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Disrupting first-year curriculum design: A holistic approach to student success

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Abstract

This 'On the Horizon' article presents a reflective case study on the implementation of a reimagined undergraduate tourism curriculum. Grounded in Freirean principles and compassionate pedagogy, the innovative design of the first year moves beyond traditional modular learning and graded assessments. Our students undertake an ungraded and holistically assessed year-long learning journey that is team-taught and project-based.

This article documents the pragmatism and compromise required to bring this pedagogical disruption into being, focusing on those moments of realism and concession required during both its introduction and first delivery. I reflect on how my team and I navigated three separate, but interlinked areas of resistance: institutional rigidity, initial perceptions amongst the teaching team around the loss of professional identity traditionally related to module leadership, and the pedagogical work of guiding students through the unlearning of their entrenched relationship with assessment.

Initial findings, drawn from personal reflections noted after ongoing staff action research meetings and curated from student reflective portfolios, reveal that while this process caused initial anxiety amongst different groups, it ultimately fostered some deeper critical consciousness and a shift in motivation from grades to intentional learning amongst numerous, but not all students. The paper concludes by distilling key lessons from this messy middle of pedagogical innovation to support other curriculum designers considering a radical reimagination of their course.

Keywords: curriculum design, compassionate pedagogy, ungrading, reflective practice

Introduction

This 'On the Horizon' piece documents the journey of a holistically reimagined first-year tourism curriculum. Rooted in Freirean (1970) principles and Kift's (2009) work on transition pedagogy, the teaching team and I redesigned our curriculum to be transformative and compassionate. It was not a simple refresh, but a response to deep pedagogical tensions my own earlier insider research had identified: Staff felt increasingly individualised and risk-averse in a measured academy yet simultaneously articulated a clear aspiration for greater collaboration and deeper, more humanising learning experiences.

I focus here on the how of this compassionate design. I have documented its key features, the significant challenges of implementation, alongside the initial and often disorienting reception by students. Told through an action research lens, this is the story of our attempt to humanise the first-year experience and contribute to a wider, international conversation on student first year success (Nutt & Calderon, 2009).

Theoretical foundations for disruption

This curriculum redesign was a practical disruption rooted in a deep dissatisfaction with prevailing pedagogical orthodoxies amongst the teaching team on my programme. Our *why* begins with rejecting an output measured, banking-style education, where students are producers of measurable products and are repositories receiving transmitted content (Freire, 1970). As leader of this teaching and curriculum design team, I contended that the numerical grade is one of the modern instruments of this model and acts as an oppressive structure that dulls students' curiosity and transformation (Freire, 1970). This theoretical grounding informed our adoption of an ungraded assessment approach (Blum, 2020) as a cornerstone of our transition pedagogy, a move that the literature simultaneously predicted may cause disorientation for students (Hall & Meinking, 2022). Similarly, our *how* was built on Freire's (1970) humanising and non-hierarchical dialogue. We felt the architecture of a modular curriculum worked against this dialogue by forcing both academics and students into isolating silos. This fragmentation seemed especially counter-productive for a field like tourism. Our discipline is not a single subject but a convergence of many, demanding a truly interdisciplinary skillset. Yet, as Seo et al. (2023) note, academic practice has often failed to build the structures needed to foster this. Our non-modular, team-taught strategy was therefore a deliberate attempt to dismantle these silos, rebuilding instead towards Freirean mutuality (1970).

In this we were driven by both pedagogical theory and a pressing local reality. Nationally, the transition to HE is a period of heightened vulnerability (Hull et al., 2019) and our own programme reflected this, with escalating mitigations and withdrawals linked to deteriorating student mental health.

As one colleague noted during earlier doctoral research focus groups, we could not "expect to see students in the classroom if they don't feel resilient enough to be there". These circumstances made our philosophical *why* a practical imperative. A Freirean banking model that prioritises outputs over process seems actively harmful in this context. Instead, our *what* became an act of embedding compassion within the curriculum: We sought to protect spaces where unhurried and critical dialogue could occur (Darder, 2018) and where students' meaningful engagement with their studies constituted a vital component of flourishing against their full cognitive, emotional, physical, and social potential (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). By embedding well-being and focusing on skills development over transmitted content, we were building our version of a compassionate pedagogy to support transition (Kift, 2009) where we could reposition our work from that of content deliverer to learning facilitator in response to contemporary student needs.

Designing a holistic first-year experience

We devised a new structure designed to first establish the conditions necessary for this critical work. Following Weston and Felten's work, we wanted to foster a community where students felt they mattered, contending that only from this compassionate starting point can students build the confidence for critical praxis (Stachowiak, 2021).

Our foundation was to dismantle high-risk summative assessments, replacing them with a pass/retrieve summative reflective portfolio. This, in turn, called for a replacement of numerical grades with qualitative and dialogue-based feedback. In scheduled workshops we allocated time for students to act on feedback and awarded credit for demonstrating development throughout the year.

To extend our compassionate methodology, weekly, contextualised well-being sessions were co-designed and co-delivered in partnership with the university's well-being practitioner team. An erstwhile overstuffed

curriculum was keenly edited, and space was protected to encourage deeper exploration of topics that awakened curiosity amongst students.

We replaced siloed, modular learning with project-based teaching blocks where learning was structured around a series of complex, real-world tourism challenges. We felt this promoted an authentic and interdisciplinary understanding essential for our complex discipline (Schijf et al., 2025). This also led to the idea of team-teaching across the year, allowing the expertise of multiple tutors to contribute critical perspectives in workshops together.

To unveil tourism injustices and issues further and foster compassion towards all amongst our students, we included marginalised voices in our curriculum as well as embedding purposeful civic engagement through work with charity partners.

Navigating the challenges of disruption

Even before launch, this intentionally disruptive curriculum forced us to strike constant balances between our pedagogical vision and the university's regulatory realities. As we entered the delivery phase, personal challenges emerged that were rooted in the professional apprehensions of the teaching team and the deeply ingrained expectations of the students themselves.

Institutional rigidity

Navigating the institution's own rigid structures required great creativity. Our desire to remove siloed modules, for instance, immediately clashed with the university's administrative disposition. Revalidation paperwork and external compliance systems demanded more traditional modular units. Removing these forced us to engineer a workaround where we created an invisible modular sub-structure (we split the academic year into two large credit-bearing modules). This existed purely for administrative colleagues and external regulators, while remaining unseen by the students, who experienced the curriculum as a single, holistic journey.

Tension also emerged with our move to an ungraded, pass/retrieve assessment model as existing student record systems could only process numerical grades. Such inflexibility meant we had to build and maintain our own local tracking system to monitor students' progress. Quantitative marking rubrics were also reworked to reflect a more compassionate vocabulary that positioned failure more positively as emergent practice.

Closer staff collaboration was initially constrained by the realities of the timetable. Once an overall schedule was established, we met weekly to coordinate the complexities of team-taught sessions. Additionally, we repurposed our time allocated to reactive academic advising to support students proactively in workshops at times of formative assessment.

Evolving professional identities

The teaching team itself voiced its own set of concerns about our pedagogical risk-taking. The most personal was the initial apprehension around module leadership. As academics, we are often conditioned to be the sole proprietors of our specific modules, and the move to a fully team-taught, co-created year felt to some like a loss of professional identity. I had to consciously shift this mindset by collectively reframing our collaborative approach as an opportunity to model this key skill to students. Earlier experience of

synoptic assessment and modular-level co-delivery from earlier iterations of our programme supported my efforts in this.

The plan to embed well-being interventions also caused concern with many colleagues readily admitting a lack of expertise in this field. Acknowledging the limitations of our expertise at the outset of the redesign project, we took advantage of the university's efforts to improve its practice in this area and asked cross-service colleagues for support. This led to a true co-design partnership with specialist well-being practitioners assisting in producing tourism-relevant and timely workshops embedded throughout the year.

The team confronted a further challenge in managing the time-intensive and often unpredictable nature of skills development and co-creation exercises with students. The demands of these activities meant that weekly workshops frequently had to be adapted in real time, requiring constant flexibility and responsiveness from and between tutors. This ongoing process prompted regular deliberation about whether there was sufficient protected time for essential elements such as dialogue and reflection. During these exchanges, it became evident that the role of the tutor had evolved fundamentally from content deliverer to emerging learning facilitator.

Student journeys of unlearning

The most significant challenge, though not an entirely unexpected one, came from the students themselves who used their reflective portfolios to share their first-year experiences. Deeply conditioned by traditional assessment strategies, our students found ungrading to be at times disorienting, echoing recent findings from Hall and Meinking (2022). Articulated by many students, Student A's reflections were typical: "During my first assessment, I felt very confused and anxious due to partaking in an unfamiliar way of being assessed as I was used to exams and revising".

We reflected quickly that we had underestimated just how entrenched our students' relationship with assessment had become. The move to ungraded, reflective portfolios was met with considerable confusion; many students struggled to comprehend how reflecting on their learning could be a valid form of assessment and many were inexpert in reflective practice. By the end of the year, several observed improvements in their reflective abilities as illustrated by Student B's comments: "Looking back at the start of the academic year, my reflections about Learning Outcome One seem underdeveloped and weak. The reflection does not have much detail when I compare it to later in the year".

To counter this, the teaching team made constant, explicit efforts to link every task and discussion to learning outcomes, demonstrating how each activity could build evidence for student portfolios. We provided feedback through multiple formative assessments and rewarded the act of responding to feedback. This approach reaped partial success as seen in this typical comment from Student C: "I will be open to feedback going forward and see it as a chance for growth rather than something to stress about".

Non-traditional, compassionate assessment choices proved challenging for some of our students. When offered presentation options for their portfolio design, many preferred prescriptive instructions and although initially averse to strict guidelines, we had to compromise with some students and provide more direct suggestions for those who struggled to make decisions.

Although this initial confusion was a significant hurdle, the final portfolios provided evidence of this unlearning process in action, echoing Mendoza et al.'s (2022) research that positions student reflections as powerful tools for self-efficacy. For some students, a new relationship with assessment appeared to shift their motivation for study. As Student D reflected, "writing became a reflective space. This reflection helped

me shift from writing for grades to writing with intention" whilst Student E commented on the "value of being present in my own learning".

These comments (and others) represented the potential success of our longer-term pedagogical risk-taking and showed us that a student journey from anxiety to intention was possible.

Lessons for future innovators

I have found that curriculum disruption is a constant and sometimes exhausting effort of compromised evolution. Our journey was dominated by tensions uncovered between the design of our curriculum and our institutional architecture, our teaching team, and our students. There were occasions when I questioned the true value of the exercise. This journey of negotiated complexities and partial successes often called to mind Alinsky's (1972) 'rhetorical radicals' and their dismissal of the middle ground. Rather than failing with all pure design principles intact, I have come to reflect that real success was found here through pragmatic interpretation. There were eventual and notable payoffs such as the student reflections around an awakening of their critical consciousness, their motivations to study, and a 96% continuation rate for the cohort.

This journey yielded hard-won lessons that can contribute to the reflective practitioner dialogue that defines the European First Year Experience Community (Carey et al., 2024). The first is one of pragmatic translation: be prepared to build invisible structures and offer creative workarounds that speak the language of the institution. Secondly, unlearning was as fundamental for the teaching team as it was for the students. It required us to evolve consciously by letting go of previous workstyles and embracing team-based and cross-service collaboration. The most critical lesson, however, is to reframe student disorientation with assessment not as a barrier, but as the central pedagogical task of the first year. This time-intensive, student-focused work of building new vocabulary and a new learning journey is the curriculum.

Ethical considerations

Part of an ongoing longitudinal study, primary data included in this work was collected from student assessments and staff meetings. Ethical clearance to undertake this work was gained following the scrutiny and approval of Leeds Beckett University's School of Sport Ethics and Research Committee, reference number 500557.

Biography

Lisa Gorton is a Course Director and a contributor to institutional curriculum innovation at Leeds Beckett University. She embeds well-being and experiential learning into course design and is passionate about inclusive education. She reimagines curriculum design through compassionate assessment, transforming teaching practices within her institution and beyond. In 2025 she was awarded the Victor Middleton Prize for Tourism Education and Scholarship by the Association for Tourism in Higher Education. Email: l.gorton@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

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