

INQUIRY ARTICLE

Co-creating a Learning to Learn Initiative

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Abstract

This case study presents the development and implementation of a Learning to Learn initiative in an introductory interprofessional course for 600 first-year students from 12 health professions education programs. The initiative derived from a bigger health promotion project aiming to improve students' health and well-being, and the specific aim of the project described in this case study was to support students' learning. Grounded in principles from Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), we collaborated with teachers and students who had previously been involved in this course to develop Learning to Learn and integrate it in the course. In this paper, we aim to describe the development and implementation of Learning to Learn in a large and diverse group of first-year students in ways that other institutions can learn from. Based upon our experiences from this pilot, we argue that there is a potential for teachers and students to work in partnerships for a shared understanding of learning processes.

Keywords: *First year students, Learning strategies, Students as partners, Higher education, Study habits*

Introduction

With the increasing number and diversity of students entering higher education, many first-year students struggle in the transition from high school to higher education and in navigating their educational journey (Noui, 2020). They are often not prepared for the independent learning expected from them (Van der Zanden et al., 2018), and tend to use non-optimal learning techniques (e.g., rereading and highlighting) that lead to less durable learning than engaging in more active techniques like retrieval and distributed practice (McCabe, 2011; Morehead et al., 2016). Fostering partnerships between students and teachers may improve student learning strategies and accomplish a meaningful relationship-rich education (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

The aim of the paper is to share our experiences from the development and piloting of a novel collaborative initiative – Learning to Learn – in ways that other institutions can be inspired and learn from.

Students as Partners

Collaborations between the students, staff and student welfare organizations are central principles in the Norwegian Universities and University Colleges Act, intended to ensure a strong student democracy and student learning environment (Ministry of Education and Research, 2024). National and local audits have, however, shown that the level of student engagement and formalization of the student voice should be strengthened (NOKUT, 2023). Also internationally, universities aspire to advancing the student voice through partnership (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). In response to such recommendations, a formal collaboration between the student union, the student welfare organization and the university was established. This three-part collaboration builds upon principles in the definition of partnership in higher education by Healey et al (2014, p. 12): “a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students’ unions and so on—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together”. In our Faculty of Health Sciences at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, this collaboration has led to several student-staff partnership initiatives that position students as scholars and co-creators of curriculum and knowledge, one of which is the Learning to Learn pilot study described in this paper.

Merging Two Initiatives Aiming to Improve Students’ Health, Wellbeing and Learning

Learning to Learn had both bottom-up and top-down drivers. First, an ongoing research project, Healthy Choices (UiT The Arctic University of Norway), aimed to strengthen students’ health and wellbeing. The project group consisted of researchers, the Student Parliament, the Student Welfare Organization and a working group with students and faculty. Through dialogue workshops we aimed to identify how the students perceived their daily lives and study environments and what areas needed further exploration and improvements. It became clear that the students were often left to themselves in figuring out how to approach their own learning process. The students highlighted the need for developing knowledge on locally tailored and practically applicable interventions that foster better environments for learning. As learning and well-being are strongly interdependent, the Learning to Learn was planned as an integrated part of the broader research project.

At the same time, the educational leadership at our university had come to realize that students need training in how to study in higher education and asked researchers at our faculty to develop resources support students’ approach to learning. This was based on

discussions among educational leaders at the university about knowledge-based education and adequate preparation of first-year students.

In response to this request and building on the existing Healthy Choices project (UiT The Arctic University of Norway), we drafted the Learning to Learn initiative. Students from various study programs expressed enthusiasm and confirmed the need for such an initiative during workshops and informal dialogues.

Theoretical Background

Students often struggle with studying independently outside of organized teaching activities and spend time using ineffective learning techniques. Such techniques tend to require less effort from the student and include rereading, highlighting, cramming, and summarising – practices that may lead to an illusion of learning more than actual learning (Bjork et al., 2013). This may be caused in part by faulty beliefs about how learning and memory work (e.g., Dunlosky et al., 2013; Putnam et al., 2016). On the other hand, effective learning strategies often require more effort, which students may perceive as arduous and, consequently, misinterpret as being inefficient (Bjork et al., 2013; Hui et al., 2022; Kirk-Johnson et al., 2019). However, the evidence base regarding what learning techniques that tend to yield durable learning has become very robust over recent decades (Dunlosky & O'Brien, 2022; Dunlosky et al., 2013). We know what works. Focusing on successive relearning, that is, the combination of retrieval practice and spaced repetition, results in better learning measured both by exams and long-term tests (Dunlosky & O'Brien, 2022; Rawson et al., 2013). If students combine this with elaborative techniques that help them meaningfully encode new information (we label this meaning-making), they have a good recipe for mastering university studies. Still, institutions and individual teachers often fail to acknowledge the need for learning-to-learn-training, and even teachers who recognize the effectiveness of certain learning techniques, seldom encourage the use of these techniques explicitly in class (Morehead et al., 2016). Thus, students are often left to themselves in figuring out how to study effectively. Improving pedagogical competence among higher education teachers may help solve the problem. Yet, faculty development activities have traditionally not included collaboration with students or students' voice (Felten et al., 2019).

With these considerations in mind, we propose to strengthen student-staff partnership in ways that engage students as co-creators of curriculum for the benefit of student learning. In the case described in this paper we build on principles for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL; e.g., Chick et al., 2025) when we present an example of how the student-staff partnership was strengthened in order to enhance student and teacher knowledge about effective learning techniques. By working together towards the same goals, a shared understanding between teachers and students about effective learning techniques and how to use them, we aim to strengthen student learning and promote student success.

Guided by the Utrecht SoTL roadmap (Meijerman et al., 2024), we also aspired to reflect and discuss challenges and success factors with the development and implementation of such an initiative within our team and with student representatives. These reflective discussions and insights (from the testing and piloting) also informed the further development of how to implement a Learning to Learn initiative in the future. Our own previous, less systematic attempts to influence students to use more effective learning techniques seem to have been largely ineffective, perhaps because our approach has been overly reliant on teacher-centred knowledge transfer without involving students as partners. Building better study habits takes more than conveying knowledge (McDaniel & Einstein, 2020; Rea et al., 2022), no matter how evidence-based that knowledge may be.

Teaching first-year students about what works needs to be integrated into a curriculum and connected to specific learning activities, not merely offered as an add-on.

Furthermore, students and staff need to collaborate closely on this.

In this paper we systematically describe the development and implementation of Learning to Learn in a large and diverse group of first-year students in ways that other institutions can learn from.

Hence, our research question is: How can students and academic staff work together in developing evidence-based initiatives for improving first-year students learning strategy knowledge and use?

Methods

Educational Context

The course *HEL-0700 Ethics, Communication, and Basic Academic Skills in the Health Professions* is a large first-semester course with a diverse student group from different disciplines. All the authors were already familiar with the course, and one of us was the course leader, which was a good fit for piloting the initiative.

HEL-0700 is an introductory course for 600 first-year students from 12 health profession education programs (biomedical laboratory scientist, clinical nutrition, clinical psychology, dental hygiene, dentistry, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, paramedic, pharmacy, physical therapy, radiography) at The Faculty of Health Sciences. The course aims to prepare first year students for academic studies and their future as health professionals, through learning about the healthcare system, communication, ethics, information literacy, and academic writing. Throughout the course, the students work together in interprofessional groups, supervised by a total of 40 teachers from the various study programs represented.

Development and Implementation of the Pilot

The Learning to Learn initiative is designed according to the Knowledge, Belief Commitment, Planning (KBCP) framework (McDaniel & Einstein, 2020; McDaniel & Einstein, 2023). The framework entails that in addition to supporting students' acquisition of *knowledge* about effective learning techniques, students also need to convince themselves that these techniques actually work for them (*belief*). Furthermore, they need to commit to using the learning techniques (*commitment*) and make robust plans for how to use them (*planning*). We developed and implemented different learning activities corresponding to the four elements of the framework in the course (see Figure 1).

Knowledge: We made an online module, consisting of videos about effective learning techniques, metacognition, and planning, emphasizing two specific techniques, retrieval practice and meaning-making. These were explained thoroughly and presented with a range of practical examples. The videos were supplemented with digital flashcards and self-test questions. Teachers were encouraged to remind the students to actively use the learning techniques throughout the course.

Belief: A few weeks into the semester, the course had its official opening, the kick-off event attended by all enrolled students. The students were expected to have completed the online module as described above beforehand. The meaning-making technique was demonstrated by having students attempt to learn two sets of 12 sentences. Each sentence described a student performing some sort of action (e.g., "The tall student bought the crackers."). When the first set of sentences was presented, the students were instructed to just read each sentence as many times as possible in the time allotted, without using any specific strategy. Before the second set was presented, they were

instructed to try to construct a meaningful explanation for why that particular student performed that particular action. After each set was presented in a learning phase, retention was assessed with questions (e.g., “Which student bought the crackers?”) using a student response system. (The demonstration materials were adapted from (Pressley et al., 1987)). This provided students with a personal, first-hand experience of the striking difference in learning between an ineffective and an effective technique.

Commitment. The students submitted a personal reflection (a few paragraphs) on how they could use the two techniques and why it would be of personal value to them to change study habits, with specific examples. These reflections became the subject of additional group discussions.

Planning. In addition to teachers giving the students examples of how to plan effectively and showing them why planning is central in habit change, the students submitted a plan for a specific week of study in the middle of the semester. We emphasized the importance of being specific about which techniques to use, how, and when.

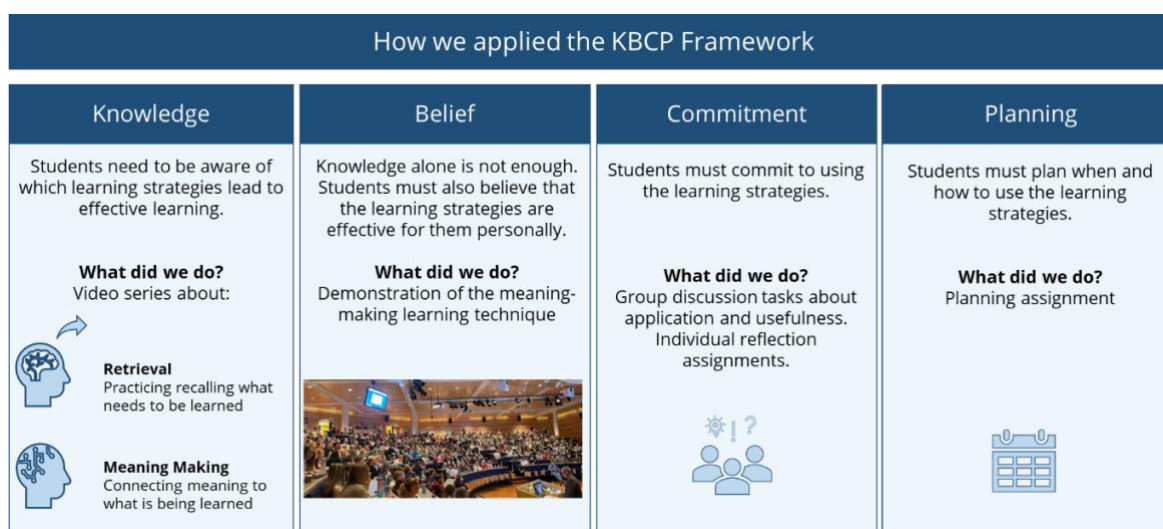


Figure 1. Overview of the framework and the corresponding activities (based on McDaniel & Einstein, 2020).

The Learning to Learn project builds on the idea that students, teachers and academic developers in higher education should be actively engaged in the process of learning together (Healey et al., 2016) to include and empower a diverse student group (Matthews et al., 2019). To ensure diverse perspectives about learning, we established a reference group consisting of two students who had completed the course earlier, two teachers from the course, one administrative staff member and two experienced educational researchers. The reference group participated in several meetings and provided their perspectives and inputs on the design of Learning to Learn. Students contributed actively as partners throughout the whole process, from brainstorming about which measures could support their learning approaches to discussions in working group meetings about the development and implementation of the curriculum. In addition, one of the authors of the KBCP-framework, Professor Mark McDaniel, provided us with valuable advice on how to operationalize the framework in our setting.

To succeed with the implementation of the initiative, we strove towards a shared understanding and language among students and teachers. All teachers involved in the course were invited to a seminar to learn more about their role, the KBCP framework, and how to best support the students in using the study techniques. Additionally, we arranged faculty development seminars, aiming to increase teacher’s knowledge about learning

techniques.

Data Collection

Data were gathered, formally and informally, from various sources to evaluate the development and the implementation of the Learning to Learn initiative (particularly from the students' perspectives). The formal data collection comprise student surveys administered at the beginning and end of the course, interviews with students about their experiences, and evaluation results from students and involved teachers. Among the informal data sources were results and observed immediate reactions from the 600 students who participated in the kick-off demonstration. Additional informal data included anecdotal student feedback during and after the course. Furthermore, feedback was collected from faculty members who participated in talks and workshops held at local seminars and national conferences. Throughout the process of development and implementation, the authors reflected and discussed the progress within the project group and the extended reference group. The formal data collections were approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Services for Research (ref. no: 930102).

As this paper aims to describe the process, and not the effectiveness of the initiative, we will not report the results of the empirical data collections in full but include some findings that are relevant for our current research question.

Results and Discussion

Our experiences highlighted the value of including a range of different voices in both the development, implementation and evaluation of Learning to Learn. The reference group's broad composition, together with using evidence-based methods and involving prominent researchers as advisors, ensured that the initiative both addressed the relevant challenges and was scientifically grounded.

However, we also encountered some challenges connected to the implementation process. We will now describe these and include some overarching impressions on how the initiative was experienced by students and staff.

The kick-off demonstration of the meaning-making technique was a success in terms of the immediate improvement in student retention of the sentences. In the rereading condition, students retained an average of less than five sentences, while in the meaning-making condition, this improved to almost ten. The buzz and excitement in the auditorium at the time, along with later reports from students in interviews, indicated that the demonstration had served as a convincing eye-opener. Disappointingly, survey results did not show a change between the pre- and post- surveys in students' self-reported frequency of use of the learning techniques.

Nevertheless, observations and reports, both spontaneous and from interviews the following semester, indicate that the initiative impacted some students' thoughts and behaviour. At the same time, they contributed insights about what did not work as intended. The students perceived that many teachers did not put student learning techniques on the agenda and did not explicitly talk about learning with students. In contrast, during the interviews, students gave examples that they talked about learning techniques among themselves and for instance "inherited" flashcards from graduate students.

Students described how university teaching and learning differed from high school, particularly the fact that they were expected to be independent learners. Therefore, they found Learning to Learn useful. One of the students said he and his peers underestimated its value in the beginning of their studies but looking back one semester into the study

year he had included retrieval practice and meaning-making in his study approach. Some students said they believed certain subjects were more suitable for retrieval practice than the topics in HEL-0700. Students reported transferring knowledge about learning techniques to other courses, and said it impacted their abilities to take control of their own studies and engage in discussions about learning with their teachers. In the discussions within the project group and in the interviews, students and teachers expressed that they seldom talked about learning approaches together, except as part of the Learning to Learn project, which in turn indicated that there was a lack of institutional culture where they worked together in partnership about learning, including learning strategies. One student pointed to a need for a more shared understanding about learning approaches among students and teachers:

I am not sure that they [teachers] know how the students approach learning. They say things like you can read more. They may have an impression that we read pretty much. (...) I do not think they are aware of that many do not spend time on reading. I do not think they know about Anki [flashcard software]. But there are many videos on YouTube for medical students about flashcards. I don't think they [teachers] are aware of this being an effective method. I think it is effective, more than reading. If I have used the cards, the reading flows better.

The teachers resonated with students and said Learning to Learn was useful to them and their teaching. One teacher elaborated:

It has been useful because many of us don't have much knowledge about pedagogy and teaching. (...) Students having the same knowledge about learning as we do—I believe this can be the start of something useful. Really. Very good. Thank you. (...) The [faculty development] introduction we had with you, and also seeing what they [students] learn in the modules in Canvas [Learning Management System].

Lessons Learned

There are several strengths about the Learning to Learn pilot that we would like to highlight. First, the initiative builds upon a research-based framework (KBCP; McDaniel & Einstein, 2020; McDaniel & Einstein, 2023). We do indeed believe that we succeeded in establishing knowledge and belief among most students and some teachers. The lack of change in reported learning techniques used, may though indicate that we did perhaps not succeed in fostering commitment and enhanced planning skills. This is supported by the reflections the students submitted about personal value of using the techniques, which tended to be somewhat superficial, reproducing knowledge of the techniques without connecting it to personal value and specific planned changes in study habits. This result supports the idea that all elements of the KBCP framework need to be successfully implemented, not only the knowledge part.

Second, the course leader was also the project leader. Her contextual knowledge about the student group and the course has been central in making Learning to Learn a reality and anchored in faculty leadership.

Third, feedback from the supervisors indicated that faculty development increased their competence and knowledge about how to encourage use of more effective learning strategies.

A weakness in our aim to include students as partners was that they were not involved in the technical and pedagogical implementation because of time constraints. However, they were indeed actively involved in development of the project idea, the design of the initiative, discussions about how to best implement the module, and in the evaluation. Furthermore, students did contribute with retrospective reflections with the goal of

improving the initiative. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that we, contrary to our initial plan, were not able to include them fully as partners through the whole process.

We, as the developers of the initiative, were not ourselves participating as teachers in the course. Forty teachers from a range of different backgrounds and study programs acted as supervisors in the group sessions throughout the course, and a certain variation in how much they invested in Learning to Learn was to be expected. This variation may impact how Learning to Learn was followed up in practice.

Towards a shared understanding of Learning to Learn

Through faculty development, we tried to provide the involved teachers with the appropriate knowledge, but they also needed to be convinced about the value of the initiative, and they needed tools and competence to implement it in the group sessions. It takes time and effort to establish a culture where students and teachers work together in new ways. This may be extra challenging in the context of the Learning to Learn initiative, which involves a multidisciplinary group of teachers from diverse study programs, each bringing their own microcultures, pedagogical approaches, and different levels of motivation for addressing student's learning processes. Traditionally, teaching has been a private endeavour for many teachers in higher education making it difficult to establish a shared understanding of teaching and learning, not only across disciplines, but also between students and teachers. Building such a shared understanding requires collaboration, where students and teachers engage as partners in exploring and co-creating effective learning practices. Student interviews revealed that students felt that teachers' perceptions of how they study are not accurate. This lack of insight among the course teachers, if such it is, may indicate that there is an untapped potential in building partnerships for learning. Few other teachers, the students interact with at their study programs encourage students to use effective learning techniques. This limits the opportunities for students to practice the techniques from Learning to Learn, and hence the effectiveness of the initiative.

Learning to Learn was not fully implemented during the pilot. It was a voluntary part of the course, with no explicit learning outcomes, and student knowledge about learning techniques was not assessed directly on the exam. As such, the intervention might have been too weak to cause a strong effect. It was a difficult balance between implementing this new element adequately without taking too much focus away from the other elements in the course.

We experienced some difficulties in getting students on board in all phases of development and implementation, as is already well-known from other studies (Grant & Arshad, 2023). Reasons may be lack of time, motivation, or perceived competence to contribute.

Further Development of Learning to Learn

Based on the experiences from the pilot implementation in 2023, the curriculum and syllabus are further developed to ensure better integration of the Learning to Learn element in the course. Learning outcomes addressing students' expected knowledge about learning techniques at the end of the course are now embedded in the syllabus and assessed on the exam. We have also included a more extensive introduction for the students, as well as for the faculty. Moreover, the course period has been extended so that students and teachers have more time to put these learning techniques into practice. Finally, we have included follow-up emails to teachers during the semester, to help them remind the students of the learning techniques. As the learning to learn initiative

progresses, we hope that future faculty development will contribute to discussions on how to better support students' learning approaches, and a more shared understanding between students and teachers about how students study and learn more effectively. Sharing insights from the students in faculty development activities is an important part of this. Through dissemination of our experiences with both the Learning to Learn initiative itself, and the process, including critical factors for success and challenges faced, we hope to also contribute to how others could implement similar initiatives.

Extending the Reach of Learning to Learn

We have aimed at sharing the process and our experiences in all phases of the project. Hence, elements from Learning to Learn have been presented at local, national, and international educational conferences, in addition to an episode of a national podcast series about teaching in higher education ("*NOKUT-podden*"). Discussions and feedback from these events have underscored the importance of collaborating with students about learning approaches, but we also realize that many teachers do not know how to do it. After Learning to Learn presentations, faculty have contacted us for advice on developing similar initiatives. The feedback from the teachers showed that the initiative has strengthened the awareness of student-teacher partnership by fostering a more shared understanding and discussions about learning among teachers and students.

After the conclusion of the pilot described in this paper, the concepts of student partnership and learning to learn have been included as key topics in the call for proposals by our university's teaching and learning enhancement fund.

The university's educational policy for career advancement and promotion now incorporates principles of SoTL. As the audience of this journal will know, collegiality and a focus on student learning are two core principles of SoTL. We hope that this policy change can be a driver for fostering a stronger culture where students and teachers collaborate more closely to enhance student learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Practice

Successfully developing and implementing a Learning to Learn initiative requires close collaboration between faculty and students in partnerships for learning. More specifically, we recommend:

- Creating initiatives based on scientific evidence
- Including students in faculty development to foster a collective understanding about how learning happens and establishing opportunities for teachers to gain insight into their students' learning habits and approaches.
- Strengthening student-faculty partnerships in curriculum design and development of teaching.
- Bringing all teachers on board, to facilitate transfer and ensure continuity in subsequent learning situations.
- Recognizing that using more effective learning techniques is more demanding than using less effective ones and that opportunities for practicing specific techniques must be created.
- Integrating and discussing the application of learning techniques throughout various teaching scenarios is crucial.

About the Authors

Iris Borch is an associate professor in university pedagogy and the leader of Centre for Faculty Development (HelPed). She has been involved in academic development at various organizational levels, including SoTL, at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) and UiT the Arctic University of Norway. Her work emphasizes collaboration with students and teachers in educational development projects, aiming to integrate their perspectives into her research.

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Kristin Benjaminsen Borch is professor in epidemiology teaching in several programs at bachelor, master and PhD level in the field of public health, physiotherapy, sports science and research methods. This includes teaching and building competence among faculty and students in international settings (Georgia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan). She is particularly interested in developing student active teaching supporting the learning process in partnership with students.

Rannveig Grøm Sæle is an associate professor working on research on student learning and success. This includes students' sense of belonging and well-being and their abilities to self-regulate their learning process. She is particularly interested in how to help first-year students find their home as a student and in their disciplinary field.

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