

## Two decades of learning advice: A reflection

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As I reflect on my twenty-year career in the student support sector, I am reminded of the accomplishments and challenges of the learning advisor role. I am reminded of the richness of our community, the diversity of our tauira, the evolution of educational practices, institutional and sector restructuring, and the role of technology. I have witnessed the rise of learning platforms such as Blackboard, Stream, and Moodle, which have become an integral part of teaching and academic support. Distance, flexi, and mobile learning have brought the promise of 'anytime/anywhere', with tools such as Zoom and Google Classroom (and the infamous line 'you're on mute') redefining the way we engage. The increasing use of collaborative tools like OneDrive, Google Workspace, and Padlet has played a pivotal role, especially during the global pandemic. To the present day, with the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), another tool that is influencing the learning advisory landscape and prompting us to rethink how we guide student learning.

My entry into the world of learning advice was a serendipitous event. It may shock you to learn that I did not go to learning advisor college. Instead, I completed an honours degree in graphic design and at the turn of the millennium, with the 'Y2K bug' dispelled, I struggled to land a job in the industry. At a crossroads, I found a fixed-term position as a design tutor at the local community college, despite having little experience and no formal teaching qualifications. At that time, technology was still relatively rudimentary. I found myself relying on acetate sheets, a projector, chalkboards, and a few slow, and very ugly 'computer' thingmabobs. A far

cry from the digital terrain we navigate today, but those early experiences laid the foundation for long-term growth.

As I juggled lesson planning, marking at ungodly hours, and completing my second degree (teaching), I found myself drawn not only to teaching content but to supporting students longer-term in their academic journeys. It became clear that my passion lay in helping students enhance their academic skills, break down barriers, and gain in confidence. Brookfield (2017) recognised that effective teaching must engage students beyond content, supporting their broader experiences and aspirations. This narrative reflects my professional development as a learning advisor and mirrors my transition from a focus on content delivery to a role centred on providing academic support and the holistic development of students' skills.

A key driver of the learning advisor role over the years has been my commitment to offering a person-centred approach to student support. Early on, I learned that effective support is not about imposing a one-size-fits-all solution but about adaptation and meeting each student where they are. Guided by the student's unique needs, background, and aspirations, I've adopted strategies that encourage individuals to take ownership of their learning and building the skills they need to succeed. This personalised, student-directed approach recognises the importance of listening to students and co-creating support strategies that resonate with them. This emphasises the significance of engaging with students on a broader spectrum, not just academically, but through acknowledging their wider goals and objectives (Brookfield, 2017).

One of the most valuable lessons of my career has been the realisation that when supporting students, learning is reciprocal. While I've supported and guided many students, they have each shaped me in meaningful ways. Every interaction has presented an opportunity for mutual learning, where we've shared knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. Building trust is central in this role, as it creates a safe space where students can tackle their challenges and genuine progress can be made. Education, as Hooks (2010) asserts, can be a collaborative act that enriches both the student and the mentor through their shared engagement. The encouragement that emerges from such relationships not only promotes academic success but can also foster a deep sense of empathy and mutual respect.

My passion for student support is deeply personal. Growing up with a hearing disability, I faced significant barriers within a medical model approach to education. These challenges

highlighted both the obstacles disabled students encounter and the necessity of providing effective, inclusive support. Support networks are essential for all students, at every level, and in all educational institutions. My experiences have shaped my commitment to inclusivity and advocacy, and particularly for learners with specific learning difficulties and disabilities. Moreover, the importance of being seen and reflected in the educational environment fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment, crucial for academic and personal growth.

Throughout my career, I have supported a wide range of students. From those developing literacy skills at NCEA Levels 2 and 3 to postgraduate students preparing theses for publication. Each stage has brought its own set of challenges and opportunities, but the goal has always remained the same: to empower students to realise their potential and build the critical thinking, confidence, and self-efficacy necessary for future success. Diverse backgrounds, goals, and life experiences mean that learning support must be adaptable, personalised, and holistic, ensuring that each student feels valued and equipped for success.

Serving as a learning advisor, I have found immense fulfilment in seeing students overcome obstacles and achieve milestones. Each success, big or small, reinforces the transformative power of education. These experiences continually renew my commitment to grow and reflect on my practice. As we continue to face socio-political challenges across the sector and grapple with the rise of the AI, I remain convinced that – while technology and assistive tools are valuable – human-centred, inclusive support remains irreplaceable. I am filled with optimism for the future of learning support, knowing that when delivered thoughtfully and compassionately, education remains the most powerful tool for positive change.

Mā te mōhio ka ora | Through knowledge there is life

## References

Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Hooks, B. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.