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PAYING IT FORWARD: PARTNERSHIP WITH STUDENTS IN ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

In this essay we explore a partnership approach that has underpinned the undergraduate degree in adult education that we, Linda and Warren, have been involved with. This essay reports on our joint experiences as teachers and learners and the benefits of maintaining flexible approaches in assessment practices that support learner development in their specific teaching context. For us, andragogy is a holistic approach with, at its heart, an understanding that teaching adults in higher education involves approaches that not only place learners at the centre but recognises learners bring with them prior experiences, knowledge, and understandings of a range of contexts relevant to their learning and motivation for learning (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2015). As teachers we draw on these resources while also enabling learners to actively engage in their learning and to critically reflect on their existing and new knowledge in relation to their current situation. This requires us as teachers to step aside, allowing students to make decisions for themselves, towards learning as a partnership between teacher and student. This type of participatory partnership focuses on engaging the student through empowerment to foreground hegemony, recognising the autonomy of the individual, and giving voice to learners through providing opportunity for individuals to work differently (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Leach, Neutze, & Zepke, 2001).

Foundation for Partnership

At our university, adult education degree students are generally non-traditional learners when compared with students in higher education who transition into study from compulsory education or gap years. They come with rich and diverse backgrounds, positional and relational identities, experiences, motivations, plans for and approaches to study, but also complex time – work commitments (Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, & Leach, 2014; Kasworm, 2010). In the bachelor of education specialising in adult education, the cohort consists of teacher practitioners already working full time or part time in a range of New Zealand post-compulsory education institutes, as well as studying at university. They already hold discipline-specific qualifications for the area in which they teach. These can range from professional and trade certification to post-graduate degrees. Generally, these teachers come to gain an educational degree in adult teaching and learning to formalise their teaching practice and to grow the pedagogic basis of their teaching.

In New Zealand, post-compulsory, or tertiary, education covers private training establishments, institutes of technology and polytechnics, wānanga Māori based education, universities, and workplace training institutes. These institutes, in turn, have their own particular cultures and student populations that influence teaching practice in ways teachers in other institutes may not be familiar with. In addition, the adult education degree students have complex demands on their lives. We are a university known for its distance learning, which allows students a certain level of autonomy in study as well as requiring a high level of motivation and time management skills (Kahu et al., 2014). Providing assessment choices,

then, recognises their diverse teaching contexts as well as supporting their autonomy and opportunity for empowerment.

Our assessment philosophy within the adult education courses views assessment as a part of learning not only to evaluate learning but also to develop learning (Leach et al., 2001). In keeping with this stance assessments encourage students to examine the social, economic, and political cultures of their own institutes, and the influence of these situated contexts on their teaching practice through analysing the beliefs, ideas, practices, influences, and power relationships. To aid the analysis students were introduced to Stephen Brookfield's critical reflection lenses as a tool for examining their teaching practice to make informed decisions about assessment and to increase autonomy. Formative assessment and opportunities to provide feedback to the students were incorporated across the whole programme. In keeping with Biggs and Tang's (2007) constructive alignment the styles and tasks of assessment practice were developed to ensure they met each course's specific goals, learning outcomes and academic requirements, and the graduate attributes. However, an additional characteristic was that assessment styles also needed to provide sufficient flexibility for students to be able to adapt, evaluate, and report on changes in their own teaching practice in ways that were relevant to their varied contexts. For example, teachers working in institutes like wānanga, where development of knowledge is recognised through traditional Māori approaches and according to tikanga Māori (Māori concepts, values, customs and ways of working), needed to be able to reflect this in responding to assessment tasks.

Our Experiences of Partnership

Warren is a lecturer at a polytechnic where he teaches exercise and wellness and is a recipient of an Excellence in Teaching and Learning Award.

Warren

In the past, I have experienced a typical type of student that fits the mould of a non-traditional learner. Non-traditional learners would be adults returning to study after a period of absence from education. Students from a working-class environment where dad was a plumber, or mum in another trade, and they are expected to carry on in a trades-based apprenticeship, and adults who were expected to be the bread winner at home and education was not considered a priority. This has changed. I now see a number of issues arising with our student cohort that completely smashes the mould on teaching strategies for the non-traditional students. These issues include younger single parents (generally female) with no support structures at home who want to better their futures via education, or students on the poverty line, possibly living in cars and expected to be fully immersed in their learning environment. More and more younger students are presenting with anxiety-related issues born out of non-study related experiences. Younger students who do not fit the high school mould and still find the transition to tertiary study traumatic. Consequently, every year students are coming on board with a distinct lack of basic comprehension and research skills at all levels. So, I have to reinvent myself as a teacher on a regular basis, specifically with regards to teaching strategies and the way we use the education experience as a conduit for change.

The possibilities for this reinvention and conduit for change were found as I progressed through my own bachelor of education study. Where I was given opportunity to make decisions for myself, my confidence grew. I have been able to pay it forward. I first get some knowledge from university and I get to talk to Linda as an individual, and it gets the human touch... as a teacher I provide a service to people. I'm a people person so it's paying it forward. Whenever I was given the opportunity to try something out I used it, not to just pass the degree. It then became something ingrained in me as a teacher and now I've got all these experiences and can use them to develop students so they feel empowered to come back to study. The momentum that the bachelor of education (adult education) provided was like being at the top of the hill and being able to let go and fly down the hill, experimenting with a huge range of ideas coming at you. Then [it] provides a variety of assessment opportunities to support this.

Linda

In partnering with Warren, as his teacher in the adult education courses, it was important to enable him, like the other students, to relate his study of teaching and learning to his own practice. The assessment activities within these courses are designed to enable students to decide what role in the assessment process they would take. They then negotiate with me the types of assessment tasks they choose to undertake and evidence they would present to meet the course learning outcomes, or they could choose from assessment options outlined (Leach et al., 2001). They could use teacher, peer and/or self-assessment, and propose an overall grade for their work, demonstrating how they have met the level of attainment. For Warren it was like “dropping a tomato which explodes around with multiple seeds everywhere, and then you can pick one up and it opens up a whole new view to you, that there are more seeds you want to explore and bring into your teaching practice.”

This is exactly what I wanted to generate from my teaching – a learning approach with individualised assessment, demonstrating flexibility integrated to meet the learning needs of diverse students and to keep them engaged in life-long learning.

Warren

There is this student...amazing character and a potential *learner* of tomorrow, so any negative impression that she gets now could put her off learning entirely. So, a learning gem for me was her acknowledging her own comments about how she now feels she has more control of her learning compared to her high school experience. As her eyes light up and she shows signs of obvious emotion, I realise that this is a major transitional step to her. My ability to be flexible with assessment of those students and to be able to talk to them is a vital part of making the assessment process transparent. I've had some amazing talks especially about assessment. I could say to them, look this is what the assessment is, this is the learning outcome, and this is what the traditional way of doing this assessment is (a report or an essay), but we can do things differently. How do you think that you might be able to meet this learning outcome? I organise students into communities of practice and they come together every couple of weeks and discuss how they are getting on with their assessment.

This is about relationship, it's a relational partnership. Rather than treating people like a number, they are known as a person. Once you recognise students as individuals, you can

adjust and adapt your teaching and assessment practice. So, you pass on what you have learnt about partnership for an assessment to another generation. This helps build your confidence and build the confidence in the next generation of learners. It is a collaboration between teaching and learning, being there for them.

Linda

I enjoyed the way Warren learned to recognise how the ability to negotiate his own assessment could help him to build confidence in a relational partnership, which was then transferable into his own practice. Warren's idea of relational partnership represents for me the type of learning with students I am exploring.

Over the period of Warren's study in the bachelor of education (adult education), the idea of participatory partnership was recognised in developing the student and teacher relationship and demonstrated in assessment practices. Opportunities to negotiate assessment tasks and trial a range of assessment applications helped to build Warren's confidence as a teacher in a manner where he could then build on the total experience and pay the knowledge and experience gained forward in working with vulnerable and diverse student groups.

For us, the flexibility in teaching and assessment strategies and opportunity to develop learner's confidence is perceived as a collaboration, a meeting of equals, providing the opportunity for both of us to learn from each other.

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