



## CHAPTER 6

### Releasing hope: transforming the lecturer role in an extended commerce course

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#### Introduction

One of the main challenges for academics working in the context of the extended curriculum programme (ECP) is to understand the nature of their identity as lecturers. In this chapter, I use two sets of data as the starting point for a reflective enquiry into my identity and my practices in the ECP classroom. I reflect first on a small-scale research investigation I conducted. This focused on my classroom practices while seeking to promote student engagement and feedback. I then review a second set of qualitative data based on interviews with a sample of my former students who were then in the final year of their degree programme. This data provides insights on the role of peer group interaction and its relation to student persistence. Tinto's model of student persistence (1993: 119) is an important theoretical framework which grounds this reflective activity helping to explain students' responses to my teaching, reactions to the feedback intervention, overall participation and engagement with their peers.

My reflective insights suggest that my students often depended more on their peers, especially in their informal interactions, than on the academic support I provided in classroom. Furthermore, it appears that students tended to organise themselves in both formal and informal ways. These insights raise vital questions about my role as lecturer, given the extent to which students seemed to function in self-directed and self-sufficient ways. An analysis of the findings shows that students often depend heavily on their peers. It further demonstrates the ways in which students organise themselves formally and informally when engaging in academic discourse. These insights have created levels of ambivalence for me especially with respect to the role I fulfil in trying to transform my classrooms into more inclusive spaces, where both lecturer and students can participate more fully. I therefore contemplate what it might mean to 'release hope' in the metaphorical sense that it can transform the role of lecturer into one of an enabler of student participation and engagement.

My decision to study at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was the same as that which later compelled me to remain and become an academic. UWC has a long-standing history of about six decades in which it ardently fought against the ills of oppression, championing the cause of the marginalised and disadvantaged. While it has become synonymous with developing critical thinkers, it has also become well-known for its philosophy of foregrounding the interests of students before all else. At the heart of this underpinning philosophy is the impetus to ensure that spaces of care are created in the classroom where students can experience the university as a place where ‘the doors of learning shall be open’. The Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) is the largest faculty at UWC and currently responsible for educating 25% of the institution’s student population. The phrase *‘Where we are concerned about your future’* positioned above the Faculty entrance attempts to signal a commitment, especially for academic staff, to student engagement and the holistic well-being of students. It is within this climate that I have become rooted in the extended programme during the last nine years. I am responsible for lecturing Intensive Reading and Writing, a course that addresses the broad topic area of Academic Literacy. This course aims to develop critical readers and thinkers as well as to teach students how to write professional business documents such as reports, formal letters and effective emails. Students join the mainstream in the second year of either their BCom (General) or BCom (Accounting) degree. The curriculum model used in our faculty is an augmented one meaning that our students complete a combination of specialised extended courses and mainstream courses over their initial two years at university. The statistical tracking of our ECP students through their studies has highlighted some positive impact on student success and completion rates. However, our programme faces some of the same challenges experienced across the sector. For example, we have to cater to the increasingly diverse educational needs and linguistic backgrounds of our students. Moreover, students face multiple resource needs which sometimes compel them to have to decide whether to use their meagre funds to travel to university or buy food for their families.

### **Framing the rationale for my reflective enquiry**

The reflective enquiry I discuss in this chapter was initiated by a classroom-based study aimed at promoting student engagement. For many first year students, being at university is experienced as very lonely and isolating. Tinto (1993: 120) suggests that when students are unable to become active and involved in their learning, these feelings of disconnection and isolation can be amplified. With its central idea of ‘integration’, both social and academic, Tinto’s model (1993: 119) proposes that the development of learning communities has a positive impact on student growth and achievement (Draper 2008; Tinto 1998). In my own

teaching context, this level of inertia has often been expressed through student resistance to the learning norms and conventions of my classroom and to the course content. Students who resist the academic reading activities required in my class and in the university more generally could, in Tinto's (1993: 121) assessment, merely be responding to either their lack of integration into the academic community as recognised members or expressing feelings of incongruence between their own values and those of the university. This raises questions about my role as a lecturer in assisting students to become 'competent members' (Barnett 2010: 122) of the academic community and how to promote this through my classroom practices. My pedagogic philosophies have long focused on creating a conducive classroom for students to become 'real' participants in the teaching and learning process. I have also believed that such participation in their own learning is key for students to become more academically integrated within the university environment. I have however, been influenced by social constructivist theories like those of Vygotsky (1978: 159) and therefore the social basis of learning has increasingly come to characterise my teaching practice. Coupled with the broader institutional culture that promotes the centrality of students in the teaching and learning interaction, student integration and activity in the community of learners in my classroom is thus a central tenet of my teaching practice. As I hold these teaching philosophies, I thus found it challenging when students appeared somewhat 'non-responsive' to the many attempts I made to draw them into more active and participatory roles. It was also difficult to understand why students failed to take advantage of consultation sessions and my offers to provide assistance beyond the classroom encounter. These challenges, and my frustration, pushed me towards reconsidering what I was doing.

The small-scale, classroom research I undertook therefore looked at how the introduction of an opportunity for formative, anonymous feedback might encourage student participation in my classroom. This feedback was structured as follows: a red box was positioned at the back of all my classrooms and at the end of each lecture, students were encouraged to 'post' written feedback about the lecture. A key consequence of introducing this formative feedback strategy was that it ensured a more responsive approach to student needs. By asking for feedback at the end of each lecture, rather than at the end of a term or semester, I could respond to student concerns in a timely manner. This obviated 'sitting' with feedback and suggestions for improvement that I could not implement because the cohort of students had already completed my course.

When I introduced the red box, I outlined to students that the intention of this feedback strategy was to improve the nature of interaction in the classroom. I reminded students that their feedback would be anonymous, that they could raise or report instances where concepts were still unclear, simply offer their reflections on any matter related to the class they had just attended or make

suggestions for new topics that needed further discussion. I also reassured students that I saw the exercise and their submissions as a means whereby I could learn more about their academic needs.

In the first two weeks there were a few responses, but these tended to address matters unrelated to the course content or teaching and learning. However, as the practice became a regular feature, the comments became more focused on specific aspects of the teaching and learning experiences students were having in my classroom. Some of the comments pertained to moments when students struggled to understand particular concepts; when they felt the need to comment on the nature of the lecture presentation; when they had a breakthrough related to my lecture and when they required me to explain a particular part of the lecture in more detail. It is also noteworthy to acknowledge the tremendous maturity with which the students embraced this classroom activity. Along with an increase in the number of comments left in the red box, I also observed changes in student behaviour and interaction in my classes. A key realisation was that presenting students with an opportunity to comment on my lectures meant I was making myself vulnerable to students. I could then harness this vulnerability, concede when I made mistakes and position myself as human—capable of not always being on top form for every lecture. Conceding to these ‘mistakes’ also created a new opportunity to draw students in to the teaching and learning relationship. The quality and depth of learning, for both myself and my students, appeared to increase. I was able to reposition myself, not only as the ‘knowledgeable other’ (Vygotsky 1978: 160) but as someone continually learning about myself, my teaching practice and about my students and their learning.



### **REFLECTIVE INSIGHTS: Recognising my own humanity**

Some key reflections from this exercise related to the recognition of my own humanity and how this could contribute to enhancing my relations with students. Fundamental here was acknowledging the importance of listening to students. Secondly, I became more aware and accepting that students have different learning styles and therefore sometimes my teaching practices might not suit or be appropriate for the entire class. In opening myself up to also be a learner in my classroom, I realised that a valuable lesson learnt from my students was the central role of laughter and how learning often needs to be layered in amusement.

Returning to Tinto's (1993) concern with students' lack of integration, the following salient points from his model of student persistence are relevant to understanding how the introduction of the red box impacted on student engagement in my classes.

The relationships between a teacher and his or her students are central for Tinto (1993). Also important is the educational structure of the classroom and the student's level of involvement in the class activities. He further suggests that these relationships between students, as well as between student and lecturer, are likely to be vital in settings where involvement is not easy to achieve, especially where you have non-residential students or those who are working and commuting to university. All these components contribute to a greater involvement in classroom activities on the part of the student. In turn, this leads to enhanced learning which in many ways can also heighten student participation. The outcomes of the red box activity appear to echo Tinto's (1993; 1998) argument. Thus, once students became members of the community of the classroom, a portal was created for greater student participation in class. It also became apparent that once students were engaged in the classroom, this facilitated an atmosphere where meaningful relationships were established.

### **Moving beyond the red box – insights from interviews with my former students**

In 2017, I conducted another small-scale investigation on the general topic of student persistence and, in particular, the role of peer groups and academic integration. As part of this study, I interviewed 20 of my former students. The process was particularly useful as I was given a further opportunity to gain student feedback on my teaching practice. The interviews, however, highlighted some unforeseen aspects of my pedagogy. Students spoke about their feelings of marginalisation in my class and noted that there were insufficient opportunities to share their knowledge and understanding during class. When confronted with the complexities of the course content, instead of bringing these concerns to me, they frequently relied on their peers to help unravel and make sense of topics discussed in class. This reliance on peer groups was especially pronounced with students who lived in university residences, who saw their peers as their extended family. Garn and Ort's (1991: 109) observation that cohesiveness and family-like bonds help students to create a sense of belonging, is a particularly useful insight. When considering this insight into students' reliance on peer groups, I wondered if this was a possible reason why my students seemed to thrive when working together in this way. What is particularly significant when reflecting on these student accounts of my classroom practices, is the realisation of their great sense of agency; thus, their capacity to seek assistance from their peers and to form peer support networks, especially outside of the formal classroom setting. This meant that students organised themselves informally by having regular social gatherings which became the launch pad for informal academic engagement. Students further indicated how informal conversations often led to opportunities to discuss mutual struggles with course content. It also

became apparent that students organised themselves informally by collaborating with each other using social media to lean into one another and provide support to one another.

### **Concluding reflective comments**

One is rarely able to make a positive impact on students unless one is intentional about it. In order to make a significant change it often requires one to deviate from that which is familiar so that one can unlock that which is hidden.

The introduction of the red box facilitated a process which changed the trajectory of my teaching practices and how students experienced being in my classes. When, as a lecturer, I was willing to open myself to my own fallacies and vulnerabilities, I was able to see myself as a custodian of hope in the classroom. The reflective insights noted in this chapter have drawn attention to how allowing myself to be vulnerable as a lecturer has directly changed my academic practice. It has created opportunities for students to perceive me differently and has helped to disrupt the status and rank automatically conferred on me by institutional structures. My reflective activities have highlighted that it is particularly important that my students are able to see me as human and as one who is also fallible. When students are able to see me in this way, and can thus identify with my humanity, opportunities are created for them to draw on this sense of humanity for their own interactions with each other and with me. In addition, this might be an important component of how and why students experience an increased sense of belonging in my classrooms. It might also be a catalyst for ushering in further opportunities for students to become ‘competent members’ of the learning community (Barnett 2010: 89). Such competence enables students to not only establish networks of learning in the classroom, or what Tinto (1993: 122) refers to as ‘learning communities’, but to also enrich the quality of engagement among students and between students and lecturers.

Considering the insights provided by my former students, it would appear that heightened levels of engagement and community can even extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom into more informal learning spaces. Collectively these reflective insights suggest productive ways of harnessing my own vulnerabilities in the classroom and drawing on student learning communities to make a difference to the quality of both teaching and learning in my ECP context.

I realise now that the words etched on the walls of the foyer of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, *‘Where we are concerned about your future’*, is not merely a phrase that denotes wishful thinking. Instead, this is a sentiment which connects strongly with my personal intentions as an ECP lecturer. My pedagogic intentions mirror those inherent in the Faculty’s commitment to be ardently concerned about the well-being and the future of our prospective UWC graduates.

### **Ethics statement**

*I hereby confirm that I received permission from the University of the Western Cape to conduct a formal study. I obtained consent from participants and ensured that anonymity remains an imperative.*

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