

Navigating change: A reflective journey across fifteen years as a learning advisor

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Fifteen years ago, Mary Silvester made it possible for me to shift roles from tutoring into the Learning Advisor team. This transition demanded new pedagogical understandings, increased involvement in cross-disciplinary work, and a deeper engagement with academic frameworks. Though the institutional context was familiar to me, the new role required me to reconceptualise how I teach, support ākonga, and collaborate with colleagues. It marked the beginning of a period of sustained professional growth, collaborative inquiry, and reflexive practice.

Embedding literacy and numeracy

Early in my LA tutoring role, embedding literacy and numeracy (LLN) became a keystone of our LA practice. At the time, LLN embedding was supported by national research and policy frameworks (e.g. National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults, Ako Aotearoa). Research had identified that embedding LLN into vocational and foundation programmes helps to align learning more closely with ākonga needs, and improves academic outcomes.

As part of the LLN embedding initiative, I co-tutored across multiple programmes including performing arts, visual arts, nursing, paramedicine, and foundation classes. In arts programmes, LLN embedding focused on critical reflection, and articulating creative processes. In paramedicine and nursing, the emphasis shifted to cultural safety, clinical documentation, academic writing, and safety-critical communication. In the foundation classes many ākonga

arrived with knowledge gaps or anxieties about academic literacy and numeracy, and embedding LLN allowed me to scaffold ākongā learning, build confidence, and better prepare ākongā for further study.

Portfolio roles

As the institution restructured, I shared portfolios with my colleague Helen Borren who has sadly died, with responsibilities for Pacific students and disabilities support. Helen's death remains deeply felt; her commitment to equity and inclusion continues to inform my practice today.

Together, Helen and I developed inclusive strategies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and support networks tailored to the needs of our portfolio cohorts. We based our Pacific support on the Fonofale Model, emphasising family, cultural identity, spiritual wellbeing, and community support as central to academic success. I went on to establish a programme known as Tusi Talanoa that targeted at-risk second year Pacific nursing students. We met weekly for two hours and focussed on academic scholarship, including assignment planning, breaking down tasks, research, academic reading, academic writing, critical thinking, etc. All ākongā in that programme completed their second year and went on to complete their third year.

In collaboration with a nursing tutor, I also established a lunchtime support programme for first year dyslexic nursing students to provide a relaxed, stigma-free space for sharing strategies and building confidence. Sessions focused on practical study skills, academic scholarship, clinical documentation, and peer connection. Attendance and engagement grew quickly, and feedback showed students felt more supported, confident, and successful in their studies. The initiative proved highly effective in promoting inclusion and academic achievement within the nursing programme.

Sensitivity research and PhD

Part of our LA roles included conducting research. Partnering with Clare Hazeldine, I turned my observations about student sensitivity into formal research inquiry and Clare and I

embarked on research investigating how sensitivity impacts the tertiary student experience. Our initial qualitative research project investigated whether highly sensitive students found the knowledge of environmental sensitivity to be useful in managing life and study. The key finding from that project was that sensitive ākonga not only found the knowledge of sensitivity to be useful, they also found it to be life-changing (Cater, 2017).

Completing a PhD while retaining a fulltime LA role was demanding but rewarding (Bassett, et al., 2024). My research enriched my practice with evidence-based insight (Cater et al. 2022) and allowed me to advocate for wellbeing initiatives at the institutional level and advocate for change at the sector level (Cater, 2022).

Sector challenges and role disestablishment

Despite this work, structural changes and shifting political priorities led to the disestablishment the LAs at my institution. These cutbacks reflect a sector trend - even as unemployment rises and upskilling demand grows, many courses, support services, and student resources have been reduced or eliminated. The closure of campus resources such as libraries is particularly concerning, as they function as academic hubs and support retention and learning. The consequence of such destruction in the sector shows a growing gap between educational research, pedagogy, and student needs and institutional strategy priorities.

Sector challenges and role disestablishment

Over the years, ATLAANZ has provided invaluable professional support and development for Learning Advisors - fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and resilience through times of significant change. The organisation has consistently upheld high standards of practice, offering a strong professional network that promotes growth, adaptability, and innovation within tertiary education. As the tertiary sector continues to evolve, ATLAANZ remains a vital source of guidance and collective strength, supporting LAs to navigate challenges and prepare for a future where inclusive, student-centred learning and professional expertise are centre of sector and institutional values once again.

References

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