



## 6. Building Connections for Success

### Essential Elements for Creating a Learning Environment for Delayed and Long-term Students

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"You feel a kind of stigma 'such a typical delayer', 'we need to see if you are even able to make it'. No one will guide you; you have to figure it out for yourself, because you are a delayed student. You didn't do what you had to do, because otherwise you wouldn't be here," said Sara (a student Social Work).

Sara is one of the students at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) who is stagnating in the final phase of her study, and consequently in the development of her personal ambitions. She is one of the 50.9% of students in higher professional education who won't succeed in graduating within five years (Vereniging van Hogescholen, 2016).

Even after successfully obtaining their first-year foundation degree, many students struggle with the bachelor thesis as a large obstacle in completing their studies. A possible explanation can be found in the fact that bachelor studies have set higher requirements at the final level which students need to achieve. These higher requirements pertain to the increments in the accreditation system and increase the focus on research skills, eventually having an impact on the study-success of students (Vereniging van Hogescholen, 2016). The graduation process is the first long-term and independent complex project that students work on. Many lack sufficient research and writing skills to easily accomplish this task (Gellevij, Mittendorff, Faber, Huizinga, Staman, Truijen, Brands, & Bisschop, 2015). The process also requires capacities for a high level of abstraction, language skills and perseverance (Brauer (2018), to be submitted).

Stagnation bears a heavy impact on the student's position within the educational system and on his/her performance. Some students even lose their ambitions, and feelings of self-efficacy can decrease and those of shame and guilt increase. Students remark that their social connections are being broken down and they often feel powerless and lonely. Therefore, study success and talent development of young and upcoming professionals come to a standstill (Brauer, 2018 - to be submitted). Often this concerns students from lower socio-economic classes with a migration background, and/or students from vocational training education (MBO) (Wolff, 2013).

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To contribute to the emancipatory character of higher education, THUAS has a high interest in new opportunities and the exploration of possibilities to improve study success (De Haagse Hogeschool, 2015). In 2017, the Research Group Sustainable Talent Development and platform Connected Learning (supported by the Comenius Fellowship) started a learning network called Favourable graduation: Design, Discover, Unfold' ('Kansrijk afstuderen: Ontwerpen, Ontdekken, Ontvouwen'). The goal of the learning network was to create a shared mental model with building blocks for an enticing and activating environment for delayed students.

In the following section we take a deeper look into the results of the learning network. The central question is:

*According to the learning network, which elements are essential for an inspiring environment to activate delayers and long-term students?*

## **Method**

The learning network was launched after a presentation about the PowerHouse on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. The PowerHouse is a graduation community for long-term students within the Department of Social Work and Education (SWE) at THUAS. Inspired by the vision of the PowerHouse, an urgent need emerged among the audience to share knowledge and innovation to empower long-term students. The learning network consists of lecturers, coordinators, deans, and instructional pedagogues of a great variety of educational programmes within THUAS, and in addition one long-term student from the Department SWE. In total some 25 professionals, have worked in three stages in alternating combinations on a design to activate delayed students in the final phase of their studies. The designing process contained the following steps:

Phase 1. 'Discover' was marked by analysing and exploring barriers that lead to study delay and the drop-out of students. At the same time the possibilities to overcome limitations were addressed. This exchange of knowledge was based on experiences, prior research, relevant literature and current educational programmes.

Phase 2. 'Design' focused on establishing the building blocks for a programme for delayers and long-term students. With a method for visionary development and innovation called Lego Serious Play, participants engaged in a brainstorming session on the elements that are crucial to activate students. During this meeting the exchange of perspectives and the development of a shared language were central. Based on the stories and mutual values, a shared mental model was built.

Phase 3. 'Unfold' pertained to the visualisation of the identified elements in a model (see Figure 1). The last meetings existed of interpreting, thermalizing and visualizing the outcomes of the Lego Serious Play sessions.

As the researcher I was both participant and observer (Gold, 1958) in the learning network. I participated in the preparation and execution of the meetings and observed the ideas of the participants from the learning network. Adler and Adler (1994) refer to this research role within observation as 'complete membership'. I studied the dialogues within the learning network with observation techniques.

By means of observation notes and audio-visual registration of dialogues, I gathered and analysed the thoughts of the participants. After my first analysis, I presented a concept-model to a number of participants from the network and processed the resulting reflections and additions to the model. Newer versions of the model were then presented four experts on the field of education development. Based on their suggestions I completed the model and substantiated with additional literature research.

## Results

The described process resulted in a model in which the building blocks for a favourable environment for graduating students can be seen in Figure 1. The building blocks are not exclusive categories, but rather a rich description of ingredients that are useful for bridging the resulting gaps. The model contains four building blocks that, according to participants, are essential: 1) community values, 2) collaborative learning, 3) support, and 4) organisation. Every element shall be explained below.

<p><b>Community values</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. learning with and from each other</li> <li>b. faith and trust</li> <li>c. growth and future oriented</li> <li>d. ambition and strength</li> <li>e. high expectations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Collaborative learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. encouraging social connections</li> <li>b. groups with shared goals and urgencies</li> <li>c. connected through physical and digital environment</li> <li>d. mechanisms of sharing from knowledge and resources</li> <li>e. diversity of expertise in (sub)group</li> <li>f. pleasant atmosphere</li> <li>g. reciprocity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. extra attention to increase of skills</li> <li>b. quick and clear feedback</li> <li>c. re-inventing personal and professional identity</li> <li>d. stimulate positive self-image</li> <li>e. motivational skills</li> <li>f. use of role models</li> </ul>	<p><b>Organization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. clear and findable information</li> <li>b. visible and accessible contact persons</li> <li>c. structured phasing of learning process</li> <li>d. transparency in assessment and learning activities</li> <li>e. calibration sessions among teachers</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Building blocks of a learning environment for long-term students

## Building block 1: Community values

An important outcome of the network is that the learning process of long-term students needs to occur within a learning community. A characteristic of learning communities is the creation of a mini-culture with its own values, routines, rituals, symbols, stories and history (Wenger, 1998). An education system can co-create and influence such a mini-culture.

What is intended is a graduation learning community with a mini-culture, where learning is not only an individual process but also a collective process, and where students and lecturers can pursue shared goals and collaborate in varying compositions and expertise. Through this collaboration between members in the group, one (a) *learns with and from each other* and the opportunity to develop both personally and professionally arises (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Another important value is the (b) *faith and trust* that each participating student is competent enough to achieve the final goal. Delayed and long-term students may lack confidence in their own abilities, which is often boosted by stigmas from the environment. Sara (student) gives an example of a statement from a teacher: "We need to see if you are even able to make it." Students within the learning community must be able to break free from these (self) stigmas. Sofia (teacher and participant in the learning network) regards the process of reframing the self as a significant role for the lecturer. According to her, the lecturer has to persuade the student that they 'have a good foundation' and they can 'just do it'. Skinner, Chi, and The Learning-Gardens Educational Assessment Group (2012) endorse that the sense of competence contributes to the performance of a student.

To strengthen this sense of competence, it is important that attention be paid to the value (c) *growth and future oriented*. The mindset within that mini-culture should focus on the conviction that you can develop capacities (growth mindset) and not be based on the belief that the lack of success is due to a lack of talent and capacities (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

In this development-oriented approach, it is important that the personal (d) *ambitions and strengths* of the student are the starting point, and (e) *high expectations* are being expressed towards the student and regarding the mutual collaboration. Research indicates that high expectations have a positive impact on student achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Tinto, 2012; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The risk with delayed students is that expectations may be adjusted downwards and thus lowered. The participants of the learning network Favourable Graduation ('Kansrijk

Afstuderen') think that for this group in particular it is very important to express high expectations regarding the final level to be attained and the commitment of each student to their personal and collective learning process.

It is also important that participants within the education system echo these values in their actions, language use, rituals and symbols. The language use of teachers must be imbued with words that convey 'faith and trust in the student'. Symbols that are used within the community should express 'ambition and strength' and they can make use of 'rites of passage' as a means to make interim success ('the growth') visible. At the PowerHouse, the symbol of the fist is used as a sign of strength. Each lecture starts with this symbol, after which a story is told about the individual and collective progression on the way to achieve the common goal. The lectures conclude with the slogan that graduation is a joint experience. This expresses the importance of learning with and from each other. As a rite of passage, passing the test for the research design (partial exam) is celebrated in the collective meetings and within the digital learning environment. These are examples of how the central values in the community are underlined by the language use, rituals and symbols. It is a way of acting that strengthens a positive learning culture.

## **Building block 2: Collaborative learning**

Within the intended learning community, learning starts by reconnecting and (a) *enforcing social connections*. Hayat (participating student in the learning network) says: "A long-term student no longer has contact with his fellow students because they've graduated and started work or because of other reasons." When delayed and long-term students lose their connection with the study programme and fellow students, it is important that the learning environment stimulates the emergence of (re)new(ed) relationships (Tinto, 1998; Kappe, 2017). Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasise that the experience of social connections with members of the education system and fellow students contributes to motivation, leading to learning and performance.

These new social connections must be a starting point for collaborative learning. Collaborative learning helps students refine their knowledge, share ideas and perspectives, learn to 'use' fellow students as resources, develop an appreciation for multiple perspectives, and be more willing to tackle complex, poorly structured problems (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003). It is up to the education system to create an environment where this collaboration between long-term students is promoted.

To activate collaborative learning between delayed and long-term students it is important that student (b) *groups have shared goals and urgencies*. Shared goals reinforce the need to participate in the activities of the group (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman,

Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004). In composing and activating groups, it is important to pay attention to this aspect. Collaborative learning is also encouraged when participants are (c) *connected through a physical (and possibly also digital) environment* (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

In the learning community, (d) *mechanisms* must be introduced and used to *share knowledge and resources*. By realizing an active exchange of resources and knowledge, the community can solve individual questions, obstacles and dilemmas of delayed and long-term students through collective knowledge (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Such a learning culture ensures that not only the individual lecturer with his or her knowledge and feedback adds value to the learning process, but that the capital of all those present in the community is available to everyone and becomes of value. This value is further increased if there is (e) *diversity of expertise* among the members of the subgroups and of the learning community (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999).

To foster collaboration, attention to a (f) *pleasant atmosphere* is important.

Nicole (Coordinator of delayed students and participant in the learning network) says: "I see an education programme as a house where it is warm and cosy." Experiencing warmth, trust and fun in a learning environment is an essential mechanism for creating a safe and stimulating environment in which students come to learn and collaborate (in creative processes) (Ehlen, 2015).

Lecturers in this learning network are expected to secure (g) *reciprocity* in both attention and time between students (developing reciprocity). The lecturer is available to the student, as are the students for each other. The culture in the learning community requires a two-way process and thus has a reciprocal nature, whereby the members of the community can take on both the role of learner and teacher to their fellow members (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004).

### **Building block 3: Support**

Lecturers are expected to get the learning process of delayed and long-term students moving again. Attention should be paid to (a) *increasing skills* to eliminate deficiencies, for example, writing and research skills, and it demands (b) *quick and clear feedback* on the performance and development of the student (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Attention must also be paid to (c) *re-inventing personal and professional identity*, so that students experience meaning in the educational tasks they carry out. Neda (participant in the learning network) mentions the importance that students should first assess 'Who am I' and 'What do I believe in' before they are able to overcome barriers. Many delayers lose their personal affinity with the subject of the bachelor thesis.

When the assignment is not in line with their ambitions, it is necessary to reinvent the meaning of education for students (Kappe, 2017). It is the role of the lecturer to offer new perspectives in this.

To encourage students in realizing their objectives, it is important that their (d) *positive self-image* is built up. Due to negative experiences with graduation, many students have lost their hope and confidence in accomplishing their final goal. In supervising such a group of students, one will have to focus on increasing hope, optimism, resilience and self-confidence. These concepts, also called psychological capital, all contribute to a better performance (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004).

The aforementioned support requires the lecturers to have (e) *motivational skills* consisting of: 'activating, confronting, motivating, stimulating and provoking to actually get students over the experienced (mental) barriers' (Arianne, participant of learning network). In the motivation process of students supply and inspiration by (f) *role models* is indispensable. Role models can be members from inside or outside the community who offer inspiration on the content or the process. It is known that the greater the psychological closeness and resemblance of the role model, the greater the effect on the development of self-confidence (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004).

#### **Building block 4: Organisation**

When delayed students end up outside of the regular process, they notice that they have to find new pathways within the existing structures. They experience the educational curriculum changes, and that programmes have lapsed and lecturers are no longer connected to the subjects they have followed. Students experience stumbling blocks around obtaining clear information and the availability of people who may guide them in the development of new routes. Sara articulates this by saying: "Nobody takes you actively by the hand, you just find it out for yourself that you're a delayed student." As a solution to this, a participant in the learning network Marianne states: "It is important that the whole faculty team is available for the student. Not only the lecturers, but also the support services. There are a lot of wheels and rods that make this process possible. If one wheel falters, it becomes more difficult to achieve the final goal. Actually, there should be icebreakers everywhere."

Characteristics that are mentioned include the importance of (a) *clear and findable information* on the routes to be followed in order to resume the studies, and (b) *visible and accessible contact persons* who can support the student in the process. It requires (c) *structured phasing of the learning process*. The amount of work to be done and the extra procedures can scare off students in restarting the learning activities.

Once the graduation process has started, there must be consensus within the team of lecturers on the quality requirements, frameworks and deadlines. Students experience that such requirements differ from lecturer to lecturer. It requires a form of organisation in which lecturers can be (d) *transparent* in their assessments about the quality requirements they set, and be concrete about the steps a student should take to achieve the final level. To have a shared vision, (e) *calibration sessions among teachers* are necessary. These are meetings in which lecturers align the substantive requirements that are set for the work of students and where lecturers determine whether the assessment indicators are applied in a comparable manner. This alignment should prevent students from stagnating because of differences in vision among grading supervisors and assessors.

## **Conclusion**

For delayed and long-term students, the education process is often a lonely journey. The main conclusion of this research is that learning should not be an individual process of the student connected to one lecturer, but rather a community where learning is a collective journey. The social interaction between lecturers, groups of delayed students and other actors is an important engine for arriving at the new knowledge, insights and expertise that are important to reach their final level. This calls for the design of social structures and the collaboration mechanism that enable the bonding of all members in the community. By making use of this added value, new opportunities for the individual are created that can lead to study success.

Another important conclusion is that in the design and development of learning communities, sufficient attention must be paid to cultural characteristics. Students who delay are faced with a loss of self-efficacy and feelings of shame and guilt. A learning community for delayed students requires a culture in which students can turn this experience into an experience of self-confidence, hope and optimism. This requires that the education system pays attention to language use, symbols and rituals to realise this turn.

The model 'Building blocks of a learning environment for long-term students' contains elements that contribute to the study success of delayed and long-term students. It is the challenge for every education programme to use it in an appropriate way within its own educational context. Each department will have to explore for themselves how these elements can be translated into the actions, language, symbols and rituals that are suitable for their own target group.

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