Student Retention Symposium

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First year: culturing students, academics and the learning environment

Thanks Alf. It’s fabulous [0:00:03.3] is going to recognise some of her data because what I wanted to encourage everyone to realise is that you all make a difference. It doesn’t matter if you’re a teacher within a course, you’re a course convenor, you’re a program convenor, every little bit helps and that’s what we’ve got to actually do. My context is I’ll teach anatomy to anybody who’ll listen, and even those that don’t I’d give it a go as well. To the point where build an anatomy facility because everybody wants to learn anatomy.

So my students in this case are first year nursing students. They’re primarily, there’s about 90% of them are women. Many of them are mature age by that sort of nasty category. First in family, absolutely, 66%. But the most important aspect for me is that they’re not juggling their home life balance. Yes, that’s what we all do, academics and students alike. But it’s more the fact that down the bottom here they haven’t got confidence in learning science. And in fact I’d suffice to say from my students that not only do they not like science, they’ve had negative experiences in the past, and mine are anaphylactical phobic to science. So you’ve got this really great challenge, but as [0:01:14.4] said, fantastic thing is 94% of them want to continue. They want to actually come with us.

Now we’re all discipline experts. You know your stuff, you know your content, you’ve reflected on your own experience, you’ve engaged, you’ve figured out what works, what doesn’t work, and you’re putting it into practice. So you’ve developed the culture for your course whether you like it or not, and part of that culture is not just you but it’s also bringing your whole team. And that team includes the students. So when I’m actually talking to my students I’m actually addressing them as “Hey team, this is our journey. Yes, you might not like chemistry, you might not like these things”. I introduce myself in sessions before semester begins to say “Okay, yeah, I’m the one who mentions the C word, chemistry”. So we make this journey together. I recognise and value the fact that they have challenges but that doesn’t mean they can’t do it. They’ve got to do it. So you bring your own culture to it, and you develop that within your course and extend that through your program. You can change the learning environment. You create it. They contribute to that creation. So build them into it. Engage them with it. Simple things that are, the nightmare for us as academics are things like how many emails we get when there’s confusion. Well I do email mass. I put up a slide in lecture one that says “Oh by the way, there’s 300 of you, there’s one of me. Let’s look at the maths. Yes, if it’s a simple email it’ll take five minutes for me to read it, address it, respond to it and file it. But that’s’ 25 hours if I do nothing else and don’t take bathroom breaks”. So it’s really important that we get this mutual respect. Make it explicit. The things that we have implicit make it explicit. You don’t have to be in their face about it, but you have to let
them know that there’s expectations of them. You expect them to be respectful. They expect that from you. Make it explicit.

Being an engaging presenter, that helps as well. If you can’t take a joke, then probably don’t come to an anatomy lecture.

So my, can I culture assessments so that it’s going to help me do this? Well [0:03:29.6] is actually already stolen my thunder and said “Well, yes you can”. And indeed this is what I’ve done with my nursing students. They do a lab every second week, so in every fortnight. After their first one they do a ten question quiz on the content, only the content, of the preceding lab. So I’m setting them a little target. This is the content they need to know. Yes, it’s articulated and integrated with their lecture material, but it’s only what they experienced in labs that’s being assessed. And they do that quiz first thing in the next lab. That is then marked in that lab. They then get that feedback in that lab. They then get the opportunity to explore that material again in that lab.

Am I paying tutors to do this and is it costing me a fortune? Well my lab classes require me to have two lab tutors there. I design the lab so that they actually do the quiz, one tutor stands up and gives the pre-lab, the workplace health and safety, the objectives of the lab, whilst the other demonstrator is marking those assessments. Very simple marking. Same pay rate. Bargain. They’re not sitting there watching someone else do something and I’m not paying for it. So it’s all about utilising your opportunities.

Don’t’ let them go overboard in material. Yes, we can all break up assessments into tiny little chunks and give them little percentages, and that will help them, encourage them to consistently engage and get those good study habits. But if it becomes a tsunami or a nightmare of load then your colleagues are going to hate you, because their courses have got obligations too. So keep the bigger picture in mind.

The lab environment is really good for me because I can control that exam environment. These students are naïve in terms of their academic achievement, their naïve in terms of their examination experience. And some of them are absolutely terrified going into that first lab, or that second lab, when they’re going to do that first quiz. So they’re experiencing all those things that are going to happen to them in their mid-semester exam big time. So what I’m doing is saying “Hey, look you know you’re going to experience that. How about we just see how you can disconnect some of these things. So your study techniques, your approach, get the feedback on: “Why did you get that wrong?” “I got it wrong because oh goodness, I didn’t’ read the question. I didn’t answer the question that was asked”. So many people do that. Under exam stress we all skip read. Absolutely. So structure your assessment.

And so these are the things I’ve done.

This I put in because it looks like a nice cross stitched tapestry really. It does actually say something but it’s not the numbers, it’s actually the picture. The picture’s actually showing, these are just the number, the students, so there’s about 270 odd students. And
this is just showing for each individual student their performance over the quizzes. So what it’s showing is there’s no big blotches of colour. So the assessments are fairly equitable in the way they’re presented, and they’re consistent.

But what I found really interesting when I mapped this was that for these trend lines, four of them are all packed together and there’s one down here. So I went and explored why. This is the week after they’ve done the mid-semester exam. So they should be absolutely stuffed full of knowledge on that particular stuff because they’ve just been examined on it. It’s also the week there’s other assessments due. They’ve prioritised something else and their performance goes down. So know your context. As well as what it is you’re expecting from them, know the whole picture.

Each student gets that individual feedback, each student gets invitations to seek additional help, whether it’s how to study better or how to face examines better. And that by building their self confidence and their self worth, that sense of capability as has been saying, you can scaffold their success. Students who, obviously the students actually think the assessment’s quite fair, and the course is effective in helping their learning. This is the SEC data.

But what I find important is that the quizzes are predictive of their mid-semester exam success in general. But if they’re attending consistently and doing these little quizzes it does structure their engagement and it does encourage them to do well. It gives them the opportunity to say “Look I’ve got some value here and if I do not perform as well as I want to in that mid-semester exam, I’m not going to fail overall. I’ve got a safety net”. And it’s building that confidence and that strategic orientation which makes a student actually successful.

Other forms of success: the strategy’s been adopted across three campuses now. However not in its entirety. This campus is where it’s built into the labs and constructed the way it is. Other campuses are going “Oh yeah, like that quiz idea, but hey I’ll do it online”. So it’s now all multiple choice questions, and all they get is a number. They don’t get the feedback of “I’ve actually not answered the question correctly because I didn’t read it” or whatever the other reason is.

It’s predictive in that students that pass my course in first semester, my course is the threshold course. My course is the most seriously content driven science course that they study in their program. It’s the one they fear the most. 85% of students starting in my course say it’s the course that they’re most scared of. And 90% say it’s the most interesting. So you don’t have to have that “Oh my goodness, it’s dreadful or boring, or it’s content laden”. Yes, it’s all of those. But hey I’ve got self interest driving me. These people are going to practice nursing on me and mine. So we’ve got a responsibility to our wider community to make sure that these people are safe to practice, but they’re confident to practice, and they’re confident to know when they’re not competent, and they’re confident to go and find ways of dealing with that.
So, yes, individuals can make a difference. At a course level. As a tutor you can make a difference. Make sure you’re all singing from the same song book, and we’ve seen some really good examples of practice as to how you can integrate that, have your tutors and your demonstration staff involved in that process. And the one I like is this culture idea, the microbial side coming out, that in these little practice exams, yes, they are true little exams in the labs, you’re actually inoculating them to more significant exam stress if you nip it in the bud. If you give them strategies to scaffold to say “Hey, look you can deal with this. Yes, I’m expecting this. But hey, I survived it before, I can do it again”. That sense of capability is the thing that keeps a lot of these students ticking along.

And you are the culture of your course. And from the grass roots we need to work it all the way up.

Thanks very much.

[Applause]