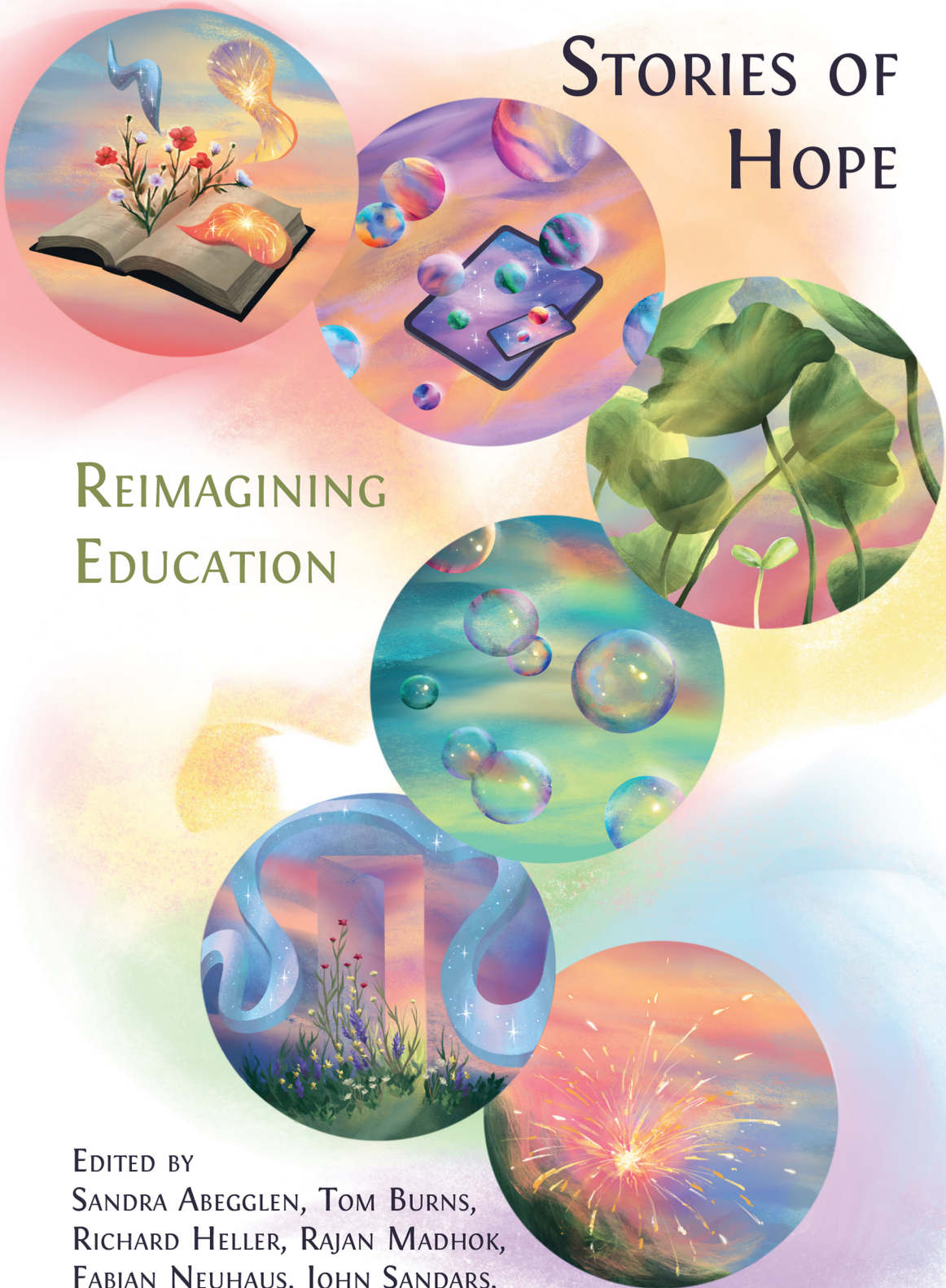
Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education



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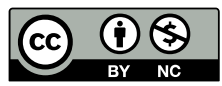

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17. Reimagining the sage–guide dichotomy: A life-long learner's story of teaching and learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

This case study uses an autoethnographic approach to explore the impact of combining the traditional "sage on the stage" and the "guide on the side" teaching models into something that would more effectively support the intentional development of students' skills. The chapter reflects on the experience of a computing educator who transitioned from orchestrating learning like a conductor to engaging as a player-conductor within the classroom ensemble. By co-creating the assessment task with students—starting with a draft and then collaboratively refining it—the educator fostered a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. Embracing curiosity and vulnerability, the course became a space where teacher–student interactions were reimagined, enabling students to be seen and treated as active agents in their own learning. This approach opened the door to more meaningful, dynamic, and hopeful educational relationships.

Keywords: collaboration; teacher-student interactions; authentic learning; teaching and learning; vulnerability

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Introduction

Several studies on teaching and learning have reported on the benefits and challenges of the "sage-on-the-stage" and the "guide-on-the-side" teaching approaches in Higher Education (Fischer & Hänze, 2019; Koch et al., 2020; Shipton, 2015). Often, this research has championed one approach over the other. While studies have argued that these two approaches are distinct and separate (Fischer & Hänze, 2019), this chapter discusses how merging these two approaches provided the lecturer of a computing subject, the second author of this case study, with a way to guide his students. In doing so, he learned collaboratively with his students while the students acquired knowledge, not only for the mastery of the assessment task, but also for the inherent process of learning itself.

The context and methodology

The chapter, through an autoethnographic account, focuses on the experiences of Yeslam Al-Saggaf, who taught a "System Analysis and Design" course after several years away from teaching the subject. Autoethnography is a type of ethnography in which one researches one's personal experience, not to simply bring the self to the foreground but rather to explore a more meaningful interaction within the context or locale of the experience that shapes the acquisition of knowledge (Reed-Danahay et al., 2020). Intertwined with the autoethnographic account, the learning activities are described, highlighting the teacher–student interactions and experiences, and how Yeslam, as the lecturer, seized opportunities to collaborate and co-create with his students. This chapter then turns to the reflections of both authors who reviewed the student results and feedback after the course was delivered. The double reflection captures how in the process of seizing these opportunities to collaborate and learn alongside students, genuine hope emerged.

Sage–guide dichotomy

Central to this chapter and its reflective autobiographical approach is the sage–guide dichotomy. A recent study by Elisabeth Fischer and Martin

Hänze (2019) provides an insight into whether choosing one approach over the other—teacher-centred (sage-on-the-stage) or student-centred (guide-on-the side)—has a more positive influence on the teaching of knowledge and skills in Higher Education. Their empirical study revealed that, while there has been strong support for implementing student-centred teaching approaches in Higher Education:

> Only if a learner is actually thinking along and elaborating new information may he or she adopt higher interest, acquire greater learning achievement, and develop academic competencies (Fischer & Hänze, 2019, p. 33).

That is, the implementation of student-centred teaching approaches alone appears not to guarantee a positive influence on students' learning experiences. Fischer and Hänze (2019) suggest that a mediation model that advocates the application of both student-centred and teacher-centred teaching approaches—a sage–guide approach—based on potential learning achievements could provide a better learning experience.

The following case study adds to this conversation not only as an observation of the positive influence a mixed approach has on students' learning journey in a computing subject, but also to reflect on the learning experience of the academic.

The story

I (Yeslam) developed and initially taught the "System Analysis and Design" course in early 2006. The goal of the course was for students to be able to gather and model user requirements using IT tools and techniques designed to provide information system solutions. Specifically, the students needed to be able to identify the problem (to be solved through the development of an information system), to define the system requirements (including modelling the requirements), and to design the system architecture. While I had originally designed hands-on activities to support the learning all those years ago, it dawned on me when I found myself teaching it again after a long break, that it would be an opportune time to "re-learn" the ways the skills and knowledge embedded in the course and its subject matter could be successfully

surfaced and transferred.

I have always imagined my class to be like an orchestra in which the students are not the audience but rather the performers making up the ensemble. While I lead the ensemble to make sure we follow the musical notation, I never stand at the podium. I always conduct the orchestra while sitting, downplaying my own instrument. My teaching and learning styles were "revealed" to me while watching an episode of Insight, an Australian Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television panel show, about twenty years ago. During one particular episode, a panellist shared with the audience that she was happiest when she was playing her part as a violinist in the Sydney orchestra. Reflecting on her views, I realised that I too was happiest when I was working in collaboration with my students: playing alongside them.

In my experience, students approach their preparation for any subject by inspecting the subject learning outcomes, the assessment items—the assignments that assess those learning outcomes—and thereafter peruse the topics (knowledge areas) to be covered each week during the session/semester. To support this practice by students in my course, whilst still fostering a collaborative approach, I create a structured syllabus that points to relevant resources for each weekly topic including relevant reading, pre-recorded lectures, and multimedia resources.

Going back to my orchestra metaphor, in preparation to perform the musical piece, each musician (the student) is given their music sheets, and we begin by tuning our instruments and learning how each instrument contributes to the performance. Table 17.1 presents the assignment details (the musical piece) and the learning activities (musical instruments) we worked on together, as an ensemble, to prepare and support the assignment completion.

However, for this renewed iteration of the course, I decided to add an additional element to the hands-on activities. I turned my attention to the weekly webinar. It was here that I planned to inject the sage–guide element of the learning experience—I became a conductor/player and used the weekly webinars to build the skills the students would need to complete their assignments, with me co-learning with them.

Element	Assignment task	Learning activities
Scenario	Create a "Click & Collect" or "Deliver Online" store for a plant nursery business.	Create an application (app) to rate (coffee) baristas to show our appreciation.
Tasks	• Understand a problem • Gather user requirements • System design and deployment (to solve problem)	• Participate in weekly webinars • Engage with learning activities • Provide feedback, comments, and questions to lecturer
Approach	Sage-on-the-stage	Sage–guide mixed approach

Table 17.1 Sage–guide mixed approach strategy in computing subject.

The assignments across the course followed the real-world scenario of creating an online store for a plant nursery business. The scenario was outlined in the assessment tasks including questions that needed to be answered and expected documentation presentation. The weekly topics were structured to provide students with the theoretical background required to understand how to approach the assessment tasks. This is where I find students really need support, and to support this "pushing of concepts and theories", I planned to use the weekly webinars as active learning spaces (rather than simply lecturing at them). Our focus would be the first assignment, which required the students to identify a problem and develop a "real" solution. In the system-design-analysis sense, this meant the development of a System Vision Document.

First, to facilitate the course and foster collaboration, I generated an idea for a web application based on a real-world scenario: an application to rate (coffee) baristas to show our appreciation for their work. From there, I developed a scenario in which I imagined how I would use the web application, as a customer, to rate baristas. Having captured the scenario in a short video clip, this was presented to the students before the synchronous webinar in the first week.

I then invited the students to a focus group discussion to jointly brainstorm the system capabilities, framing the session as an opportunity for students to be part of the development process. During the webinar, I conducted the focus group discussion as a member of

the orchestra, asking the students, as key informants or participants, open-ended questions with intense curiosity. I took "live" notes of the students' responses, showing them how their responses mapped onto the objectives of the learning activity—and how they contributed towards the course outcomes. From their responses, we collaboratively created a draft of the System Vision Document for the Rate Barista web application as the outcome of the learning activity, which is the first assignment in this subject.

It was evident early on that structuring the learning activities around the Rate Barista web application example engaged the students because jointly "chipping in" on a relatable scenario allowed and gave space for the student voices and students profited from the consideration of each other's opinions.

Structuring their subject's assignments around a parallel scenario (see Table 17.1), it became evident that students were more invested in participating in the class learning activities because the Rate Barista tasks were clearly mapped to their assignment tasks. To analyse and design the Rate Barista system, the students and I needed to create a number of analysis and design models—in addition to the System Vision Document mentioned above. To assess the students' achievement of the subject's learning outcomes, the students needed to create, on their own, a number of analysis and design models for the plant nursery business "Click & Collect" or "Deliver Online" store, including a System Vision Document, which is achieved early on in the session. So, as the students and I collaboratively developed the analysis and design models needed for the Rate Barista web application, their continuous hands-on involvement in the development of these analysis and design models enabled them to develop the skills they needed to develop the analysis and design models needed for the plant nursery business.

Uniquely, during the middle of the session/semester, I sent out a reflection of my learning journey with my students. I first outlined what we had achieved together in each weekly webinar. I then documented my thoughts on how we got to each achievement and what I learnt from the interactions and discussions. Rather than pointing out where I thought students needed more clarity, I posed questions to which students could agree or correct me, such as: "Now that we have modelled the components of the Rate Barista system, where are the components going

to be stored? Are they going to be stored in the same server or different servers? Why would we do that?" The main focus was to demonstrate that I had indeed learnt from my interaction with them. I ended this message with an open invitation to reflect with me: "What about you? How did you go? I will put this reflection on our Discussion board in the subject online site so you can reflect on your journey too and ask any questions you may have."

This teaching strategy proved effective as evidenced by a significant improvement in the progress rate for this subject, exceptionally impressive Subject Experience Survey (SES) scores, as well as unsolicited positive feedback. A number of factors contributed to a positive and a happy learning experience: (1) Australians love coffee and for them baristas are unsung heroes so the scenario engaged the students; (2) Learning by doing, as opposed to learning by understanding what is required, gave the students an example to follow on from, transferring the skill to their assignment's task later, on their own; (3) Showing a genuine curiosity on my part by tapping into students' inherent learning skills, and letting go of ego, i.e., not worrying about being judged, and accepting a vulnerability, made the conditions conducive to a positive learning experience; and (4) Learning collaboratively with the students empowered them and made them feel valued. This, as well as the socialisation that developed from the interaction with their peers, made learning a happy moment.

Learning by example and in collaboration worked well for the students. In the anonymous SES, one student commented: "The Rate Barista Case Study—as the subject progressed it helped to bring all the concepts together"; while another added:

> I found the "Rate a Barista" ongoing activity to be extremely worthwhile and beneficial to being able to learn the subject outcomes. It gave us a real-life example of applying the various aspects to a real life, relatable scenario.

As can be seen from this unsolicited feedback, the students benefited from the adoption of a unified example upon which we progressively co-created the required artifacts that fulfilled the objectives of the subject's learning activities together.

The following comment from one student—"Having the interaction during lectures really helped to learn about the subject, being able to

discuss things and do different parts together really helped expand how I thought"—shows how students felt confident doing the subject's assignments on their own, having developed the required skills through completing the assessment tasks using a different scenario. The course's remarkable progress rate suggests, overall, that the students achieved the subject's learning outcomes.

Reimagining and letting go of ego

There are numerous benefits to conducting teaching as if conducting an orchestra of which you are also a member. Each performer plays their part in the production of the musical piece, so all performers, regardless of the instrument they play, feel valued. Likewise, in a class, the consideration of students' contributions/input/opinions can make them feel valued. The performers' sense of value is derived from their knowledge that the part they play is critical to the success of the musical piece. In a similar vein, developing the solutions to the learning activities in collaboration with the students encourages them to invest in their own learning. Moreover, in a musical performance the player-conductor and the musicians follow the musical notation together—and together create the piece—in contrast to the conductor, who stands at the podium to lead the musical ensemble. To adopt this model, it is important that the lecturer makes a start at the solutions to the learning activities, not simply pushing out knowledge, but creating the space where together, tutor and students co-create the finished piece. The lecturer plays and harmonises with the students. The message is a simple one: "I am like you, doing my part too"; thus, leading by example.

This story is about how structured and scripted learning activities intertwined with collaborative teacher-student interactions and experiences provided opportunities to co-create learning with students. Sharing our hope to collaborate with students, we became learners alongside them. This can be achieved with genuine curiosity and acceptance that an individual's perception of the world is unique and both teacher and learner can co-create a learning journey that is beneficial to both.

Steps toward hope

- Transition from a directive role to a collaborative one, engaging actively with students in learning activities.
- Involve students in the creation and refinement of assessment tasks to value their input and foster ownership.
- Approach teaching with genuine curiosity and openness to create a space for innovative teacher–student interactions.
- Recognise and support students as active participants in their learning journey to develop meaningful and hopeful interactions.

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