

Sausages and The Study Skills Handbook: Learning advising at a regional polytech

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I round the corner into the hub of Student Success, noticing stains on the grey carpet. Looking up, I see my new manager smiling.

“Welcome. We’re so glad you’re here,” she says. “It will be so good to have a full team again.” She leads me to the Learning Advisors’ (LA) office. It’s the last door on the right.

The office feels warm as if someone has cranked up the air conditioning. I shake hands with the team leader and another LA. We are a team of three.

Training begins. My team leader explains how they do workshops. Make a PowerPoint. Include some activities. Don’t have too many slides.

“This will be a piece of cake,” I think. I’ve just come from eight years teaching in secondary schools.

Then reporting is explained. Every interaction with a student must be logged in the student management system.

“Every interaction?”

“Every interaction. Stats are important,” my team leader replies.

To begin with, I don’t receive many appointments because I’m a new face to the taurira, so I turn some pages instead. I read Cottrell’s *The Study Skills Handbook* and wonder how on earth I managed to get A’s with my evidently shoddy study habits? I Post-it pages and pepper PowerPoints with Cottrell’s wisdom.

I've moved cities for this role at a regional polytechnic. It is the Holy Grail of jobs: permanent AND fulltime. I enjoyed teaching, but I grew tired of being in the precariat, constantly on contracts. I'm impressed that polytechs have HR or "People and Culture" as it's called here.

Six years later. It's Monday morning and the first day of Orientation Week. I can't get a free park because students have arrived early for the powhiri. My colour-coded Outlook day includes a workshop for ninety first-year nursing students at 11am, followed by barbecuing sausages at 12pm for a welcome spread. At least the menu hasn't reformed in six years.

We LAs are still a troupe of three. However, I'm the last of the LAs minted in 2019, and we are a sub-set of the library now (officially: Library/Learning). At my desk I can hear the beeps of 'real' books checking out and the voice of a student who needs help logging into an e-book database. The name of the database tells me it's a nursing student. It's always a good sign when they're visiting the library and logging into databases. Yet, reform is chasing these costly sounds.

"Research comes before drafting, which comes before editing. Leave enough time for each step of the process," I advise, during the 11am workshop. Approximately half of the class are students for whom English is their second language. I'm aware that in other countries, essays don't dominate tertiary assessment the way they do here. At least for the moment, this is true in Aotearoa.

I mention A.I. during workshops these days. What is acceptable use. What is not. How to include an acknowledgement if A.I. was used. A student, bless, asks, "What is A.I.?" In two sentences I provide a definition that Elon Musk wouldn't be proud of.

According to the 5Ps of Learning Development, the student's question about A.I. would fit into the third 'P,' which is Perception of task (Webster, 2023). Over the years, I've come to have a greater appreciation of questioning during interactions with taurira. Without appreciating the context in which a student is studying and their learning processes, LAs may fall into the trap of "pronouncing a diagnosis on examination of the symptoms and prescribing a treatment. This not only pathologizes the student by locating the problem in them but also robs them of agency as they passively await the Learning Developer's prescription" (Webster, 2023, p. 4). Ouch.

However, as Webster notes, LAs are restricted by the short-term nature of most student interactions. Where I work, face-to-face appointments have always been thirty minutes long. And I sometimes worry about taura getting bang-for-their-buck during their appointment time with me. During their last five minutes, I have been known to thrust handouts at them faster than the UK changed PM's in 2022.

COVID. An internal restructure. The Labour government's Te Pūkenga plan. The National government's reforms. I know the names and faces of LAs from around the motu thanks to online meetings to discuss a joint submission for the red consultation.

I ferry out another tray of slightly charred sausages, treading on the same grey carpet, which (as yet) has not been replaced.

References

- Cottrell, S. (2013). *The study skills handbook* (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Webster, H. (2023). The five Ps of LD: Using formulation in Learning Development work for a student-centred approach to 'study skills.' *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 20(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.20.4.07>