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**Title: Engaging Students in a Community Of Learning: Renegotiating the Learning Environment**

**Karen A Theobald<sup>a</sup>**

**Carol A Windsor<sup>a</sup>**

**Elizabeth M Forster<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> School of Nursing, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

<sup>b</sup> School of Nursing and Midwifery, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

**Corresponding Author:**

Dr Karen Theobald  
School of Nursing, Queensland University of Technology  
Victoria Park Road  
Kelvin Grove Queensland 4059  
Australia  
+61 7 31383904  
k.theobald@qut.edu.au

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## **Abstract**

Promoting student engagement in a student led environment can be challenging. This article reports on the process of design, implementation and evaluation of a student led learning approach in a small group tutorial environment in a three year Bachelor of Nursing program at an Australian university.

The research employed three phases of data collection. The first phase explored student perceptions of learning and engagement in tutorials. The results informed the development of a web based learning resource. Phase two centred on implementation of a community of learning approach where students were supported to lead tutorial learning with peers. The final phase constituted an evaluation of the new approach.

Findings suggest that students have the capacity to lead and engage in a community of learning and to assume greater ownership and responsibility where scaffolding is provided. Nonetheless, an ongoing whole of course approach to pedagogical change would better support this form of teaching and learning innovation.

### **Highlights:**

- The shift from faculty led to student led teaching created tensions for nurse educators and students
- Student engagement and ownership of learning is achievable through targeted scaffolding and resource provision
- Isolated pedagogical transformation is difficult and its success may be limited without a whole of course change

**Key words:** Student engagement, student-led, community of learning, tutorial learning

## **Introduction**

Undergraduate student engagement in tutorials is an ongoing challenge for academics and students. The purpose of this research was to foster student engagement through the design, implementation and evaluation of a tutorial learning environment grounded in social constructivist educational principles. A constructivist approach asserts the importance of the active involvement of learners in sharing, synthesizing and building knowledge (Gordon, 2008; Winstone & Millward, 2012). The starting assumption of the research was that effective learning occurs in an environment that enables and encourages interactive learning and hence a community focus to knowledge development. A community of learning approach engenders a sense of belonging to and identifying with a community wherein learners actively participate in learning together (Wenger, 2009; Masika & Jones, 2016). Thus a related assumption was that, within a learning community, students are active learners who can assume responsibility for learning and how learning takes place.

## **Background**

There is widespread concern that undergraduate students are becoming less engaged and that this trend is detrimental to student learning outcomes and in the longer term the viability of higher education programs (Salamonson, et al., 2009; Kuh, 2009; James et al., 2010). Student engagement is perceived as a key factor in producing better outcomes for university graduates in a climate of economic constraint (Trowler, 2010; Bryson, 2014; Bernard, 2015). A lack of engagement is reflected in students' lack of preparation for classroom activities, less participation in class, declining attendance, greater reliance on academics for knowledge acquisition and decreased social engagement in university communities (Baron & Corbin, 2012).

Disengagement may also be linked to students' competing life priorities and expectations and to socio-political influences in universities that render students passive consumers rather than active participants (Kahu, 2013; Kahu et al., 2014).

### *Student engagement perspectives*

The concept of student engagement has its origins in 1960s and 1970s research on student time investment and its impact on learning (Axelson & Flick, 2011). More contemporary works extend across the behavioural, psychological, sociocultural and holistic dimensions of engagement (Kahu, 2013). The behavioural perspective centres on the evaluation of teaching effectiveness and the use of structured instruments to measure student learning outcomes (Kahu, 2013). A limitation of this view is its focus on completion of learning tasks and the absence of consideration of broader contextual factors that shape engagement (Zyngier, 2008). From a psychological perspective, engagement refers to the interplay between student behaviour, time devoted to learning, and self-regulation and motivation. Here emotion, or the degree of a student's attachment to learning, is a key influence (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007). While the psychological perspective acknowledges internal factors that impact on engagement, absent is the recognition that learning involves the broader dynamic of interaction with peers, teachers and diverse learning opportunities.

The sociocultural perspective is concerned with the impact of social context on the experiences of students and encompasses cultural, ethnic, social and economic positioning and discipline related values (Zepke, 2014; Hagel et al., 2011). Factors associated with a university culture, such as the power of a discipline, the culture of

academia and a focus on outcomes, will shape student learning (Kahu, 2013). These latter factors are often overlooked where academics are embedded in a culture that values measurement of performance over engagement.

Finally, the holistic approach asserts that engagement is a dynamic continuum incorporating the various levels of classroom learning, curricula and higher education organisation (Kahu, 2013). The approach values emotions and thus a teacher's disposition to be inclusive of students and to engender belonging (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kember et al., 2001; Baron & Corban, 2012; Van Uden et al., 2014). Beyond the individual teacher a holistic view also recognises the importance of adequate resourcing and institutional support for engagement resources (Hand and Bryson, 2008). Thus, critical to this broader approach are the multiple actors and influences that construct learning and engagement. It is this approach that provides the impetus for transformative teaching and learning practices. Transformative teaching involves relinquishing control over knowledge acquisition by the dominant group (Swanson, 2010) and in this case, by university tutors to undergraduate nursing students.

#### *Responsibility for engagement?*

In this research the initial interest was the immediate teaching context and who was responsible for engagement within the frame of the student–teacher relationship.

Our starting point was that students and teachers co-construct student engagement and learning. Thus both student and teacher beliefs and practices around teaching shape engagement (Van Uden et al., 2014). More broadly, higher education institutions are also responsible for constructing a learning and teaching vision and the context that promotes student engagement (Masika & Jones, 2016).

### *The tutorial learning environment*

The existing tutorial learning environment in the research setting centred on the traditional tutor directed small group teaching sessions. In recent years, in the research university, there had been increasing evidence of a significant decline in student attendance at and participation in tutorials. The development gave rise to questions around the mode of teaching and learning and the extent to which it underpinned a lack of student engagement. Such questions provided the rationale for a reconceptualization of teaching approach grounded in social constructivism and Vygotsky's argument that posits social interaction and collaboration as central components of learning (Vygotsky, 1962; Powell & Kalina, 2009).

### **Research aims:**

The aim of the research was to design, implement and evaluate a learning community that would enable students to collaboratively engage and manipulate learning. The learning content was centred on Australian population health priorities (cardiovascular, respiratory acute and chronic conditions, across lifespan) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). It was anticipated that the construction of a learning community where students, in collaboration with peers, formulated and interpreted realistic clinical cases would result in a more effective and inclusive learning environment.

The focus of the research implementation was a core second year unit within a three year Bachelor of Nursing program at a large Australian university. The second year unit structure employed weekly lectures and tutorials to support student learning. The research sought a shift from the traditional lecturer driven approach in tutorials to a

strategy that would enable students to construct learning through a student led, interactive, learning community.

### *Social constructivism and education*

The study's social constructivist theoretical frame and methods were grounded in a synthesis of educational principles that brought students to the centre of learning. In terms of infrastructure, a team of four nurse academics, two educational learning designers and a language and learning advisor developed a student led community of learning approach and a web based resource to support students in clinical decision making (CDM) around the assessment and management of clients with cardiovascular and respiratory health problems.

The new approach shifted responsibility for learning from tutors to students where the latter were asked to prepare and facilitate a student led learning session centred around patient case studies. To support students to take on the increased responsibility the teaching team role modelled the delivery of two learning sessions for students. Time for preparing the sessions was also integrated into tutorials and tutors were available to provide support. A further strategy was a videorecording of a mock student led learning session to scaffold expectations.

All of the above processes were augmented by the online web based resource that depicted a clinical decision making (CDM) framework and addressed issues around diverse learning styles, group work, interactive presentations and effective exchange of knowledge. The expectation was that a renegotiated learning situation would encourage students to collaborate, to promote cooperative learning (Vgotsky, 1962),



and to develop a curiosity for alternative perspectives (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Swan, 2005).

## **Research design**

The study employed the three phases, of design (explore and develop resources), implementation (a new student led community of learning in phase two) and evaluation (survey), two of which are the focus of this article and are addressed in turn. The first phase explored student perceptions of learning and engagement during tutorials prior to the study implementation. Students were invited to participate in the first phase through an online communication and short presentation at the start of a lecture. Participant information and consent forms were distributed at the lecture and online. Interested students were asked to contact the researchers by email or in person. Ultimately face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 students. Open ended questions were posed around the research project aims and as participants raised salient points these were further explored in subsequent interviews. The interview duration ranged between 30-60 minutes.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was undertaken using a combination of sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969), identified from a review of research, and the social constructivist methods of Charmaz (2014). The sensitising concepts were student engagement, ownership, knowledge construction, interpretation of learning and community of learners. Further conceptual ideas were generated through initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) where initial codes depicted data and focused codes represented abstractions from data. The two processes were iterative whereby evolving analytical

ideas were continuously compared and contrasted. The combination of deductive and inductive strategies ensured that existing literature both informed and was challenged by the analytical process.

### **Phase One Results**

Analysis of phase one data generated three analytical findings; *constructing learning ownership, social connectedness* and *fostering engagement*.

#### *Constructing learning ownership*

Student constructions of learning within traditional small group tutorials were focused on learning for assessment which reinforced a tutor driven and controlled style. The importance of learning for assessment, as reported elsewhere (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), was further reflected in the strategic decisions of the students to attend certain classes. Class attendance was seen as a financial sacrifice and a pragmatic exercise and hence students were more likely to attend classes that were perceived to have concrete value such as information about an upcoming examination.

The pragmatism noted above underpinned an expressed preference for a more didactic tutor driven style where tutors were responsible for, or the gatekeepers of, student success. Here the tutor was characterised as the repository of all knowledge and one who directs the course and structure of the tutorial. Indeed, students may reinforce existing power relationships to ensure successful outcomes.

The tutor driven style, however, was not valued by all participants. Some students valued interactive contexts as reflected in the following:

*If I wanted people to just talk at me I'd go to lectures. This form of tutorial is practically the lecture all over again (P6 Student)*

Where students have an opportunity to effectively interact with tutors and other students the pragmatism of tutorial attendance can give way to active participation. It has been argued elsewhere that where students learn to work together and negotiate the dynamics of interactions in learning activities, a sense of acceptance and social inclusion is engendered within learning (Maskia & Jones, 2016).

#### *Social connectedness*

Small group teaching is considered a vehicle for social connectedness among students. Social connectedness involves the way people relate to others and their perceptions of themselves within social relationships and networks all of which impact on student engagement in group situations and on academic motivation and success (Jdaitawi, 2015; Allen, et al., 2008). Collaboration with others is also acknowledged as a foundational skill that enables students to assume more responsibility for learning (Carpenter & Pease, 2013). In the present research and although the benefits of connecting and collaborating were apparent, this did not always occur. Students commented on the positive connections they made with other students:

*...good to be contributing yourself because even if you get it wrong someone can tell you it's wrong so you're not just carrying on thinking the wrong thing...*  
(P2 Student)

Yet conversely, social connectedness, collaboration and peer learning interaction were at times absent and the result was a sense of disconnect among students. One participant described the experience as such:

*I've had a couple of tutorials where no one spoke at all. I just felt like I was walking into a room full of strangers and I just felt uncomfortable.*

(P12 Student)

Within the wider educational literature, group collaboration and dynamics, a commitment of group members and a sharing of ideas are deemed critical to the success of small group teaching (Carpenter & Pease, 2013; Hansen, 2006, Livingstone & Lynch, 2000).

### *Fostering engagement*

Tutor characteristics and qualities are an important influence on student engagement and learning (Baeten, et al., 2010). The finding of fostering engagement has been demonstrated where, for example, students refer to outstanding teachers as those who shared personal stories and experiences (Uitto, 2012; Elder et al., 2011). The level of teacher openness is thus considered a key factor in encouraging motivation in students (Kunter et al., 2011; Elder et al., 2011). As others have noted (Krause and Coates, 2008, Zepke et al., 2010), professional and pedagogical qualities are critical to engagement and student perceptions that academics are genuinely interested in learning:

*I enjoyed the real life experiences and storytelling from practising clinicians who were tutors (P8 Student)*

*She doesn't give you answers but what she expects and (she) tells you all the things that you need to do... And she just helped us learn. I mean she'd walk around the classroom and she'd sit down with groups at times and she'd be like "so what do you think about that" and she would just help you in your discussion. (P1 Student)*

The phase one findings suggested that student perceptions of learning were a product of the context in which they learn. Thus there was an emphasis on learning for assessment and a preference for teacher driven tutorials. The findings also indicated that tutor characteristics and qualities were key drivers in fostering student engagement and learning. All of the above factors informed the process of renegotiating a learning situation which would position students as learning agents who construct their own knowledge within a supportive environment. The focus was on the development and implementation of a community of learning that would engender ongoing social connectedness, collaboration and learning.

## **Phase Two Results**

The second study phase saw the implementation of the new interactive student led community of learning sessions. In each of seven weeks of learning sessions and across 27 tutorials, groups of three to four students were required to take responsibility for the development and facilitation of a one hour learning session. In

each session the expectation was that students would apply CDM skills to review a predetermined clinical case, identify assessment data, determine critical actual and potential problems and present evidence based responses to these issues. Also determine how interventions would be evaluated. An important component of each forum was the use of learning and teaching strategies that would engage peers in the sessions.

At the completion of the semester's work, students and tutors were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews and six students and four tutors shared their experiences of the tutorials, their understanding of active engagement and collaboration and how and whether this was enacted in the tutorial sessions. The analytical processes outlined for phase one were applied in phase two and generated the following analytical outcomes.

### *Recognising the value of learning*

Students had preconceived notions of the function of tutorials within the degree program and the introduction of the new learning community resulted in initial resistance to change. While the research and teaching teams were confident of the merit of a student led approach to learning this was not immediately the case for the students. Individuals have embedded beliefs about teaching and learning that can underpin resistance to change (Le Fevre, 2014). Yet for some students there was also gradual acceptance and appreciation. As one student noted:

*I sort of started to see what was happening but only towards the end. I can see how it might work and it might be a good thing. But by the same token when I go to my tutorials, I want my teacher up the front. (P1 Student)*

Nonetheless, for others, confusion and some resistance over the shift in roles was persistent.

### *Mistrusting change*

Students struggled to accept the new community of learning approach and expressed a lack of confidence in self and peers to facilitate an effective learning process. There was also hesitancy in providing feedback to peers because of fear of humiliation. Within a supported community of learning it is expected that students will actively make sense of their experiences and thus engage in process of reflective awareness of learning (Masika & Jones, 2016). Nonetheless, while student confidence in learning communities may improve over time the absence of trust in a learning approach will impact on a commitment to learning (Masika & Jones, 2016). The following comments reflect student concerns with the learning structure:

*...there was a bit of pressure on us not to put our peers on the spot because the group would present and the tutor would question them during the presentation. If they didn't know the answer it was quite humiliating for them. Yeah, so it was very, very awkward, the whole thing. (P5 Student)*

*You haven't got the teacher who's got all the knowledge and can explain things. When you have your peers presenting to you, it's quite interesting, I suppose. We only got what our peers researched... so I think we missed out on a lot of in-depth (information) in the whole lot of the unit. (P2 Student)*

Hence and as others have argued, when students are required to assume a partnership with teachers in a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning, this can be disconcerting and threaten a sense of stability (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). It is hard for students to accept that they have sufficient expertise and knowledge to engage in the greater responsibility of a student led community. The analytic findings generated from tutor interviews further produced two key tensions; *challenging tradition* and *relinquishing responsibility*.

### *Challenging tradition*

In response to the change in learning and teaching approach, tutors questioned the value and legitimacy of peer learning. Tutors experienced a sense of discomfort and disorientation with the repositioning of their roles in tutorials. Two tutors pointed to such tensions:

*We are trying to put the responsibility on to them to present. We as tutors usually pull all the information together... I feel as though it is a bit of a cultural change.* (P2 Tutor)

*Two or three times something really incorrect was said (and) I had to pull these up and that was my role but it was a little bit uncomfortable.* (P3 Tutor)

When a change in pedagogy is instituted and is markedly different both students and academics may feel insecure (Keesing-Styles, et al., 2014). In the words of Ball (2003), teaching staff may “become ontologically insecure: unsure whether [they] are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others”



(p.220). In response to change, teachers may also engage in reflection on usual teaching and learning practices and may be prompted to reconsider teaching identities (Keesing-Styles, et al., 2014).

### *Relinquishing responsibility*

In relinquishing some responsibility for facilitating learning in tutorials, tutors were concerned that students perceived that they were 'getting a raw deal'. The actual teaching and learning process became the focus for tutors rather than the intended outcomes of the peer led learning approach. While the tutors understood the benefit of students assuming greater control over learning they were uncomfortable with their loss of role:

*...the interesting thing about the tutorials was that students were upset because it seemed as though they had a whole lot of work to do... it was just a process to work through... Most of them actually ended up doing a good job even though they felt that it was a raw deal that they were doing our job (P2 Tutor)*

*...not all students got it and we did see some of the assignments not passed. ...they were given every opportunity to do so (P1 Tutor)*

*Obviously they didn't think they were going to get anything out of it although they definitely would have, in terms of extending their knowledge and the discussion and feedback afterwards (P2 Tutor).*

Teachers have a responsibility to facilitate the transformation of knowledge, skills and capability of their students. However, when an innovation is introduced that threatens an accepted role there is a risk that teachers may perceive they have failed (Le Fevre, 2014). Adapting to a new pedagogical approach can leave teachers with a sense of loss regarding behaviours and beliefs usually perceived as integral to the teaching role (Westberry, et al., 2015).

## **Discussion**

The findings of phase one reflected existing knowledge on higher education student learning that points to a student focus on assessment and teacher driven model of learning that deems students as largely passive recipients of instruction (McGarry et al., 2015; Hudson, 2014). The findings also highlighted the importance of tutor qualities and social interaction and connectedness in engaging students in learning (Kunter et al., 2011; Elder et al., 2011; Robinson, 2012).

The phase two analysis revealed unanticipated responses to the implemented changes within the learning and teaching context. First, the students had not previously been exposed to a student led and community of learning approach within the three year degree program. Although the restructure of student learning was supported by teaching faculty and the development of online web based resources, the expectations of the learning experience created resistance among the students. A student led approach may demand that students engage in more preparation and work outside the classroom which could be the basis of discontent (Seyedmonir et al., 2014).

Second, while the value of greater engagement was not questioned, strategies were needed to overcome contextual barriers to student engagement. An example is the conceptualisation of the tutor as the “powerful other” within the teaching and learning exchange which might inhibit students from assuming greater control (Robinson, 2012). Posing questions that challenged peers also risked creating a tension within the student group. This issue has been explored in relation to flipped classrooms where students find peer feedback unhelpful and where students often lack the skills to give competent feedback (Helgevold & Moen, 2015).

Third, a shift from traditional teacher led tutorials to a more student driven approach raised issues around the role of the tutor which was perceived as ill defined. Indeed, the construction of the student role as educator produced confusion among students and tutors alike who were no longer sure of their respective responsibilities. Tutors had previously delivered structured content grounded in vast clinical experience to impart knowledge to students. Within the new tutorial environment, students were expected to co-create knowledge with peers. Thus the role of the tutors was less visible and a background presence. Tutors would now provide guidance and advice only when required to by students. Yet, the point at which tutors could and should intervene to expand upon or correct knowledge statements was unclear.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

The objective of the study was to promote better student engagement and collaboration through the design, implementation and evaluation of a student led community of learning based around Australian health priority clinical cases.

Collaborative learning and the use of case studies are considered effective strategies in facilitating student engagement and consequently more advanced critical thinking and problem solving among students (Kuh et al. 2010; Van Auken, 2011). A shift in pedagogy in this study, however, confronted the primacy of more traditional learning and teaching approaches within the discipline and the university. Both students and tutors experienced a detachment from expectations and established identities and thus an uncertainty about how to participate in the learning situation. Hence the study findings support a broader approach to pedagogical change that extends to a whole discipline and requires institutional commitment. Context is integral to the success or otherwise of new learning approaches.

Thus an implication of the findings of the study is that collaborative learning requires timely and ongoing preparation of both students and tutors for changes in teaching and learning approaches. For tutors and although pre-briefing was undertaken in this study, clarity around role change appeared to be lacking. Realistically, the complexities of the existing context could not be adequately addressed through briefings that occurred within a constrained period. For students, a broader range of strategies was put in place to support the fulfilment of expectations of the new student role. The combination of online delivery of structured learning material was designed to prepare students for group activities and to enhance student involvement and understanding (Helgevold & Moen, 2015). Outcomes for students were promising in achieving engagement learning objectives. However, an important assumption underpinning the methodological approach that informed the concept of a student led community of learning was that knowledge would be co-constructed

and thus student outcomes cannot be evaluated in the absence of consideration of the tutor role.

From the above it can be concluded that the realization of student led approaches to learning is dependent upon a commitment to a whole of program or course approach rather than implementation within discreet academic units. More broadly, universities are characterised by ingrained methodologies and implicit are power differentials between academics and students which may undermine efforts to create greater student engagement and responsibility for learning (Robinson, 2012). Thus cultural change at the disciplinary or institutional level appears essential to the effective introduction of innovative and collaborative pedagogies.

The study was not without limitations. Despite offering incentives to participate in the study recruitment of students was difficult. Students at the study university were surveyed on a regular basis regarding their learning experiences as part of ongoing student evaluation of quality of teaching. These processes may exhaust interest in participating in additional research involving surveys and interviews. Compulsory off campus clinical practice experience further compounded student on-campus availability for participation.

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