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Coaching learning, cultivating confidence: Insights, reflections and takeaways on first-year student support

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ABSTRACT

In this vignette, I reflect on some insights for first-year student support I gathered in 45 years of experience. Supporting student learning in the first year of contemporary higher education involves a wide range of staff in a variety of roles. This was not the case when I started teaching in higher education. As universities in Flanders grew larger, more and more supporting tasks were transferred to specialists. I experienced this development as department head of education and through visitation committees. When we organised in 2010 an EFYE conference in Belgium, almost all Flemish universities were represented, showing that the time was ripe to intensify research and practice regarding first-year student support. A few years earlier we had started a practice-oriented research project on how to support first-year students (FYS) starting with the research question: Which characteristics of FYS determine their chances of success? Based on the results, we started various actions and further research. This led to the development of Lemo, an online self-assessment feedback tool on learning competences and motivation. We explored how the tool could best be used to effectively support students' learning. Student advisors and mentors can play an important role in this, but they themselves indicate that it remains difficult to reach and effectively support students who do not know how to manage their learning process.

The first and best place to support students in taking up their own learning process is the classroom. There, teachers can address the specific challenges students face and build their confidence in how to study. This requires professionalisation of the teachers and sufficient teaching time for the core subjects of the first year.

Keywords: success factors, learning strategies, feedback tool, teacher design teams, self-regulated learning

Increasing attention to supporting first-year students

Drawing on 45 years of experience in higher education, I am looking back at various initiatives to support first-year students to identify some key insights and takeaways I would like to share. Supporting student learning in the first year of contemporary higher education involves a wide range of staff in a variety of roles (Morgan, 2013). This was not the case in 1978 when I started teaching in higher education. As the lead teacher of a class of 30 first-year students (FYS), I introduced them to the functioning of the school, organised social activities to promote group dynamics, and served as the students' personal mentor. The first assignment students got was to write an essay about their motivation for the degree programme.

As universities in Flanders grew larger after several waves of mergers, more and more supporting tasks were transferred to specialists as study supervisors, student counsellors, financial advisors, mental health advisors, disability support staff, etc. I experienced this development as department head of education and

as chair and secretary of visitation committees. The quality assurance system became an important catalyst for the development of all kinds of support activities. I was particularly pleased with the criterion: does the programme take into account characteristic features of incoming FYS? When we organised the 5th EFYE conference in 2010, the first in Belgium, almost all Flemish universities sent a delegation, showing that the time was ripe to intensify research and practice regarding first-year student support.

Access to higher education in Flanders

Higher education in Flanders is open access (with the exception of medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, and performing arts programmes). The only requirement is a secondary school diploma. Furthermore, students can enrol in virtually any higher education programme, regardless of their specific secondary school specialisation. The intention of this system, combined with low tuition fees, was and still is to democratise education. In reality, it generally results in the first year being a selection year, with low pass rates.

Determining factors for success in the first year

Since 2004, universities of applied sciences in Flanders have also received funding to conduct research. In one of the first research projects we launched, we wanted to address the low first-year pass rates. We collaborated with researchers from the University of Antwerp to find out which entry characteristics of our students were correlating with success. The influence of students' personal and background variables (intelligence, gender, prior education) and of socio-economic factors (family background, cultural capital) was demonstrated in our study. We also found that study motivation and the quality of learning strategies are related to success rates (Donche & Van Petegem, 2011; Van de Mosselaer et al., 2006). We decided to collaborate with study advisors and programme administrators to take action to guide and coach students in these areas: to foster their autonomous motivation and self-efficacy, and to strengthen regulation (self-regulation, planning and time management) and processing strategies (analysing, relating and structuring, concretising, critical processing, memorising and cooperative learning).

Using a feedback tool for coaching

We started from the basic idea that every student is primarily responsible for their own learning process and chose to hold up a mirror to students regarding their study motivation, learning strategies and self-efficacy. Based on scientific frameworks, we developed the Lemo instrument at our institution in collaboration with the University of Antwerp (Donche et al., 2010; Van de Mosselaer et al., 2012; Vanthournout et al., 2016). It consists of:

- a self-report questionnaire;
- an individual feedback report: a personalised learning and motivation profile, with strengths and points to work on, an explanation of results, and tips on how to enhance learning competences, and foster motivation and self-efficacy; and
- a group feedback report: an overview of the students' characteristics for student advisors, tutors and lecturers.

The first online Lemo-tool was ready in 2010 and provided diversified access for all involved. It was used in many Flemish and some Dutch universities, mainly in universities of applied sciences, as well as in many secondary schools, to prepare pupils for higher education. In the following years we evaluated the effectiveness and impact of the instrument. We listened to students, student counsellors, lecturers and people responsible for the use of Lemo in various universities. This led to a renewed version in 2017, with a revalidated questionnaire and with much attention to a clear structure, attractive visual layout and understandable language in the feedback reports.

Focus groups with students were very insightful, especially regarding how the tool can be used so that more students can make correct estimations of the learning strategies they need to deploy to adapt to the expectations. It is important that the tool is deployed at a time when most students have actually made a commitment to studying, that students are informed about the relevance of the tool and they are continually made aware about effective study methods throughout the year (discussion of results, retakes after exams, self-reflection, etc.). In programmes that take this to heart, student advisors and mentors play a key role in this process. They indicate that it remains difficult to reach and support students who do not know how to manage their learning process.

Coaching learning in the classroom

The main insight for me on how to coach learning remains that it is best done in the classroom by the teachers themselves and in collaboration with the students. We organised focus groups with students to ask them how teachers can do this. The following guidelines are based on student voices:

- Communicate expectations and objectives of the course regularly;
- Clarify relevance, create meaningful context;
- Organise activities, give assignments so that students use and develop essential cognitive processing strategies;
- Create a good social atmosphere, let students learn from each other;
- Offer formative assessment options, provide feedback, encourage students to monitor themselves;
- Spend time during the class to reflect on how to study; and
- Schedule review lessons.

Separate workshops on learning strategies by external advisors can be inspiring but can also feel disconnected from the learning contexts of the courses. In the classroom, teachers can focus students' learning activities on the processing strategies they need to master, address the specific challenges students face, and build their confidence in how to study. Due in part to time pressure, teachers often limit themselves to content delivery. Yet, they are best placed to support students in becoming confident, independent learners. A key question then is how we can support teachers in taking on this task. My answer: 1) by providing sufficient teaching time for the most important courses, and 2) by professionalisation.

Sufficient teaching time for main subjects

To support first-year students, a programme at our university implemented 'learning groups' into the curriculum. The class size was 15. The content focused on topics typical of First-Year Experience Seminars as in the USA. The method focused on active learning methods, including group discussions and group work. The use and follow-up of the Lemo was integrated. Although students and instructors positively evaluated the course, it was discontinued because its impact in terms of transfer to other subjects could not be demonstrated. Instead, the main courses were allocated more teaching time, giving teachers more time for study coaching during class time. This allowed them to monitor the impact of their efforts on student engagement, understanding, and progress in the actual learning environment.

Professionalisation through teacher design teams

To professionalise teachers' learning coaching skills, we opted in a 2017 practice-based research project for teacher design teams (TDTs), partly because traditional professionalisation initiatives (e.g., workshops) are rarely effective (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012). TDTs are a group of at least two teachers, from the same or related subjects, who collaborate on a regular basis, with the goal to (re)design and enact (a part of) their curriculum (Handelzalts, 2009). This allowed for professional development to be directly linked to teachers' daily teaching practice.

We organised TDTs focused on addressing learning support in the classroom. I was lucky my TDT consisted of trained and committed teachers who did not need convincing of the benefits of learning coaching. They shared their practical approaches. Two examples:

- Starting with a new subject, Niki tests the prior knowledge of students and also asks what they want to know about it. This takes time, but she experiences that this makes sense because you let students think about it, you can connect with what they already know and with their interests.
- Sarah often gives students the assignment to illustrate a part of the learning content in preparation for the next lesson using a video clip, poetry, newspaper article, etc. She always asks other volunteers. The next lesson then starts with this illustration. This practice helps students to make the connection between theory and practice.

Having students collaborate gives them additional learning opportunities. The feedback they give each other and receive from the teacher in class creates a supportive classroom culture. When they successfully complete a task, they see themselves as capable learners, not as passive recipients of teaching.

Commitment to supporting self-regulated learning (SRL)

Teachers in higher education easily assume that FYS are adults and sufficiently prepared for their studies after completing secondary education. However, results of Lemo feedback reports annually confirm what in-depth research also shows (Donche & Van Petegem, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Van de Mosselaer et al., 2006; Willems et al., 2021): many first-year students struggle with self-regulated learning (SRL) and need to be challenged to develop their learning competences. Colleagues investigated this further through 'think aloud' sessions in study assignments and focus groups. During the first semester, FYS mainly rely on learning strategies they developed during secondary education. For many FYS students, exam results at the end of the first semester are a wake-up call, prompting them to reconsider how best to process course material. At that time, a retake of Lemo, giving an updated individual feedback report, can be a significant catalyst, especially if followed by a meeting with a study advisor. But FYS also indicated they would benefit from

more support from their teachers to regulate and monitor their learning. In turn, teachers indicated that, while they consider it important to utilise learning coaching, they lack knowledge and tools to concretely support students in their development of SRL. In the ZALM-project, colleagues thus used educational design research (McKenney & Reeves, 2014) to develop a toolbox with concrete materials to guide FYS' self-management strategies (Govaerts et al.,2024; Koelman et al., 2022, 2024). The toolbox eventually became a database hosted on the institution's learning platform, containing about thirty support sheets tailored to higher education. One example which can be explained briefly is the following:

Think-pair-share is an accessible way to have students actively process content:

1. Students think individually about a problem or assignment;
2. They pair their ideas with a fellow student; and
3. They share with the whole group.

Evaluations indicate that instructors enjoy browsing through the toolbox – with or without the use of filters (group size, self-management components, or LEMO scales) – and choose an approach they will implement, while aware that growing in SRL is a cyclical and time-intensive process.

Concluding thoughts

Compared to 40 years ago, greater attention is now paid to the challenges and sometimes difficult circumstances that first-year students face. Centralising student-support staff (advising, disability support, career services, financial aid, tutoring, etc.) into a student centre has become a common model with several clear advantages. Yet, the question remains which support initiatives are better offered locally, within or close to the programmes.

The classroom remains the first and best place to support students in taking up their own learning process. There, teachers can address the specific challenges students face and help them build confidence in study approaches. If we want to take that support seriously, we need to focus more on teacher professionalisation, as well as further researching its effectiveness.

Biography

Herman Van de Mosselaer taught first-year students for the first 20 years of his career. The following 20 years he took up several positions in higher education: from department head of education and quality assurance to coordinator of educational research. He has been a member of the EFYE Conference Organising Committee since 2010.

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