CHAPTER 16

Developing learning partnerships in the Postgraduate classroom

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Abstract

The Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PG Dip: HE) was rolled out for the first time at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) amidst the novel Covid-19 pandemic. The course was designed for face-to-face delivery but due to the global pandemic the programme had to be offered remotely. The authors are from the Academic Development Unit and Writing Centre and it was our first time teaching online so we had to quickly learn how to navigate the online teaching and learning space. We were faced with a paradoxical situation in our class as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z students with varying digital competencies and teaching experiences all belonging to the same cohort. We had to take these factors into consideration as we purposefully redesigned the delivery of the module and developed innovative ways of teaching and assessing remotely. The theory of Connectivism (Siemens 2004); Healey, Flint and Harrington's model (2014) of engaging students as partners in higher education; and Prensky's 'pedagogy of partnering' (Prensky 2010) underpinned our work and influenced the design and delivery of the curriculum. In an attempt to foster collaborative learning, we provided students with the

tools, scenarios and leading questions that enabled the fostering of ownership in their learning. We offered opportunities for students to actively construct knowledge by evaluating, analysing, synthesising and applying new knowledge in relevant contexts. As students became partners in the learning process, we found shifts in their 'knowing and being' (Barnett 2009) which was evident in their written tasks, group activities and discussion boards. Particular dispositions and qualities that foregrounded identity development and collaborative learning were developed during the course of the module. This chapter foregrounds that online teaching and learning should be designed to enable a partnership between the facilitator and student as this allows for particular dispositions and qualities to be developed in students. Learning activities must be adaptable and robust to encourage sustained, active participation. As facilitators of learning we must reflect on our practice and make pedagogical shifts in our professional learning as we design teaching and learning in multimodal learning environments.

Keywords: partnerships, connectivism, collaborative learning, reflection, curriculum design and delivery

Introduction

The Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PG Dip: HE) was rolled out for the first time at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualification is housed in the School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Design at DUT. It was designed for a blended learning approach with contact sessions supported by online interaction, however, due to the global pandemic, it had to be offered remotely. The programme is offered part-time, online over two years and has a prior qualification requirement and a minimum of two

years teaching or related experience in higher education. It was developed by a working group comprising of members from the School of Education and the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at DUT. The aim of the programme is to enhance the knowledge and competencies of lecturers, academic developers and quality promotion specialists in teaching and learning centres whose role is to contribute to the transformation of higher education. The PG Dip: HE which consists of eight modules, aims to develop in participants, high levels of theoretical engagement, intellectual independence and the ability to relate knowledge to a range of contexts in order to undertake specialist work in higher education.

The authors of this chapter are from the Academic Development Unit and Writing Centre and facilitated one of the modules on teaching and learning. We were faced with a complex situation in our postgraduate class with Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z students with varying digital competencies and teaching experiences all belonging to the same cohort. It was also our first time teaching remotely, and this meant that we had to quickly learn how to navigate the online teaching and learning space. We purposefully redesigned the delivery of the 8-week module and developed innovative ways of teaching and assessing remotely with the aim of deepening theoretical understanding of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education and equipping students with knowledge in innovative strategies in higher education.

As we engaged in learning partnerships through active learning we also embarked on our own journey of professional learning. Viewing students as partners in the classroom was both challenging and exciting. Developing partnerships with our students meant that we had

to let go of the reins and trust in the process that was unfolding. It involved hours of preparation as we had to engage in reading and research to design well-structured activities for both synchronous and asynchronous engagement. In the selection of the module content, we were mindful of fostering a shared knowledge base of theories, concepts and principles from which participants could draw to inform their practice as academics. We spent countless hours reading students' responses to the discussion threads or reflective responses to the readings we recommended for the module. Students also shared resources which we engaged with. It was a fulfilling learning experience as we gained new and invaluable insights into various aspects of the learning and teaching in higher education. Learning was reciprocal as we assumed new roles and identities as partners in the learning.

Learning partnerships

Biggs (2012) highlights the importance of good dialogue and how it shapes and deepens understanding of learning activities. A significant part of our teaching was underpinned by Lea and Street's (1998) Academic Literacies approach which supports dialoguing in preparation for writing tasks or activities. During our post-lecture reflections, we discussed what worked, what did not work, how we felt about the students' engagement, were they engaged productively, what needed to be built on in the next session and so forth. We also used the weekly feedback from the students to improve our practice. These regular reflections and feedback enabled us to critique our facilitation styles, the resource materials and the level of partnership with our students. It also helped us to understand the value of developing adaptable and robust learning activities to encourage sustained, active participation.

Student engagement was supported through online platforms; we used Moodle which is the official Learning Management System at our institution for asynchronous teaching and for uploading the assessments and we used Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) for synchronous teaching. We encouraged online engagements through regular formative tasks, discussions and the submission of module assignments on which participants received developmental feedback. This synchronous and asynchronous engagement with students enabled a partnership between us and the students.

Theoretical focus

In this section we discuss some of the theories that framed our understanding of developing learning partnerships with our students. This discussion includes the concept of connectivism with a focus on learning in hybrid settings; Healey, Flint and Harrington's model (2014) that underpins ways of engaging students as partners in higher education; high impact practices particularly the flipped classroom (Gerstein 2012); and Prensky's pedagogy of partnering (Prensky 2010).

Connectivism

The theory of Connectivism underpinned the way we structured and facilitated the module. Connectivism is "the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories" (Siemens 2004). Siemens further expands the tenets of the theory (2004: 1-2),

> Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between

important and unimportant information is vital. The ability to recognise when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made yesterday is also critical.

Pivotal to connectivism is the understanding that learning takes place across information technologies and networked communities (Dunaway 2011). The preliminary focus of connectivism is the "individual where personal knowledge comprises of a network, which feeds into organisations and institutions, back into the network, then continues to provide learning to the individual" (Govender and Rajkoomar 2021: 62). Connectivism highlights the significance of the capacity to be able to "recognise connections, patterns and similarities and the ability to synthesise ideas and information" (Dunaway 2011: 676). Connectivism highlights how learning takes place within physical classrooms and within hybrid settings. In our postgraduate class, students were accessing knowledge from various online sources and sharing their learnings and experiences with the rest of the class. The classroom was not teacher dominated but student centred and this led to deep learning. This was evident in the students' reflective pieces and their final assignment.

Model on how to engage students as partners in higher education

We further found the conceptual model by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014: 24) on ways of engaging students as partners in higher education, valuable as we began to contemplate how to engage our students as partners in the online classroom.
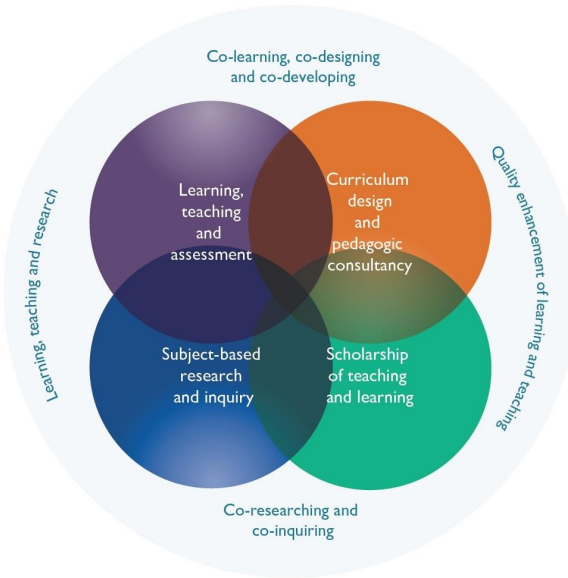
Figure 1: Ways of engaging students as partners in higher education (Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014: 24)

Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014) model distinguishes four broad areas in which students can act as partners in learning and teaching - learning, teaching and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. All four areas as illustrated in Figure 1 are imperative for engaging with students as partners. However, for the purpose of this chapter, we focus on one area which is learning, teaching and assessment. In order to develop partnerships in the post graduate classroom we had to prepare adequately for out of class and in- class learning so that students were active participants in their own learning. When engaging students in active learning (Kuh 2009) it is

important to create spaces for reflection. The spaces that we used in our postgraduate class were online platforms such as Moodle and Microsoft Teams. Students were also expected to submit written reflections as well as oral in-class reflections. As facilitators we had to consider the different learning styles of our students and their contexts when structuring, sequencing and pacing the curriculum (Kolb 1984).

Particular dispositions and qualities (Barnett 2009) that foregrounded identity development and collaborative learning were developed during the module and we emphasised the significance of reflection and transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) talks about critical reflection and teachers' role in creating 'safe' spaces to nurture students' reflective expressions. We encouraged participants to engage in reflective activities throughout the module by getting them to understand the value of engaging in small written tasks in preparation for online sessions (Schön 1983). The practice of reflection is supported by DHET (2018: 4) as it maintains that "Teaching development and teaching quality is more strongly enabled through reflection and collaborative interaction than through external prescription." Based on this, those of us in the academic project need to find meaningful, sustained ways through critical reflection to reposition our practices to build a transformed higher education system.

The flipped classroom

High impact practices including the flipped classroom (Gerstein 2012) were used to engage students in active learning and prepare them for the partnership journey. We recommended that students engage in specific readings and asynchronous activities on Moodle before every online lecture. We provided a variety of activities such as online threaded discussions, critical response to an article, responses to a

leading question which had to be supported by theory and debates. We found that these high impact practices led to rich, deep and insightful in-class discussions and students were also able to link the theory with practice. It was evident that students were steadily moving towards being active participants in their learning.

In an attempt to be inclusive and cater for the varied type of students in our class, we drew on Prensky's "pedagogy of partnering" (Prensky 2010: 4) in the design and delivery of the module. Furthermore, to foster collaborative learning, we provided students with the tools, scenarios and leading questions that enabled the fostering of ownership in their learning. We provided opportunities for students to actively construct knowledge by evaluating, analysing, critiquing, synthesising and applying new knowledge in relevant contexts. As students became partners in the learning process, we found shifts in their 'knowing and being' (Barnett 2009) which was evident in their written tasks, group activities and discussion boards. In the delivery of the module, we used various pedagogical strategies to cultivate 21st century skills, such as "critical and creative thinking, cognitive flexibility, integrative and reflective thinking, social skills, ethical reasoning, and inter- and cross-cultural competence" (Mintz 2020: 1).

Prensky (2010: 13) maintains that "partnering refers to letting students focus on the part of the learning process they do best, and letting teachers focus on the part of the learning process they can do best." Prensky (2010: 13) further suggests that students should be primarily responsible for "finding and following their passion, using whatever technology is available, researching and finding information, answering questions and sharing their thoughts and opinions, practising when properly motivated, and creating presentations in texts and

multimedia." Participants were encouraged to 'partner' with us (the facilitator and their fellow classmates) and engage in weekly pre-module activities where they could reflect on their specific discipline practices and institutional approaches to learning and teaching. They further brought their thoughts, ideas and visions to the online platform and this enabled rich discussions, a sense of interconnectedness among participants and active learning. Weekly online discussions encouraged students to reflect on their practice. We set pre-module tasks to encourage critical reflection on their roles within their institutions, their practices and the theories underpinning their practices. In doing so, we provided a space for students to engage in critical written reflection. These pre-module tasks aimed to enable participants to begin to identify possible areas for change in the field of higher education and change in their practice. At the beginning, we faced some resistance to these weekly pre-module tasks, but students quickly came on board as they realised its value and relevance to their professional growth in the higher education sector.

In their first pre-module task, participants were tasked with providing a written description on the teaching and learning strategies in their institutions. They needed to analyse institutional documents, including vision and mission statements and policies. We encouraged participants to use their agency as academics, and Margaret Archer's Social Realism Theory (Archer 1995; 1996), particularly the concepts of culture, structure and agency, to engage with the cultural and structural enablements and constraints related to learning and teaching in higher education. Our facilitation aspired to deepen participants' knowledge of the significant challenges of student access and success in the South African higher education context.

Ownership of learning – participants' perspectives

Developing partnerships in the classroom entails that students take ownership of their learning. In this module this was aligned to the purpose of the learning, teaching and assessment aimed at developing participants' knowledge of student learning to enable them to contribute to the development of the teaching and learning agenda in their institutions which will contribute to enhancing epistemological access for all students. The students in our class were in various stages of their careers ranging from junior lecturers to professors. These are some of the reflections that participants shared after a classroom discussion.

> Student A: *I feel we can support students in their learning by firstly having a conducive environment for learning. This also needs to be done by our teaching approach which must be creative and innovative. In addition, there must an engaged, participative approach from the student. As teachers, our role is to facilitate the learning process.*

> Student B: *Academic teachers have a tendency to overload the curriculum with content, burdening themselves with the task of teaching that content and student to absorb and reproduce. Threshold concepts enables teachers to refine what is fundamental to grasp of a subject and make sense of what seems central and often difficult to grasp by most learners.*

Online sessions also foregrounded theories informed by a social understanding of learning. We explained that academics need to use learning theories in their teaching, to reflect on what they do, and to share their experiences. Learning theories enable the development of

academics' pedagogical knowledge. We asked participants to think about how they will integrate some of the theoretical perspectives in their practices in teaching, learning and assessment in their institution. They needed to reflect on the needs of their students, the national imperatives, and the institutional directives that inform their teaching practice. Importantly, participants were given a space to reflect on the integration of theory and practice and share and discuss these ideas and implement them into their teaching practice. Comments from Student C and D reveals a shift in the way these students perceive their role as a teacher.

> Student C: *I believe students learn best when they can relate to the content and are able to make real life connections to the content and the world around them. In this context, I believe my role as a teacher is to help students to make meaning of the content that is presented to them and be able to see connections between the content they learn in class and the world around them.*

> Student D: *...this strategy is deeply rooted in the constructivism paradigm. Through my knowledge of Media Studies, I will make the learning activities to be more engaging and intriguing to all my students irrespective of their backgrounds and social experiences. My assessments will be incorporated in my teaching to advance high premium learning. I will ask my students to point out critical ethical matters in the global media and dissect such reportage based on the theoretical concepts.*

In terms of Prensky's suggestion of making use of available technology, participants had to actively use the learning platforms including Moodle, MS Teams, email and WhatsApp groups to meet the programme outcomes. Technology was used by participants when working on group

activities, for independent research and inquiry. It was our first-time using Moodle as a mode of instruction and we had to quickly learn how to navigate the system. It was challenging at first and we set up a separate Moodle classroom where we could 'play around' with the different tools. Using technology enabled us to mediate learning in this module and as discussed earlier in this chapter we had a mix of generational students with differing digital competencies, so we had to provide much support and training on how to use the Moodle platform.

The concept of students 'engaging in research and finding information' as proffered by Prensky (2010) formed an integral part of this module. Participants were provided with a detailed list of core and recommended readings for the module, however we emphasised that further research needed to be undertaken by participants to meet the outcomes and for theoretical engagement and knowledge building. We used tools such as discussion boards, Microsoft forms and break-out rooms to encourage participants to engage in their own learning. The breakout rooms in MS Teams were used to generate small group discussions. We found that there was a richer discussion and more participation within the small groups. During sessions we provided an article and leading questions to stimulate discussion and students could draw on their own resources to support and build their arguments. We further encouraged students to research and find information to be able to articulate a theoretically robust understanding of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education in South Africa. In addition, participants were encouraged to share reading resources in the relevant online channels on the MS Teams platform.

Prensky (2010: 13) also proposes "answering questions and sharing their thoughts and opinions" and in the teaching, learning and assessment

module participants provided their perspectives by answering questions posed through in-class discussions, questions raised by the facilitators and fellow participants on Moodle discussion boards, via the chat function on MS Teams and during online synchronous teaching. It was evident that through encouraging the sharing of opinions of participants from various disciplines, participants shared their contexts and practices as is evident in the comment from Student E.

> Student E: *Since sociocultural theories advance a mediatory role in learning, my duties as the lecturer can be described in the way they encourage learning and is realised via Vygotsky concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD describes the nature of the environment that promotes student learning. New challenging situations for learners demands new innovative mediatory tools for that activity. As a lecturer I need to afford students the right learning environment with adequate support from other students...".*

Prensky's (2010) view of 'creating presentations in texts and using multimedia' was employed in our module and we used online breakout rooms to provide participants an opportunity to work in groups, dialogue and create presentations that were shared and discussed in the plenary session. These included presentations where participants reflected on their institutions' teaching and learning agenda, shared diverse discipline practices, and teaching and learning approaches all of which contributed to building new knowledge in the field.

In an effort to foster collaborative learning, we provided students with the tools, scenarios and leading questions that enabled the fostering of ownership in their learning. Ashwin (2009) speaks of how teaching-learning are intertwined and must interact and the value of collaborative approaches to teaching and learning for students. During

the programme, through collaborative dialogical engagement, we assisted students with what Biggs (2012: 42) calls "the felt need to get there." The non-threatening partnering environment when purposefully created enables participants to engage, ask questions, grow, and develop their understanding of the need for transformation in teaching and learning, which further strengthens their ability to become more confident in their roles in the academic environment. This was evident in the way in which students engaged in learning activities throughout the module and in their final module assignment. We acknowledged that students needed a supportive context in which to learn and grow and one where they felt a sense of belonging. In doing so, we needed to carefully think about our role and how we were to motivate the cohort to succeed. Our aim was to create the climate and environment for the development of the student and for them to explore, discover and own their learning.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has opened up critical spaces for higher education practitioners to reflect on our curriculum and pedagogies. It has highlighted the need for academics and academic developers to utilise meta-theoretical knowledge to enable us to better understand that higher education is a social field. It has also helped us understand the importance of reflecting on our roles, academic practices and our views on student learning. Our main argument in this chapter is that a pedagogical shift is required in our classrooms where students are viewed as partners in the learning process. The Covid-19 pandemic foregrounded the necessity of embracing pedagogical shifts which requires that we need to undergo a process of unlearning and relearning new ways of thinking, doing and becoming. In turn, students

should be encouraged to take ownership of their learning. Theories such as connectivism (Siemens 2004), engaging students as partners (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014) and the pedagogy of partnering (Prensky 2010) opens up incredible opportunities and the potential to enable partnerships between the facilitator and student, allowing particular dispositions, qualities and knowledge/s to be developed in both the lecturer and the student. These are vital for the 21st century classroom as it caters for a diverse student and staff population and creates a vibrant and flexible learning space for both students and staff.

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