

The discourse of 'care centred pedagogy' has gained significant momentum in recent decades. Authors such as Lynch (2010 & 2015) and Noddings (2013) have highlighted the dangers of 'care-less' education environments associated with increasingly marketized, neo-liberal agendas (preoccupied primarily with measurable outputs, numbers and performativity metrics). There has therefore been a counter movement that increasingly values care centred pedagogies and climates of care. Care centred pedagogies and their positive impact on student motivation, and inclusion have subsequently been well documented by authors such as: Motta and Bennett (2018), Palahicky et.al. (2019) and Bali (2021).

TUS-MMW is therefore committed to a care-centred pedagogy, which places 'human relationality' at the core of our teaching and learning. 'Pedagogies of care, including transition pedagogies' is a key pillar in our new TUS-MMW Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2022). It is a commitment to a socially just, inclusive, and enriching learning experience for all our students. It is about an authentic educator presence, where our pedagogical practice reflects the importance of the social and the relational. A care-centred philosophy enables and nurtures "climates of care" (Noddings, 1984) where our learners, teachers and support staff feel valued, respected and connected as part of a learning community of equality, trust and fairness (O'Connell and Ryan 2022). We are committed to creating a 'community of practice' as colleagues who attend regularly to the underlying purpose of our programmes and critically discuss pedagogical issues, in a supportive collegial environment.

When we place our students and our relationships with them, at the centre of our practice, we embed a deep respect for the students' capacity and agency for learning. Placing pedagogic relationships at the centre of our practice, enables us to draw on the existing funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 1992) that our students bring to the learning encounter. Active learning strategies respect prior student knowledge and experience. It therefore seeks to connect these 'funds' to our curricula. Active learning can thereby enable our students to put into practice these new connections and become agents in their own knowledge making. It is deeply respectful of our students and what they bring to the learning encounter, reflecting co-constructivist approaches. Active learning shifts the focus from the lecturer to the student's engagement with the module content. The lecturer becomes a facilitator of learning, rather than a deliverer of content. This is a crucial pivot in understanding how learning happens.

Drawing on the Deweyan (1916) conception of education as a social process, we see active learning as a key vehicle for these social interactions. More recently, the impact of active learning on student performance and engagement has been highlighted by authors such as: Eison (2010), Freeman (2014) and Ryan (2021). Drawing from Dewey's conception of learning as a social process, contemporary authors favoured a co-constructivist ethos in learning encounters.

As we commit to active learning in our pedagogical approach, we must also consider innovative learning assessment which builds on this philosophy of learning. As students engage in active learning for innovative assessments, they feel respected and valued as contributors to the TUS-MMW learning community.

#### **Building active learning strategies into our practice**

In order to embed active learning strategies in our teaching, we need to adopt an attitude of humility and a willingness to learn. We need to move from any notions of 'the all-knowing lecturer' to facilitators who are happy to share what we know, help our students to discover what they know and declare what we collectively don't know. We can therefore guide them to continually look for answers. To help our students become self-directed and autonomous learners as they progress through third level education, we need to encourage them to continue searching and thinking.

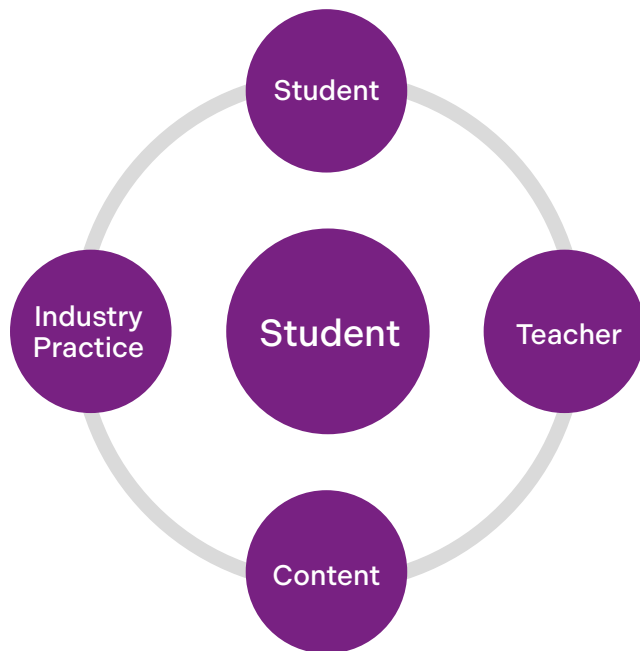
This 'not knowing' attitude paradoxically begins with being seriously committed to our subject domain and researching and developing associated resources so that we have adequate mastery to design and facilitate a rich and informed learning experience for our students. It is important to be explicit with our students about our teaching style: *Care centred pedagogy, with active learning for student engagement infused with energy, fun and reflection.* Being explicit about the rationale, what is required from our students in terms of engagement and active learning is important too. Drawing on the rich lineage of educators and particularly John Dewey, who explicates an active teaching and learning philosophy, helps our students value this approach.

In our teaching we seek to create a stimulating learning environment of humour, challenge, problem solving, insight, reflection, space for thinking and peer engagement. In order to create this type of learning space for active and connected learning opportunities, we must lay the groundwork for group work and community building with peers. This can take some time at the outset of our learning encounters, but it is essential to create good boundaries and clear guidelines for the peer engagement we require in our classrooms.

This can involve a group learning contract and developing ground rules that can help students navigate the learning environment. The recently published resource 'Groupwork in Higher Education: A Practitioner Guide' (Ryan 2022) may be helpful here. We need to attend to the diversity of our student population and notice students who may need more encouragement to engage. Shy or reticent students may find it challenging to engage in the learning community. We need to have an equality lens to our practice as our student body becomes more diversified and commit to inclusive practices which create a welcoming climate for all students. Engaging with students in enhancement activities is also helpful. Enhancement activities can include: site visits, guest speakers, conference planning, professional seminars, (discussion of relevant film/documentary) report or publication launches and Christmas fundraising activities.

When we plan our pedagogical approach to embrace each of the four interactions below, we are providing students with a rich and diverse learning experience that places students at the centre of the learning approach. The many active learning strategies contained in this publication and in its precursor (Ryan 2021) provides for a great variety of rich learning scenarios.

#### *The four pedagogical interactions of Active Learning*



#### **Building innovative assessment strategies into our practice**

Homes (2018) makes a strong case for assessment as engagement, particularly the use of continuous assessment and how it can drive learning. Some of the innovative continuous assessment practices we have used for Early Childhood Education and Social Care programmes include mock interviews with a panel of lecturers from their programme. This 'real' life scenario encouraged students to embed the theory of their modules with the practical experience of doing an interview for a position in an ECEC setting. Students had to prepare a CV, attend an interview, and complete a written reflection on their learning, post interview.

A second example is in the fourth year Social Care programme. In a capstone module with 100% continuous assessment, students had to complete a ten-minute role play with a peer on an intervention that they would use in a professional context. This was observed by classmates who gave feedback after the process. This was a powerful assessment process as learning became live in the classroom and embodied in practice. The written component involved the theoretical underpinning of the intervention, along with a critical reflection on the practice encounter. The learning was significant for the person completing the role play but also for the peer observers (as well as for the lecturers).

An overall approach to assessment that demonstrates our care-based approaches (including both formative and summative) will include: exploring and discussing assessment choices, sharing rubrics for success, encouraging ongoing discussion and clarification, providing timely and supportive feedback, encouraging students to engage with 'authentic assessment tasks' and processes, and animating ongoing assessment through discussion and peer review.

The importance of providing overview feedback on assessments completed, is also helpful and encourages assessment as learning. Feedback which acknowledges collective and individual achievement is also important (highlighting what has been done well, using a list of commendations and a list of areas for improvement). It is also really helpful to provide opportunities for students to discuss feedback and seek clarification regarding future assessment goals.

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