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Students as Partners in Creating an Alternative Approach to Teach Farm Business Management in New Zealand, or: "Can Financials be Sexy?"

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STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO TEACH FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT IN NEW ZEALAND, OR: "CAN FINANCIALS BE *SEXY*?"

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Introduction

In March 2018 we attended a 'Staff student partnership' workshop facilitated by Alison Cook-Sather and Roseanna Bourke, inviting participants to reflect on their partnership activities and further develop partnership programmes. Following from this, we discussed our approaches to teaching and partnerships and started to develop the outline and potential content of this essay, which reflects on Eva's teaching practise, written from her perspective.

Eva: My teaching career began relatively recently, when I started at the School of Agriculture at Massey University in 2015, following five years in a farm economics research and consultancy firm. I quickly became passionate about teaching, especially appreciating the development and growth the students undergo during their time at university.

When I took over course coordination from a retiring colleague in mid-2017, I was keen to start with a clean slate, having taught and tutored into the course previously and seen what worked well and where I saw opportunities to implement changes and innovations.

I faced a key challenge to introduce budgeting and other financial decision tools to students that, in majority, have a low natural inclination towards desk work and number crunching. For example, responses from course surveys to the question "Why do you take this course?" were typically answered by choosing the response "Compulsory."

My goal for 2018 was the make the financials class *sexy*.

Pedagogical challenges with large class sizes and required learnings

At this university, the course was the main compulsory second year course for both AgriScience and AgriCommerce students, and student numbers fluctuate between 80 and 120 internal students each year. In addition, about 10-20 distance students study the course over a full year (vs a single semester internally). Large class numbers bring a different dynamic with them and can be challenging to engage with. This dynamic includes that it is more difficult to gauge the individual learner's needs, the fact that certain activities take more time, or some typical forms of engaging the class might be excluded, such as open discussion.

The course focusses on farm business management in terms of financial and other decision support tools; the students learn, for example, how to set up farm cash flow budgets, or generate gross margins, and also get an introduction to human resource management. It is the only compulsory second year farm business management course for all agriculturally related studies. Hence, a lot of expectations are put on the learnings the students should take from the course in order to be prepared for subsequent courses. This significantly limits the flexibility in adjusting the content taught; hence, my focus naturally shifted towards the delivery.

What did I do? – Drawing on the student voice to get students' interest

If changing content was not an option, I first needed to get information on how my teaching practice could be enhanced. Thus, I turned to former students for feedback, and consulted with them about their learning.

As a first step, I collected feedback from the previous year's class in a brainstorming session. This was a successful exercise as it rendered all the key learnings as well as what the students found most difficult and most rewarding. Consequently, I decided to use the brainstorming chart from the former class to start the new class. This showed the new/current students what former students thought were the most important learnings from the course.

In the previous class, when teaching into the course, the then-course coordinator and I agreed to initiate a course survey, the first in a number of years. I used this feedback to inform my current course. A recurring theme was students reporting on the long turnaround time to receive feedback on their marked assignments. In their experience, this rendered the feedback useless for them to improve from one assignment to the next. As a result, I made it a goal to change this and got additional funding for external markers to ensure marking turnaround within the prescribed three weeks.

Another topic was the required workload associated with the assignments. The students' perception of a high workload partly comes from the change in learning experience, where they have moved from solely classroom-based teaching in the first year of the programme, to going out into the field, collecting data, and putting this together as an assignment in second year. I could see that part of the students' concern was certainly justified.

I came to realise how much we as teachers tend to view our course as independent from others, and often as the main priority. In contrast, for the students it comes along on the same priority level with all other courses, which each have their own assignments throughout the semester in addition to other commitments, such as university or national level sports. Furthermore, agricultural students often have to help out on family farms. Subsequently, I made the decision to address the workload for each assignment, while ensuring students could still meet the same learning outcomes. This was achieved, for example, by replacing a full discussion with a short and succinct executive summary. The existing concept of doing three assignments on three different case study farms visited throughout the semester was considered beneficial, as the students have the chance to experience common New Zealand farming systems. However, the assignment setup was changed so that the students assumed the role of a consultant, preparing a financial analysis report for a client with the goal to add value to their business. This, while implicitly expected previously, had never been worded as such and thus was not fully understood by most students (judging by their reports). This year, the students were told that while there were no additional marks involved, they were free to create their own consulting firm and logo to use in the report.

Students also reported that the new assignments were introduced before the previous one had to be handed in, thus creating confusion and stress. The late deadline was initially intended by staff to provide students with as much time as possible to complete each assignment – here, the feedback showed another gap between intention and result. Thus, deadlines where shifted to allocate a clear break between the deadline for one assignment and introducing the next one. In reality, this meant less time per assignment but was accompanied by more assignment work and content in class. I also introduced a more flexible arrangement with

students for submission of assignments, where they were able to submit up to two weeks later. When pressures in a student's life prevented them from submitting in time, I chose to take a *first-time-lenient* approach. When students approached me about an illness or special situation, without further evidence, they did not incur the late penalty.

There is also value in receiving retrospective feedback from past students. For example, students who (during the course) experienced it as quite a step-up from their first year of studies were now in their third year, approached me to say how much they valued the student-staff interactions in the course. They reported experiencing a further step-up in their third year, where they were expected to work much more independently, and missed the opportunity for such interactions due to the lecturer often being unavailable. This is to say that students' perception of a course can change when they have more courses to compare it to.

The approach I took to working with students to maximise their learning experience

One of my goals for the course was to provide transparency and clarity to the students, so in the first lecture clear guidelines on associated workload and expectations were communicated and discussed. Expectations included both sides: what I expected from students and what students could expect from me.

To get more of a student-centred approach, I introduced *what-do-you-want?* classes and tutorials. These opened with points such as "One thing I need to know about…" or "What I am hoping to learn today…". While potential content was prepared up front, the students' input at the start provided me with the chance to put a focus on their perceived needs and gaps. Working on assignments and case studies was also introduced in class so that students could apply their knowledge and figure out remaining questions in a class environment, working with other students and myself.

An informal *half-way* survey with two comment boxes was introduced, encompassing two questions: "What I really like about the course…" and "If I could change one thing, it would be… ." This provided an opportunity to get anonymous feedback part way through the course and to shift direction, focus, or pedagogical practice, where needed. The students received my comments on their responses in the form of a course announcement which included students' positive feedback, aspects they would like to change, and how I intended to act on that, or, if not, a reason why it was not going to change. The students' feedback was hugely helpful and led to some immediate changes, such as incorporating more assignment-related content into lectures. Other feedback centred around how confusing students found the data collection out in the field – this provided an opportunity to explain why this is one of their learning outcomes and how it (getting consistent information from clients) is an important skill for their future working lives.

A self-assessment component was introduced to their last assignment, providing the students with a whole new concept. Most of them had completed some form of peer assessment before, but the concept of assessing their own learning in a course (instead of the teacher assessing them) was new to them. This also provided me with an opportunity to generate information on their understanding of their own learning.

Implications for my teaching

Using previous feedback to inform the current course set up provided an excellent starting point for me to go on. The new structure and processes around assignments seemed to work well for current students; overall assignment marks increased compared to last year (although this is only anecdotal as a multitude of factors will influence the results). Seeing past students' perceptions change over time was also beneficial for me, as it demonstrated that some level of *stretch* or personal growth is feasible even if the students perceive it as challenging at the time.

Some changes, such as the focus on an authentic consultant-client relationship for their assignments, generated incredible results. From my perspective there was little added freedom in terms of the option to create their own company. But this led to a high identification of the students with their own work. Suddenly, it was not just *an assignment for the lecturer* but providing value to the client, and they were also aware that copies of the best work would be sent to the case study farmers (i.e. that there was a realistic chance the client would read their work, and thus gain another audience). This was similarly reflected in the survey feedback, where students stated how they liked "to learn real life skills" and the "practical application of course material with the field visits and assignments" and that it was "practical and work related." Some of the most powerful feedback I received was in an email after the first assignment was due, from a student I least expected to hear from: "It's great that we can have fun whilst working hard! What we are learning in D Tools [course-name used by students] is exactly the reason I came to study. Really enjoying it."

Working closely with current students throughout the semester had multiple benefits. Overall, I think one big advantage of this approach was the mutual trust created between staff and students, which led to active student participation in class and constructive feedback from students. By the end of the semester the self-assessment was a resounding success as all but two students were achieving and reflecting on their learning well above my expectations. The end of course student survey assesses students' agreement with ten overall statements, such as "Feedback on my work helped me learn," and also provides students the opportunity to write additional comments. When compared to other years, this years' survey improved in all ten categories, with eight categories rated 90% or higher by students (100% indicating all student respondents answered "strongly agree"). So yes, I think financials can be a *sexy* and exciting topic for students to learn about.

As a teacher, I learned a lot from collaboration with the students. I learned more about how I structure content and interactions, and how I get student input on what they really need. In large classes it can sometimes be difficult to get a feeling for this, because the personal connection is less pronounced. The class size and resulting lower level of personal connection make the development of mutual trust in the student-staff relationship a big factor in order for students to vocalise their needs. However, I still noticed a disadvantage in this process, with regards to the resistance I met from my colleagues and other staff. As I was new to course coordination, I was keen to discuss my ideas and get feedback.

The perception from staff of the self-assessment was that I would be gifting marks to students without them having to put any work in. In my view this shows a misconception of self-assessments and how they work. As a result, I compromised, and introduced it in a low-key way, tagging it onto an existing assignment.

What-do-you-want classes were perceived by some colleagues as risky; they were openly nervous about not being in charge and felt that if they were to simply ask the students what they wanted they would look unprepared in front of the students. However, in my experience, in terms of preparedness, the opposite is true. I actually prepared for a range of content and had to have the flexibility to go beyond that.

Another point was the perceived overuse of student feedback. Some staff believed I should not ask for too much feedback as it invited criticism, and not to reply to criticism from students as it would look like an excuse. I highly value my colleagues' input as most of them have decades of experience. At the same time, I was lucky to meet like-minded individuals from other disciplines at the *teaching and learning* course workshops. Exchanges with these individuals gave me the confidence to try out different approaches, as they supported my realisation that there are other ways of improving practices and enhancing learning for students.

It is a great way to develop relationships, trust, and engagement

This is only the beginning of my student-staff-partnership journey as I am still in my first year as course coordinator.

At the outset I thought that the size of the class and limited content flexibility would be a challenge. Now I see it more as a given, a part of the existing framework, that can be well worked with given the right tools and a student-centred approach. In the future, I would like to have more workshop-style classes, meaning just a mini-lecture from my side, work time in groups on the topic I outlined, and bringing the results together. This will have to be balanced with the formal content that is expected to be taught. The advantage of workshops, while having less formal content, is the chance for deeper learning and that the students fully engage in the topic.

For me, it all revolves around being flexible and responsive to the students' learning needs. This first year was a great learning curve not only for the students, but also for me. I was amazed by the students' constructive feedback and input. And I also learned how our best intentions as teachers can sometimes miss the point if we do not consider the students' view.

To other teachers, who might think about innovative approaches in their teaching I would like to say: look for like-minded people inside and outside your discipline and organisation. The exchanges with other lecturers have contributed to my learning as much as my students have.