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STUDENT AND STAFF AS PARTNERS IN LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT CONVERSATIONS

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Introduction

I can't call on tales of romantic notions that brought me into teaching. Neither academia nor teaching were on my list of dream occupations. In fact, there was no list at all. Teaching just happened, influenced by moving to New Zealand, having a young family, working in a professional role at a university, and seeing the opportunity to complete a PhD. I remember the initial anxiety of giving lectures, learning about regulations, and assessment requirements. I received guidance from experienced colleagues. Over the years my confidence with conventional teaching grew, and I started to branch out and challenge myself and my ways of teaching.

Engaging with educational developers, teaching and learning enthusiasts, and researchers in higher education opened up new perspectives. This helped me to move beyond the narrow confines of teaching approaches I had experienced in my subject area of computer science. I worked hard on becoming a good teacher, especially in the context of large, first-year classes: by providing current and relevant material, setting meaningful learning objectives, aligning assessments, and supporting students. The last point is particularly important – how best to support students. I have tried the conventional: tutorial, labs, discussion forums, online sessions (as more than half of my students study off campus). I have offered email and phone support and created virtual office hours (via open video conferencing sessions students can enter). But, all these efforts had limited success. While I have been able to engage with some students, there are large numbers I have not reached. Far too many students, particularly in our first-year courses, do not master the course material to a level that gives me confidence that they are well equipped for more advanced courses. While marking assignments and exams, I feel like screaming out loud, "Why did you not seek my help during the course?"

So what is the answer?

After years of searching for solutions, I am turning to student-staff partnerships for answers. Can we change our approaches and put learning conversations into the centre of course design? Can we establish partnerships, where staff assist students in creating personal learning plans, where conversations about the course material and student work are the norm? Can students drive progression through a course themselves instead of following lesson plans with fixed schedules? Can we do this at first year despite large student numbers? Let me outline this vision.

Vision: Small groups

In our new student-centred partnership approach, we bring students and staff together in small-group settings to enable relationship building. Planning sessions follow where students chart their intended progress and interact with staff. Students plan their progress through a course – taking their individual contexts into consideration, such as their level of existing knowledge in the subject area, their study workload, and their life circumstances. The

progress plan provides a reference point for the individual. It has the potential to be changed, based on rate of progress and in response to outside events. Students work at their own pace.

Vision: Assessment conversations

As in traditional courses, learning objectives are linked to assessments. Yet, instead of focusing solely on the student's work, submitted at the same date for everyone in the class, the assessment engages the student in a conversation about their work at a time when the individual student feels ready. Such assessment conversations involve one student and one staff member. The student prepares a body of work, for example a set of computer programmes showcasing concepts related to a learning objective. The student determines when s/he is ready for the assessment, and requests the assessment conversation. The staff member and student sit together in the same room, or are connected virtually, and look at the student's work. The staff member probes, asks 'why' and 'what-if' questions. Both work through a marking rubric, determining what the student has already achieved and where further work is required. From there, the student either moves on to new material in the course or revises their work helped by the feedback and directions gained from the conversation. When ready, the student asks for a new assessment conversation.

In our approach students can only pass a course once they have achieved all learning objectives. This means that students have to show a high level of proficiency, a level that ensures a strong basis for more advanced work. Achievement will only be attested by presenting and discussing work in assessment conversations. High-performing students typically require only one conversation per assessment point while others need several conversations. Importantly, all students talk to staff, one-to-one, several times for each course. This provides staff with the opportunity to nurture and support, tailored to the individual level, at the time the student is ready for the conversation.

Vision: Conceptualisation and implementation

A side effect of this partnership assessment approach is that students complete a course at different speeds. Students can move quickly through the course and complete in significantly less time than the traditional semester, enabling them to move on to advanced courses earlier. Yet, students can also extend work on a course to well beyond the semester. We suggest that this extra time investment is worthwhile. Students can focus on the feedback provided and re-work material. Passing means that students have actually mastered the material and fulfilled the learning objectives. There is no scraping through, and failure rates are lower. Throughout the course students can focus on their achievements instead of getting demoralised by low marks they cannot improve on.

Our approach is not new. It builds closely on the Keller Plan or Personalised System of Instruction (PSI) (Keller, 1968). This was popular in the 1970s and resulted in highly positive learning outcomes. At the core, the strengths of PSI lay in insisting on mastery of learning objectives in combination with giving students feedback and time to learn from this feedback. Supported by improved learning and communication technologies, we want to revive PSI.

We can now produce multimedia instead of text-only study material, book keeping of individual achievement is easier, and personalised support of distance learners in face-to-face

conversations is possible. In extension of PSI we want to strengthen the learning partnerships between students and staff by putting a stronger focus on shared planning and discussion. In this endeavour we are guided by the research on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002). We strive to create learning environments that support the development of self-regulated motivation through addressing students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, this vision is not reality. The changes we suggest affect several university procedures and systems, from enrolment to examinations and finances. Investigations have shown that those hurdles can be overcome and also that interfaces to government agencies are not in the way. At the moment we are fighting the financial support hurdle. Implementing this vision requires far higher spending on teaching support than current approaches. But, our modelling shows that the higher investment should pay for itself in financial terms by higher pass rates at first year and by greater success at higher levels. Besides balancing the books, the biggest impact might come from the gains in student and teacher satisfaction.

My teaching career started in the late 1990s. Over the last years I have grown increasingly dissatisfied. My university has passed on to teachers external pressures created by funding providers. Participation has been widened, levels of support have decreased, and expected pass rates have risen. It is my responsibility to ensure that enough students pass so the university can maintain its income streams. Passing now comes before learning. This threatens the value of our degrees and takes the satisfaction out of teaching. Instances of direct contact with students and supporting their learning and progression become fewer and further between, whereas the time spent on administration and formalities increases. I am not alone in this observation. In preparation of our proposal we held conversations with educators at our university. They spoke of the love and passion they have for their jobs and of the enjoyment they derive from seeing students' progress. What they criticised were the time pressures, the administrative burdens, and the failures to reach students who disappear into the system. The strength of our proposal lies in connecting students and teachers. We need to establish personal relationships from day one and set strong foundations, both on subject and study skills levels, for successful and satisfying learning and teaching.

References

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