was somewhat blindsided by this and panic once again set in. Since I had not heard anything from students in the allocated review time, I had not anticipated the need for further negotiation, let alone planned it in that day's lecture materials. Also, I could not guarantee permission to change the assessment, but we undertook the process anyway.

At the end of class and as a whole group, students again discussed and re-negotiated. I deliberately removed myself from the conversation to observe how they led themselves. The session played out like a 'storm' (Tuckman, 1965) with the fourth years as the main combatants. But the outcome was a reduction in the number of tasks and subsequent re-distribution of percentages.

It is hard for me to describe the immense sense of pride I felt as I witnessed my almost-teachers having serious pedagogical discussions with considered and justifiable arguments during their re-negotiation. As clichéd as it sounds, from this moment, I knew that they were ready to become successful graduate teachers who would advocate for best pedagogical practice. *But* this was all about the fourth years; what of the voiceless second years?

Sarah: The fourth years dominated this discussion. We took the floor supporting each other's arguments or rebutting them. During this time, the second years retreated and did not engage in discussion. This was due to their unfamiliarity with the people in the room and probably what they felt was their lack of experience when it came to assessment expected in our field.

Lauren: This second discussion was much less structured, leaving me feeling a little frustrated. People had the tendency to talk over one another, and no doubt some students felt uncomfortable putting forward their opinions in that situation. This was especially evident with the second years.

While it was a relief being given the opportunity to rethink the assessment after a period of reflection, it might have been less frustrating if there had been more time to discuss the concepts, and people had been able to discuss it with a smaller group of people first to narrow down ideas. I felt rushed and pressured to make a decision as it was the end of the class and people wanted to leave but we also needed to get the changes to the university as soon as possible. Perhaps it would have been

less frustrating and stressful if the changes had been discussed at the beginning of the lesson when there was more time to undertake discussion and then a lesson to mull over the ideas.

Overall, it was a tedious process, but in the end was worth it. I now feel comfortable and confident with the assessment items chosen and thus feel in control of my own learning and achievement.

Sarah: In future, when getting large groups to engage in these discussions, I believe the mediation of the discussion by the lecturer is important to allow all sides of each story to be heard and a ‘safe space’ be created. In smaller groups of single-year classes, I predict this would be less of an issue but the lecturer’s role still stands.

Sue: This session was reinforced with an email to students that outlined the new, improved assessment regime and another brief opportunity to voice dissatisfaction to me directly. Nothing arrived. Was that a sign of approval? Or disengagement? Or undeveloped relationships and trust?

Finally and significantly, I needed approval from my faculty to enact this new assessment program. While this occurred relatively swiftly, it was a stressful layer of administration that could be a deal-breaker for the entire students-as-partners process as negotiating assessment.

Final Thoughts

Sue: I am delighted by this rich and productive negotiation and reflection process. It was an authentic, professionally-focused task which I believe has been a significant learning process in itself for these pre-service teachers. It has been a risky pedagogy to undertake (my end-of-semester teaching evaluations might be negatively affected) and my failures have been on public display, but my professional instinct tells me that the journey has been worthwhile.

I genuinely look forward to a time when the reality of teaching at UQ aligns with the philosophy of our new Student Strategy (University of Queensland, 2016). If we aim to “create a culture of shared responsibility” (p.12) by providing students with “a greater degree of control of what, when and how they study” (p.8) and “invest(ing) in teaching innovation” (p.12), then our institutional policies and procedures also need to support this. As well as amending assessment lockdown rules, I suggest that new students-as-partners lecturers campaign to suspend their official teaching evaluations. This will provide some freedom to make mistakes without fear of a blemished teaching record.

Lauren: I felt thrilled, heard, and in control of my learning being given the opportunity to negotiate assessment tasks. While the process was at times tedious and frustrating, the final outcome was positive and very successful. The students-as-partners process should be used more often as it allows us to take ownership and commit to our learning from the beginning of the semester.

Sarah: The students-as-partners process left me with feelings of both ownership and accountability. I was very satisfied to have been able to contribute and be a part of the process, but it also meant that I was more committed to the assessment and had a greater understanding of the course expectations. At first, the feeling of responsibility was a little daunting since the onus was entirely on us to completely commit. However, I enjoyed the way the discussions and negotiations fostered positive student-student and student-teacher relationships. All in all, I think our students-as-partners experience was a fantastic way to develop a whole range of aspects of our course this semester.

Summary of Considerations and Recommendations

Based on our experience with students as partners in negotiating assessment, here are the things worth considering:

Step 1 Notify the students

- (i) Alert students before semester begins.
- (i) Use an anonymous, online poll to stimulate engagement and preparation.
- (ii) Provide an extensive list of assessment types for students' consideration.

Step 2 Set the scene

- (i) Include an icebreaker activity at the beginning of the first class to stimulate intra-class discussion.
- (ii) Acknowledge that relationships matter. They influence the quantity and quality of debate and are difficult to establish in a short time frame.

Step 3 Discuss in groups

- (i) Create opportunities for all students to feel comfortable voicing their opinions (online or in person).
- (ii) Provide adequate time for discussion, debate, and decision making.
- (iii) Connect possible assessment items to intended learning outcomes.
- (iv) Ensure a shared vision between students and lecturer.

Step 4 Write and reflect on the assessment tasks

- (i) Encourage students to reflect on tasks in a timely manner.

Step 5 Re-negotiate the assessment regime

- (i) Allow time and provide a structure to re-visit assessment program in week two.

Final thoughts

- (i) Know your institution's assessment policy and procedures. Advocate for change if they don't support students-as-partners activities.
- (ii) Campaign for the suspension of an official teaching evaluation while undertaking students-as-partners projects for the first time.

Have a go and enjoy it!

References

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