

Becoming a learning advisor was a dream come true

Hua Dai

Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

hdai@unitec.ac.nz

Kia ora ATLAANZ,

I am Hua Dai, senior lecturer of learning and development and learning advisor at Te Whare Wananga O Wairaka. I became a learning advisor in May 2010 after one year as a student advisor to support migrant Mandarin-speaking students who enrolled in the ESOL (English as a Second Language) course at Unitec.

Becoming a learning advisor was a dream come true after I had taught at tertiary institutes in China, Australia, and at language schools in Auckland for decades. During those years, I was a lecturer of English at a Chinese university, then a part-time tutor of Contemporary Chinese Language and Literature at Sydney University while completing my master's in applied linguistics and starting my PhD. This was followed by teaching as an ESOL teacher at Auckland language schools when I accepted a scholarship to continue my PhD at the University of Auckland in February 2001. In 2003, I discontinued my doctoral research and left higher education to recover from a life-death-life experience in Auckland. When I was ready to work, I wanted to find a job that would mean I leave work at the end of the working day and not need to think about it all the time or take work home like I did in my previous teaching positions. With the previous teaching positions, I was forever thinking about what materials were best for my class of international language students, or taking marking home to complete while working at university in China.

In May 2009, I became a student advisor to support migrant students who needed assistance with their communication in this English-speaking country. But I soon got bored with the job as it required little of my brilliant brain; I needed more academic stimulation to keep me

interested. So, I was promoted to be a learning advisor in May 2010. I enjoyed my role as support and guidance for Social Practice and Nursing students at Unitec. For my interest in the subject, I read the designated readers earmarked by the Bachelor of Social Practice lecturers for their students. I familiarised myself with the terminology that frequently baffled new students. I formed regular weekly study groups for international students on the course. We would meet at a pre-arranged time of the week to review what they had learned in class and help answer any questions in group discussions. Then, there was time for them to work on their weekly assignments with my immediate available guidance. The intention was to assist them with their academic studies, provide a community that feels connected and supported, and develop self-confidence and success. I would invite previous graduates or students from higher years to come and speak to the group. This proved to be successful. Students in my study group graduated and became social workers in the community.

At the same time, I also ran a regular study group for Bachelor of Nursing students. Similarly, students came to work on their assignments, discuss any issue they might have with their studies, and to be supported by each other and me. This study group gradually evolved into a study group of Drug Calculation when I got Maths support written into my role as a dual learning advisor of literacy and numeracy at a time when the Maths advisor left Unitec between 2013 and 2016. I loved teaching Maths and facilitating students with Drug Calculation in alignment with the Maths lecturers' formulae.

During that time, I developed a technique using the Psychosynthesis framework of Mind-Body-Feelings, which I was trained in in 2005 and 2014 – 2016 at the Institute of Psychosynthesis NZ, to support students feeling anxiety when doing drug calculations. My article to promote the technique was published in the ATLAANZ Journal in 2021.

Apart from my study group, I also developed and organised regular joint workshops with a mental health advisor/counsellor to help students manage anxiety. My support was successful, and students responded positively with high achievement and skills to calm their nerves during exams and in life. The senior lecturer of Maths on the Bachelor of Nursing commented that during my support, he had the highest pass rate, and the lecturer in the Bridging course for Nursing also thanked me for the steady high pass rate in her class. This time gave me the most

satisfaction and a sense of reward working as a learning advisor. I was promoted to Senior Lecturer of learning and development in 2016, effective in February 2017.

However, since 2014, the constant change and shift in the sector have created chaos and uncertainty in tertiary learning advisors' work. I continued my support and research interest in whole-person education and cultural relevance in education, as well as personality types in the learning advisors' role, while at the same time observing the changes in the field of tertiary learning advising. The first shift was management's attempt to merge our role with the librarians' work. Many institutes locate their learning advisors in the libraries. It is what happened to me and my colleagues. We sit in the library while we continue our learning advisory work. The librarians and learning advisors are doing different work and playing significantly different roles in students' learning and success.

From my perspective and belief, learning advisors are responsible for nurturing and fostering the development of students as human beings and students on their life journey, where higher education is only a part. This may be from my personality type as a big picture person; I take my role as not only academic support but also development support for students in their lifelong learning and development journey. I wanted to support students to be conscious human beings and social workers and nurses to support the communities they will serve. Meanwhile, librarians are there to provide the resources required for their study. We have a common goal in students' success, yet we play different roles in the students' journey to becoming successful. Everyone, including learning advisors and students alike, is on their journey to maturity and consciousness. Education is only part of the journey. Therefore, the learning advisor's role allows me to support and facilitate students' development into mature and conscious individuals.

Recently, two social practice students came and told me that they were the earliest or the only ones who raised their hands in class to ask questions to guest lecturers, which could only be answered by the guest lecturers in class. Their readiness to raise their hands with their intended questions drew the attention of their class lecturer. They answered the lecturer's question of how and why they were the only ones who always asked questions. They told the lecturer that they had come to Hua for support. Hua explained to them how crucial it was to preview course materials and be ready to ask questions in class to help answer questions identified in the preview.

There are other aspects of those students demonstrating their becoming conscious and independent learners; for example, they took control of their learning. They created a timetable that suited them for previewing, reviewing, and planning their assignments. They are mothers of young children, so they are conscious of the impact and influence of their behaviour on their children. They are also conscious of the gender inequality when they were demanded by their respective children's fathers to leave school early so they could pick up their children to take them to their dad, who could stay at work and wait for their children to be delivered by the mothers. Knowing this and being conscious of what it means to be a woman in society will eventually support their work as social practitioners in future.

Another social practice student came to me in year one, telling me they needed help as they did not know how to write, but could speak, as they were a minister at their local community church. We planned for the student to come with their assignment question each time before they started writing, so we could analyse the assignment question together and set up a structure for the student to research and write. Then, the student would bring their draft to read to me, and we would consider any editing together. This way, the student passed all their assessments with high marks, which boosted their self-confidence and allowed them to continue working increasingly independently. The student once told me with great pleasure that their lecturer told them that the lecturer read the student's assignment ten times as it was so well written! That affirmed to the student that they could do it and do it well if they planned well and followed through with their plan with steady support. Another social practice student, in the Master's in Applied Practice, developed her research methodology with my support. Their research proposal got high marks after I supported it.

Currently, I am supporting a wahine Māori at certificate level. She came to me because I was known to have been learning Te Reo and love supporting students who struggle to keep up with the class. After an initial meeting and greeting, I found out that this student was adopted at birth to a Pakeha family of six children of their own. As a norm, the mother did not cook breakfast, nor prepare lunch for my student to take to school. So, the student only had one meal each day: dinner. She couldn't eat much at dinner, because her stomach had shrunk over time when there was only one meal daily for most of her life. I was shocked to hear that and to realise that my student was starved daily. How could she catch up with the rest of the class? I heard that

she was invited and expected to go to the kuia (elderly Māori woman, especially a female relative or ancestor) at the marae (a meeting grounds of Māori communities) house every morning for porridge as breakfast because the kuia was concerned about her well-being. Further, I discovered that the student was given \$75 weekly from WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand), but the money was put into her public transport card. If the money was not spent, she would lose the benefit. When I suggested that she take the free shuttle, she insisted on taking the bus, thus spending money when I wanted to teach her to budget and prioritise her spending on buying lunch. Thus, a further social problem was revealed from this student's life. As a learning advisor, my role is not only to support her with her academic success, but also to support her with navigating life situations and becoming a mature and conscious human being, so she not only can do maths or read and write but also know how to live independently and successfully as a human being in society.

My support plan now includes meeting this student weekly, when she brings her schoolbooks to the appointment with me. We will do Maths one week and reading and writing another week. She can bring her questions from class to get help from me. The goal is to help her catch up with her classmates academically, develop reading and writing skills, and develop Maths skills. I plan to also connect with a student advocate at Unitec to write a letter to the student's WINZ manager and ask for their reconsideration of allowing her to use the money for food and use the shuttle to save money for food. This advocacy will support the student and teach them problem-solving as a social being, thus taking control of how to live their life. Since 2012, I have been presenting at ATLAANZ regional conferences on the theme of taking students as human beings on their development journey through life.

In 2025, I am as passionate as I ever have been in supporting and facilitating students' development as human beings through the learning advising I am offering. From my daily work experience, a learning advisor's role cannot be replaced or confused with other people and positions in tertiary education. To future-proof our role, we need to let our values be known in the students' academic success and their lives as human beings, and the benefit of producing conscious and aware graduates for the community. We need to know our values and state them out loud.