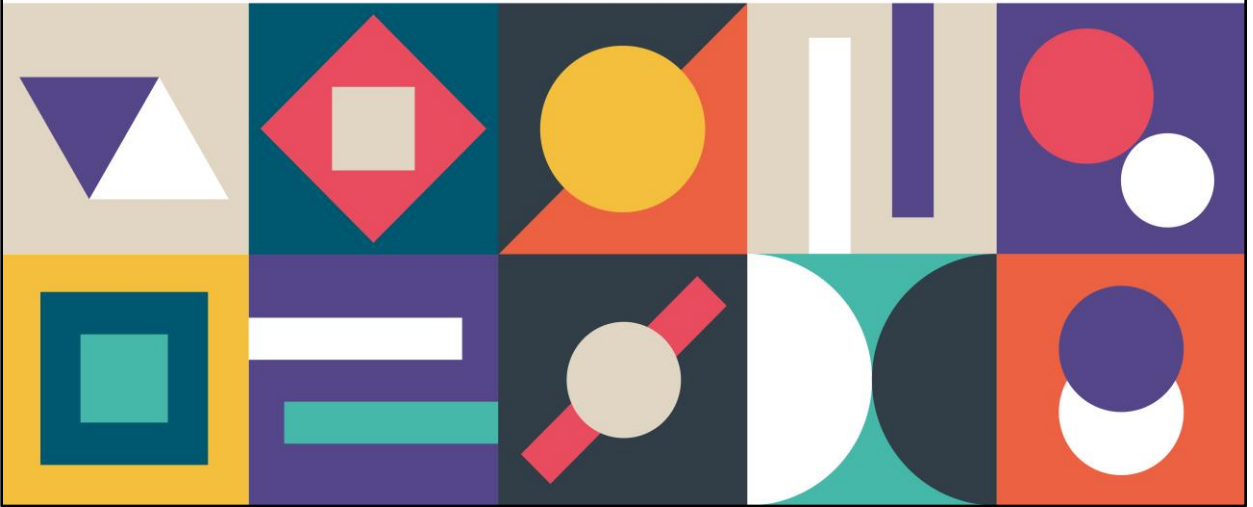


 **AdvanceHE**



LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

A partnership approach to enhancing the student experience

Training Resources

Karen Arm, Solent University



At Solent University we have cultivated learning conversations within course contexts to explore what is and what is not working effectively – with a view to enhancing learning and teaching practice.

This training resource outlines the learning conversation process and related workshop activities.

Steps taken

- 1 • Meetings with Course Leaders
- 2 • Workshops with students
- 3 • De-briefings with course teams
- 4 • Changes aimed at improvement

These are the steps that we take with each of the course teams we work with.

The entire process takes approximately four months to implement with outcomes being continually evaluated.

STEP 1: Meeting with Course Leaders

- Discuss course level NSS results including successes
- Identify issues for focused attention
- Explore context to the issues arising



First we meet individually with each of the course leaders.

In the meetings we....

- Explain overall approach (the steps)
- Discuss course level NSS results including successes
- Identify issues for focused attention
- Explore context to the issues arising
- Agree dates for workshops with students

An important part of these meetings is reassuring the Course Leader of the values underpinning our approach to course enhancement. That it is;

- 1) Pedagogy centred - focused on learning as a partnership
- 2) Appreciative – identifying what is working well (and not so well)
- 3) Inquiry-based – exploring the specifics of the learning context
- 4) Developmental and supportive – listening and working with course communities
- 5) Participatory – engaging staff and students collectively in identifying new actions in teaching and learning practice

During your studies how often have you...?

	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
1. Reviewed your notes after class				
2. Summarised what you learned in class or from course materials				
3. Identified key information from recommended reading material				
4. Asked another student to help you understand course material				
5. Explained course materials to one or more students				
6. Discussed your performance with academic staff				
7. Discussed course topics, ideas or concepts with academic staff outside of class				
8. Come to class without completing reading or a task				
9. Explored how to apply your learning to the workplace				
10. Asked your lecturer/tutor a question in class to clarify				

STEP 2: Workshops with students

We facilitate one-hour workshops with undergraduate students in selected courses.

The workshops are facilitated by two members of staff external to the course team (in our case, educational developers).

The workshops are run with entire level cohorts. They work for varying cohort sizes and are suitable for level 5 and level 6 students.

The workshops take place in timetabled sessions in semester one to ensure maximum attendance. Although they have historically taken place face-to-face, it is possible to adapt the workshops for online delivery. Students are sent a session outline beforehand.

The workshops are discursively framed around learning experiences (we would like to have a learning conversation with you to understand what is and what is not working well in respect of your learning). They consist of four activities.

In our workshop preamble, we explicitly stress that the workshop:

- Focusses on learning as a partnership
- Is inclusive of every student in the cohort
- Is active and participatory
- Is reflective and action-focussed

We encourage true and honest responses to the activities, stressing that workshop outcomes are reported back to the course team anonymously.

During your studies how often have you...?

	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
1. Reviewed your notes after class				
2. Summarised what you learned in class or from course materials				
3. Identified key information from recommended reading material				
4. Asked another student to help you understand course material				
5. Explained course materials to one or more students				
6. Discussed your performance with academic staff				
7. Discussed course topics, ideas or concepts with academic staff outside of class				
8. Come to class without completing reading or a task				
9. Explored how to apply your learning in the workplace				

Activity:

Your role in the learning process

The first activity we do in the workshop invites students to think about their own role in the learning process.

Each student is given a questionnaire consisting of 15 closed questions taken primarily from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (<https://studentsurvey.ie/survey-questions>).

For each question, the student is asked to indicate how often they do each activity to support their own learning.

This is followed by an open-ended question which encourages students to reflect on how these questions have helped them think about their own learning.

Students complete the questionnaire individually and then are encouraged to chat with each other about their responses.

The questionnaire is not used as a tool of measurement (how many times a student admits to missing a lecture for example) but rather as a tool for reflection and impetus for discussion.

Most importantly it encourages students to consider that learning is a partnership (and they are not just passive recipients of teaching at university).

Timing - This activity takes approximately 10 minutes.



Activity: Thematic Analysis

The second activity in the student workshop shifts the focus from the student to the course.

Each student is given three pieces of yellow card. They are asked to individually write down “3 things on the course that really helps you to learn” (one idea per card).

The students come to an assigned area of the room and put their cards face up on the floor.

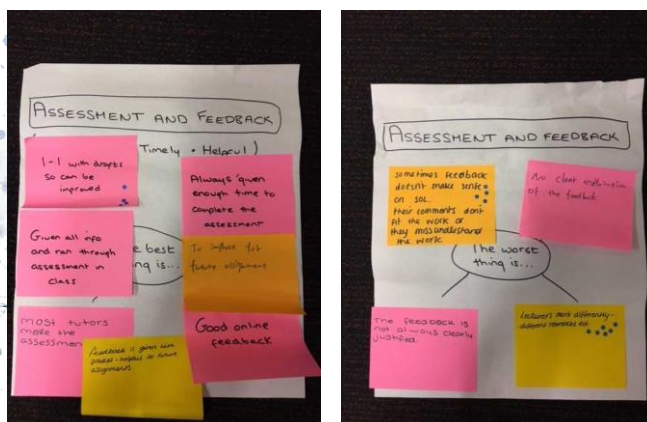
The students are then invited to thematically analyse the responses (by clustering groups of cards that are making similar points). Every student is encouraged to get involved. The students then report back to the workshop facilitator on the themes identified.

This activity is then repeated for “3 things that have been problematic for your learning (on red card).

This tends to be a very successfully activity. The students enjoy the active participation and working as a team to undertake the thematic analysis. It is inclusive of everyone involved and is empowering for the students to see that their responses are collective. The activity generates lively conversation amongst the students and allows the workshop facilitator to seek elaboration on points raised. Most importantly, it immediately gives a sense of the most important things that enable and impair learning in a cohort, from a student perspective..

Timing - This activity takes approximately 20 minutes.

Activity: Boardwalk



The next activity uses a nominal group technique.

We divide the students into three groups. Each group is asked to work on a separate topic:

- Learning Opportunities
- Teaching on my course
- Assessment and Feedback

Each student is given two post-it notes. On one post-it note they are asked to identify the best thing about the topic and on the other, the worst thing.

This activity is deliberately provocative and is intended to encourage the workshop participants to crystallise their thinking generated in the previous activities.

Spread around the walls of the room are flipchart sheets for each topic (for example, the best thing about teaching is..... the worst thing about teaching is....)

As with all activities, students are asked to refrain from naming individual members of staff and instead identify the practices that are appreciated or not.

Students are asked to put their post-it notes on the corresponding flip chart sheets.

Each student is then given five sticky dots. They are asked to 'do the boardwalk' and read all the group responses. They then place their sticky dots on the five responses that resonate most strongly with them.

This activity allows you to collect the views of everyone in the group and then quickly assess the importance of these via a tallying of votes.

The workshop facilitator then feeds the outcome of the activity back to the group seeking further clarification of selected points if necessary.

Timing - This activity takes approximately 20 minutes.

Activity: Improving learning

One thing your course
could do to improve your
learning experience

One thing you could do
to improve your learning
experience

In the final activity, students are each given two pieces of card.

On the blue piece of card, they are asked to write: “One thing your course could do to improve your learning experience”.

On the green piece of card, they are asked to write: “One thing you could do to improve your learning experience”.

This activity encourages students to develop ideas and strategies aimed at improving learning.

Timing - The activity takes approximately 5 minutes.

We bring the workshop to a close, thanking the students for their participation and explaining the next steps in the learning conversation.



STEP 3: Debriefings with course teams

- 1) Discuss the outcomes of the workshops with students
- 2) Facilitate CPD on teaching, learning and assessment in response to issues identified by students
- 3) Establish a whole course commitment to enhancing learning and teaching

The student workshops generate a huge amount of data. We type this all up into a report which tells a compelling story about learning from the students' perspective.

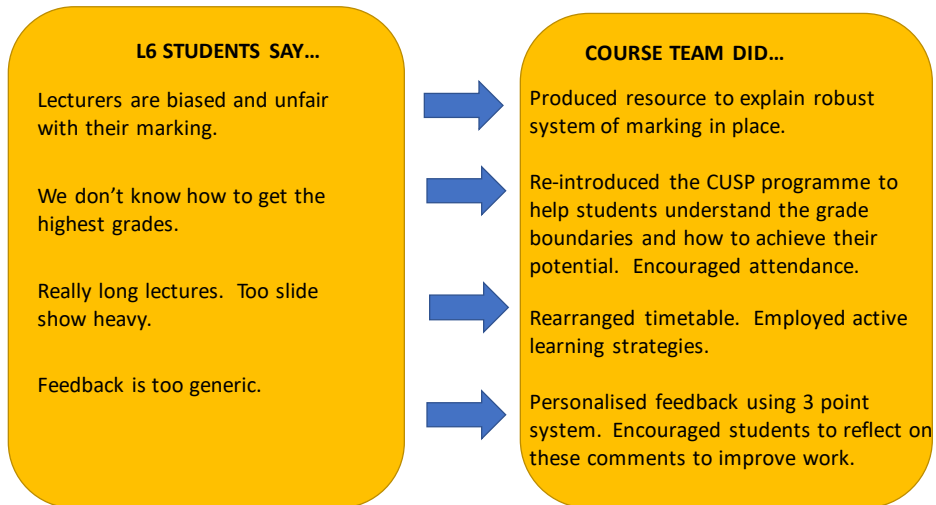
We then meet with the entire course team for a de-briefing – first asking their predictions and then taking them through the headlines of the workshop outcomes. Importantly we focus on the things that students enjoy about learning on the course as well as areas they would like improvement. Following the meeting we send the full anonymised report to the course team.

As Educational Developers we then share examples of good and evidence-informed pedagogic practices that respond to the particular issues identified by the students (for example active learning strategies in response to complaints about didactic teaching).

The course team then collectively action plan against the issues raised by the students. We focus on actions that could be implemented immediately to benefit the current cohort as well as actions for longer term.

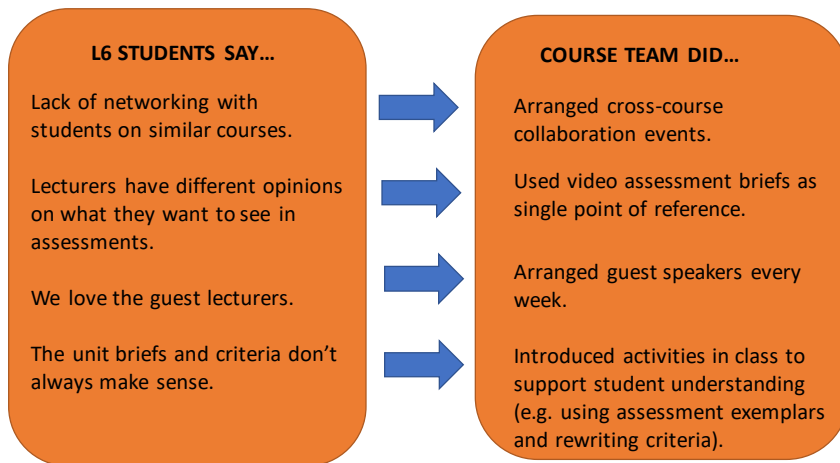
Where students have identified a practice that they find especially useful, this often instigates an adoption of this approach more consistently across the course team.

STEP 4: Changes aimed at improvement



Course teams then make a number of changes to their practice aimed at improving the learning experience. An example is provided here.

Changes aimed at improvement: Another example



Here is another example of changes made to course practice aimed at improvement.



Continuing the conversation

- Thanking the students for their reflections on learning
- Justifying pedagogic approaches taken
- Explaining issues that are irreversible/beyond course control
- Collectively action-planning

Course teams go back to their students:

- Thank them for their reflections.
- Discuss with them what actions they are putting in place.
- Discuss what actions they are not putting in place (rationalising existing approaches to teaching and managing learning expectations).
- Support the students to action plan to improve their own learning strategies

Progress against course and student actions are revisited throughout the academic year.

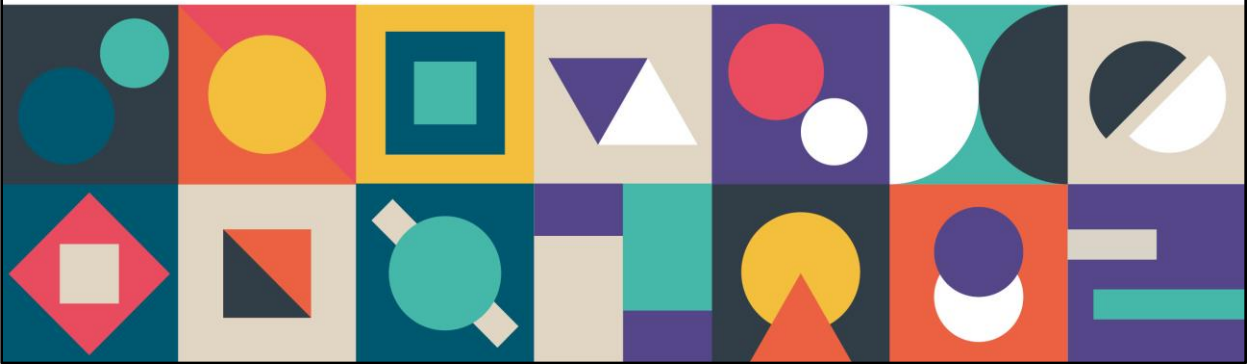
Acknowledgements

The Learning Conversation process and workshops were jointly developed by **Karen Arm** (Senior Lecturer, Learning and Teaching) and **Tansy Jessop** (Professor, Research-Informed teaching) at Solent University in 2018.



AdvanceHE

For more information
www.advance-he.ac.uk
🐦 in f @AdvanceHE



For further information about the Learning Conversation approach, please contact;

Karen Arm
Senior Lecturer in Learning and Teaching
Solent University, UK
Karen.Arm@solent.ac.uk