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Learning with peers, active citizenship and student engagement in Enabling Education

Nick Zepke

Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Abstract*

This paper examines one specific question: What support do students in Enabling Education need to learn the behaviours, knowledge and attitudes required to succeed in tertiary education, employment and life? Success appears in many guises. It can mean achieving officially desired outcomes such as retention, completion and employment. It can also mean achieving less measurable outcomes such as deep learning, wellbeing and active citizenship. The paper first introduces an overarching success framework before exploring how the widely used student engagement pedagogy can support learners to achieve both official and personal success outcomes. It then develops two specific constructs applicable to Enabling Education as found in student engagement: facilitated peer learning and active citizenship. Peer learning is here connected to tutor supported but peer facilitated mentoring; active citizenship to educational experiences in classrooms, institutions and workplaces that support flexibility, resilience, openness to change and diversity. The paper includes examples of how facilitated peer learning and active citizenship can build success in practice.

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Introduction

In this paper I address one overarching focusing question: What support do learners engaged in Enabling Education need to succeed in their study? In Australia the provision of Enabling Education, established in the *Higher Education Support Act (2003)*, could be said to provide vital support by admitting to degree programs learners who were not otherwise qualified to enrol. The Act subsidised courses offered by universities in communication, specific literacies and numeracy, research and critical thinking; as well as the 'softer' skills of working in teams or independent thought in a discipline area to enable the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award. However, according to Pitman et al., (2016) research indicates that *Enabling Education* learners' higher education attainment, "in terms of retention and success, is under the national average" (p.12). Consequently, legislation brought forward by the government in the *Higher Educational Support Legislation Amendment Bill 2017* included the removal of government tuition subsidies for Enabling Education programs. The government justified in part withdrawing the \$30 million-plus in subsidies because Education Department statistics show that fee-paying students are more likely to succeed in finishing courses than those not having to pay (Ross, 2017).

Beyond providing the context above, I do not engage with the politics of Enabling Education subsidies directly in this paper as I cannot change political decisions. Instead I explore how we might better support learner success in meeting desired learning outcomes using educational solutions in classrooms. I do this by responding to the focusing question in four sections. The first explores a possible overarching success framework for Enabling Education. This introduces generic institutional policies and practices designed to support learner success. The second section

summarises key findings from student engagement research offering ways to reinforce success frameworks. These can be condensed into three propositions: successful students invest in their own learning; tutors and institutions support successful engagement; and success requires supportive environments. These propositions focus on *student voice*, where students are not merely allowed to speak but where their views are acted on; *learning partnerships*, where students are partners in learning and teaching; and *active citizenship*, where students are empowered to act confidently in a democratic culture and so make a difference in their communities (European Commission, 2005). Hence the third section discusses the use of facilitated peer learning to develop the active citizenship of Enabling Education learners. The paper includes examples of how facilitated peer learning and active citizenship might build success in practice.

Overarching success frameworks

Universities and their leaders have the first responsibility for supporting learner success. They develop and adopt the policies that enable learners to succeed in education, the work place and as socially integrated citizens (Hyland, 2003). Success tends to be judged by whether 'hard' quantifiable outcomes such as retention, acceptable levels of academic achievement and program completion are achieved. For learners to attain such hard outcomes, policies must set measurable standards and goals towards which institutions, tutors and learners strive. However, success defined by hard outcomes alone gives an incomplete picture of learner/learning achievement. Learners' own goals and experiences perhaps unconnected to hard outcomes are equally important. One approach that expands the meaning of success beyond hard outcomes focuses on 'soft' outcomes (Butcher, Foster, Marsden, McKibben & Anderson, 2006). Such outcomes are derived

from students' cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Various governments and international agencies have developed frameworks listing desirable soft and hard success outcomes. Voogt and Pareja Roblin (2012), for example, analysed eight success frameworks from around the world. They found that hard outcomes like retention and achievement were generally included. They also identified soft outcomes such as collaboration, communication, ICT literacy, and social and/or cultural competencies. Most success frameworks also included creativity, critical thinking, productivity, and problem-solving. Such soft outcomes are not easily quantified but offer important indicators of success that need recognition from governments and institutions.

One success framework integrating hard and soft outcomes was developed for California Community Colleges (Booth et al., 2013). It was based on learners' reports that active support must feature in students' daily experiences with administration, tutors, peers and members of the community. Researchers concluded that learner success is most likely when they are directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected, and valued in institutional and programme practices. Learners are *directed* if they have a goal and know how to achieve it; *focused* when they stay on task by keeping their eyes on the goal; *nurtured* if they feel they are supported to succeed; *engaged* when they actively participate in learning activities; and *connected* if they feel part of the institutional and wider community. While all these success factors contain hard and soft outcomes, hard outcomes dominate the *directed* and *focused* factors. Where everyone knows what outcomes must be achieved and understands that the curriculum is directed to and focused on such outcomes, the road to success is set out. *Engaged* and *connected* success factors include both hard and soft outcomes. Hard outcomes such as retention

and completion can be met when learners engage and connect with the curriculum. Soft outcomes such as positive energy and commitment are also embedded in engagement and connection. The *nurtured* and *valued* success factors are personal and subjective and align more with soft outcomes than the others.

Further policy suggestions for inclusion in success frameworks have emerged. For example, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt (2005) investigated the practices of twenty successful higher education institutions in the USA. They found that these organisations focus on supporting student success, fore-ground learning, establish high expectations, aim for continuous improvement, invest money in support services, support diversity and prepare students for learning at work and in the wider community. Only a small sample of what this might involve can be noted here. There is consensus that a learning and success centred culture is part of the learning experience; that enrolment processes, course advice and monitoring of progress are in place, user-friendly and efficient; and that communication channels between learners and providers are clearly established, well publicised and open (Ramsden & Callender, 2014; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Tinto, 2015). Extensive student services are also frequently listed as being necessary in supporting student success. Examples include child care, pastoral care, financial advice, counselling, health services, library support, resource centres for minorities, employment services, study skills assistance and active learning and support networks. In short, providers and teaching programs that build and maintain *success frameworks* support learners' total well-being (Field, 2009; Gill, 2009).

Another key purpose of *success frameworks* is to identify and promote practices supportive of successful learning. Candidates abound. For example, Chickering and Gamson's (1987) time honoured seven principles of good practice pick up on the outcome goals of the Voogt and

Pareja Roblin (2012) and Booth et al., (2013) frameworks. The principles are: encourage tutor-learner contact; develop cooperation among learners; use active learning techniques; give prompt feedback; emphasise time on task; communicate high expectations; and respect diversity. Together, these principles help learners meet both hard and soft outcomes in a *success framework*. More speculative but equally serving both hard and soft outcomes, is the work of Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016). They suggest four future proficiency clusters underpin success. The first is creativity and innovation. Programs placing critical thinking, problem solving and reflection at the heart of learning, support learner success in times of rapid technological and social change. The second proficiency cluster centres on resilience. Learners encouraged to adapt to change are nimble and flexible; learn from mistakes and persevere. The third proficiency cluster is teamwork. Programs in which individual and collective success are considered equal help prepare learners for success in life. The final proficiency cluster is design thinking. Here institutions place learners' success first with the entire system designed to meet this outcome. Figure 1

provides an overview of key ideas from these different success frameworks.

Teaching for success

Creating an institution's overarching *success framework*, however, is only a first step to supporting learners' success. Such frameworks offer high level principles that help universities, tutors and learners visualise and plan for success. Student engagement is a concept present in most *success frameworks*. It offers insights into the behaviours, thinking and emotions that lead to successful learning (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). But student engagement is complex. Its complexity lies, first, in its multiplicity of meanings and conceptual uncertainties (Ramsden & Callender, 2014); second, its generic and applied nature offers a practical plan for teaching and learning, but one that must be adapted for different contexts (Reschly & Christenson, 2012); and third, the classroom is a single cultural interface in which diverse tutors and learners interact (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). In short, student engagement does not present to tutors or learners a ready-made recipe for 'how to do engagement' in every classroom. Its central message is that tutors

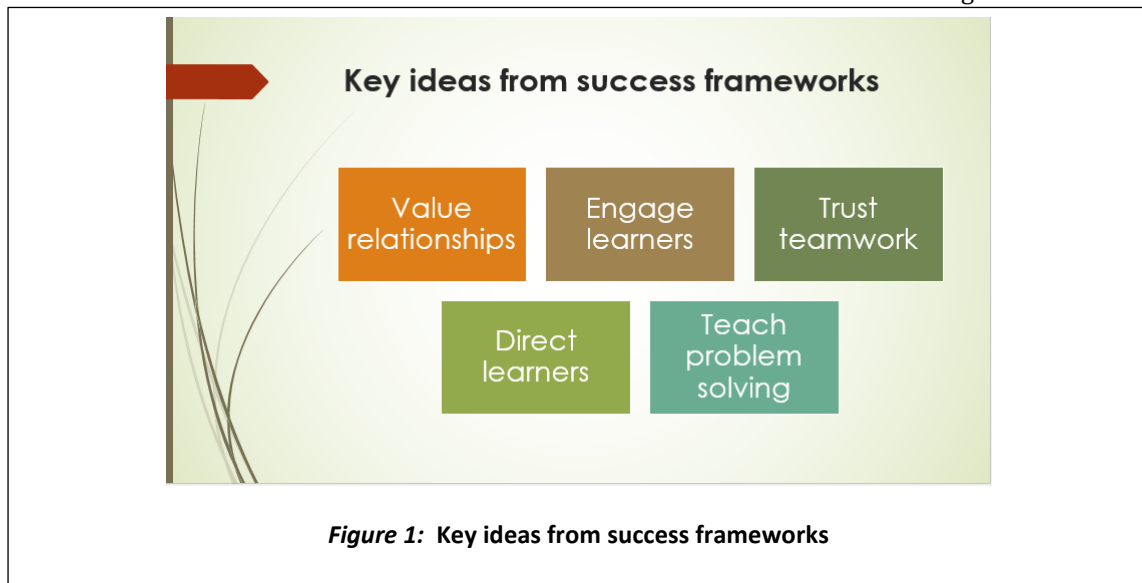


Figure 1: Key ideas from success frameworks

and learners must actively engage together to achieve hard and soft outcomes in unique contexts with unique participants.

This central message offers the enabling education community evidence-based approaches for learner success. Kuh (2009) and Pascarella, Seifert and Blaich (2010), for example, show that student engagement is an important predictor for retention and improved grades in higher education. It is also positively correlated with a range of softer outcomes such as critical thinking, cognitive development, self-esteem, satisfaction with life and the building of positive relationships with others. With such evidence student engagement can serve as a practice model that supports learner success in universities and subsequently in productive employment. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2008) found that the right behaviours by learners and tutors support engagement and success. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) suggested that engagement is not only about right behaviours but also involves students' cognitive investment in and emotional commitment to their learning. Cognitive engagement points to investment in deep learning of concepts and skills, of individual construction of meaning and of transforming meanings (Marton & Säljö, 1976). Emotional engagement results from feelings of psychological wellbeing such as a sense of belonging and security in relationships both inside and outside the learning context (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2012). Together these forms of engagement are critical for achieving learning success in course work and life more generally.

Carey (2013) goes even further. He views engagement as an expansive idea that in addition to fostering active behavioural, cognitive and emotional student participation in learning involves building a sense of identity with, belonging to and involvement in the work of their tutors, institutions and occupations. Lawson and Lawson (2013) go wider still with

a multi-dimensional view of engagement. They synthesise student engagement using a socio-cultural ecological lens tracing student, tutor, provider and external environment perspectives. Kahu (2013) suggested that while engagement occurs within a specific learning context, it has positive consequences, such as satisfaction and well-being, citizenship and personal growth; in doing so, highlighting a connection between well-being, citizenship, education and engagement both inside and outside the learning and teaching cultural interface. Leach (personal communication, 2015) summarises the complexity and practicality of student engagement as follows:

Student engagement is understood as the time and effort students invest in educational activities. The consequences of their engagement - their success in their study, their personal growth and the contribution they make to society through active citizenship - are affected by personal and contextual antecedents as well as the actions taken by tutors, institutions, families and friends to facilitate their engagement in an active partnership.

Proposals for student engagement practice

Many different behavioural, cognitive and affective characteristics of student engagement have been proposed as models for quality teaching since the 1980s: Entwistle and Ramsden (1983); Kuh (2009); Zepke and Leach (2010). These models have had a major impact on educational practices. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been particularly influential with its survey of behaviours. NSSE offers a powerful data set about behaviours leading to generally hard outcomes. Alternatively, Zepke (2017) used a 'meta-synthesis' (Erwin, Brotherson & Summers, 2011) of over five hundred research publications to make ten proposals for engagement that address both hard and soft outcomes. This section now summarises

Zepke's proposals for a supportive student engagement practice under three general headings: (i) learners invest in their own success; (ii) tutors and institutions are vital enablers of engagement; and (iii) engagement requires enabling external environments. Figure 2 below provides a visual overview of these three supportive student engagement practices with a focus on how tutors can help.

Learners invest in their own success

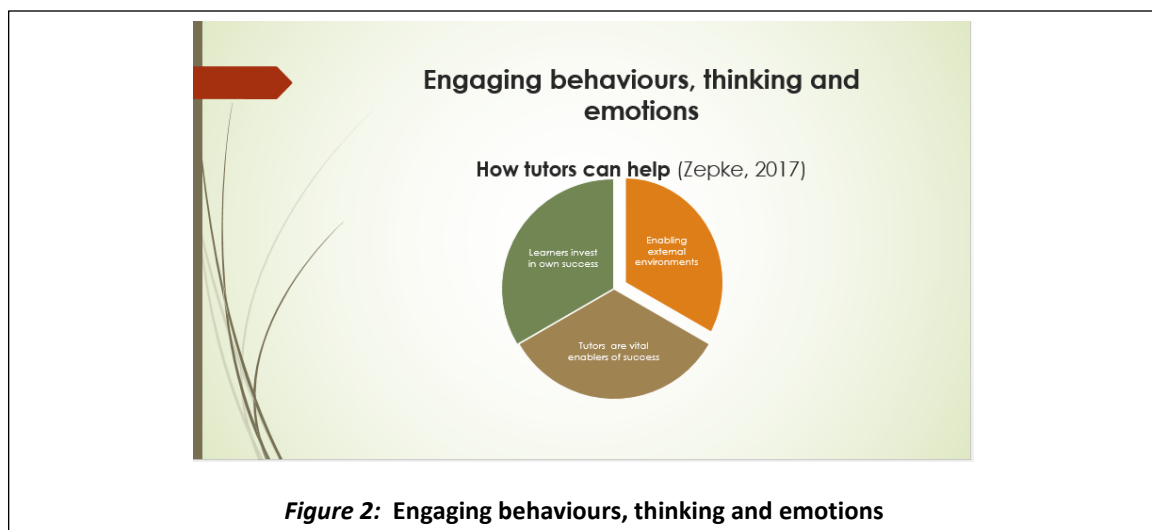
Four proposals fall under this heading. All focus on how learners can be supported to grow their own self-belief, motivation, social and cultural capital and deep learning with the support of tutors and institution.

The first proposal is that learners' self-belief is vital for success. All learners have individual and collective strengths. This can be enhanced in the classroom by a strengths-based approach. This proposes that learners who achieve hard and soft outcomes have self-belief and are supported to develop it. Self-belief requires support that builds strength and is not fixated on problems. Strengths-based learning is rooted in *appreciative inquiry* (Bushe, 2013). This de-emphasises negatives people bring to learning. It requires tutors to demonstrate that

learner strengths are appreciated, that learning activities and assessment methods vary so that different strengths come into play, and that affirming feedback focuses on strengths while not ignoring weaknesses.

The second proposal suggests that learner motivation grows from self-belief. Learners invest in their own success when able to learn autonomously, enjoy learning relationships and feel they are competent to achieve their own and others' objectives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Of the three motivational factors - autonomy, belonging and competence - feeling competent is most important. This proposal requires learning tasks and activities that enable learners to feel competent to develop their strengths; receive feedback on completed tasks that is timely, specific, reinforces strengths and provides guidance on how to address weaknesses; group activities that encourage interdependence, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity for individuals to work autonomously with others.

The second pair of proposals focus more on student engagement as a practice that values individual and group differences. The first proposal in this pair is that learners' different social and cultural learning capital is



recognised, valued and built to increase learners' feelings of self-worth and competence in *enabling education*. This suggests that whether due to social class, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, geographic location or sexual orientation differences influence how students engage and whether they succeed. For learners from minority 'non-traditional' groups to feel like fish in water (Thomas, 2002), learners must have the social and cultural capital needed to succeed. A curriculum that builds social and cultural capital supports, for example specific learning needs of minorities in a learning group; adopts strategies based on *appreciative inquiry* to acknowledge practices of minority groups; offers feedback that is aware of social and cultural differences.

The second proposal in this pair is that engaged learners are deep learners. The Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom (n.d.) brought together numerous characteristics of deep learning from the research literature. Mentioned as developing deep learning are analytically examining facts, ideas and practices by matching them to learners' existing knowledge structures; linking ideas and practices to different social and cultural settings; looking for meaning; solving problems; distinguishing between argument and evidence; developing curiosity and personal interest in the subject.

Tutors and institutions are vital enablers of engagement

The previous proposals highlight the importance of learners' own agency in engaging and tutors' role in helping them develop that agency. This next cluster of three proposals comprises: (i) quality teaching and institutional support enhance engagement; (ii) discipline knowledge engages students; and (iii) quality teaching adapts to changing student expectations.

According to Trowler (2010) questions of how quality teaching can support student success

dominate engagement research. Practices enhancing engagement are many. Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice still serve well as a guide for engaging teaching. But tutors must remain aware that to engage their learners often requires context specific applications of generic ideas. For example, conceptual understandings and practices must meet the changing requirements of a discipline. Such understandings involve ever changing key terms, concepts and principles and how they can be applied in the 'real world'. Tutors must also respond to changes in technology and keep abreast of changes in evaluating and interpreting knowledge and practices. This last point is critical in times of ever changing learner expectations. Examples of tutors meeting learner expectations include being on top of changes happening in the world of work and employment, particularly in technology. Universities and tutors also need to keep up with changes in the way learning support like library services, pastoral care and support networks are delivered to keep up with changing learner demands.

Engagement requires enabling external environments

The three proposals in this section suggest that learning does not just occur in classrooms. The first proposal in this section captures the idea that learning is lifelong and lifewide. It adds an extra dimension to student engagement. It suggests that learners inhabit multiple learning spaces simultaneously and can draw inspiration from them. Barnett (2010) lists such potential learning spaces. Formal learning in credit bearing courses is one space. Learning at home, work, even the pub and in the bus, can provide unaccredited but personally stretching spaces that transfer knowledge, skills and attitudes to the formal classroom.

The second proposal in this cluster focuses on soft success outcomes. It proposes that learners are citizens and should become active citizens through their learning. Learners want to feel they have a voice in what and how they learn and 'student voice' has become a powerful metaphor for active citizenship. Where educators give students voice and opportunities for collaboration, engagement rises. Klemenčič (2011) suggests that engagement serves as an indicator of democracy and delivers a culture of dialogue. Figure 3 captures the three components of student voice, learning partnerships and active citizenship for student success.

The third proposal is that student engagement links to learner wellbeing. Personal and social well-being is achieved by engaging in supportive relationships and developing a sense of trust in others. Personal wellbeing requires autonomy, competence, engagement and self-esteem; social well-being involves social engagement, sound interpersonal relationships and social competence.

Facilitated peer learning and active citizenship in practice.

As outlined above, learning with peers and active citizenship offer two practical learning approaches supportive of learner success. Both approaches draw on *success frameworks* and student engagement pedagogy. Voogt and Pareja Roblin (2012), for example, found that *success frameworks* share similar curriculum goals like collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, citizenship, productivity and problem-solving. Student engagement invests heavily in the notion of *partnership* as transforming the learner from *consumer of knowledge* into a *producer of knowledge* (e.g. Hagyard & Derricott, 2014; Neary, Saunders, Nygaard, Brand, Bartholomew & Millard, 2013). According to Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016) a combination of peer facilitated learning and active citizenship helps 'future proof' learning by enabling learners achieve success now for the future. They propose that 'future proofing' requires learners to apply ever-changing knowledge, skills and values in their own

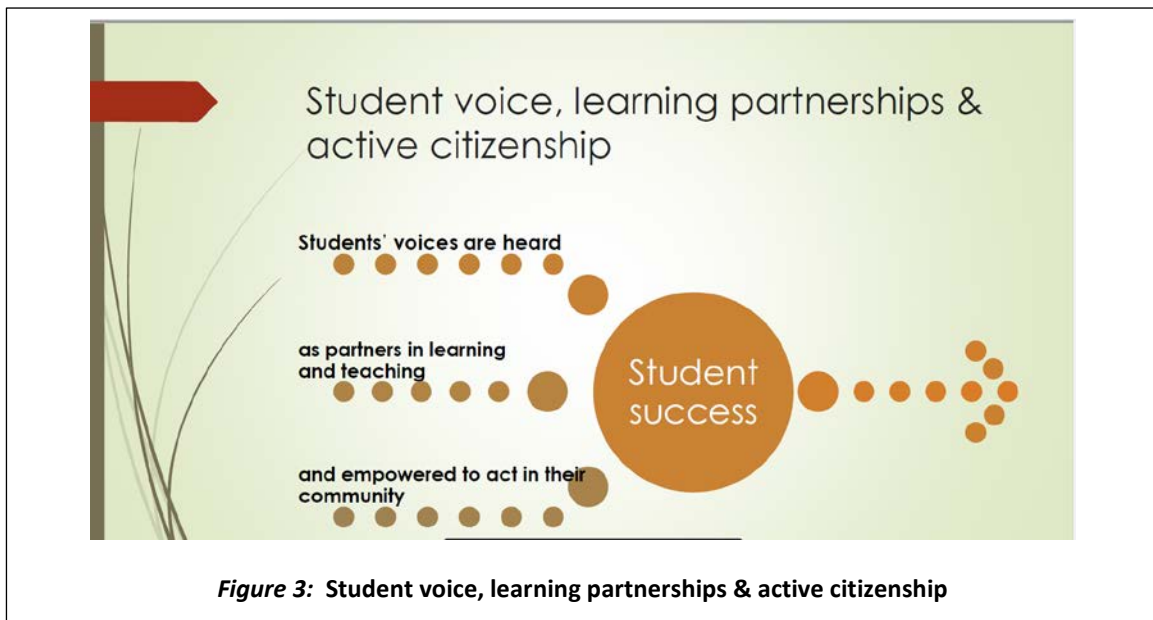


Figure 3: Student voice, learning partnerships & active citizenship

context for the betterment of their occupation and society. But the idea of future proofing challenges current curriculum thinking and practices. From a philosophical standpoint, Biesta (2013) argues that curriculum is far more concerned with accountability and performativity than the needs of learners in a changing world. He suggests a switch in curriculum focus from the individual to the collective, the democratic and the political. Tagg (2003) agrees from a practical standpoint. He advises tutors to focus on collaborative activities and real-world applications so that learners engage with each other to achieve hard and soft outcomes.

Future proofing involves learners pursuing success by drawing on the experiences of peers as well as the knowledge and skills of their tutors. Modelled on Wenger's (1998) version of learning communities, such learning partnerships result in mutual engagement and joint enterprise; working together to achieve common goals, sharing responsibilities and resources (McIntosh & Cross, 2016). There are many slightly different versions of peer facilitated learning: peer assisted study sessions (PASS), peer facilitated study, peer assisted learning (PAL), learning communities, supplemental instruction and transition mentoring are some examples. Research suggests that whatever the version, all contribute demonstrably to learner success. For example, there is a strong correlation between students regularly attending PASS sessions and an approximately 10 per cent increase in learning success, a lowering of the failure rate and an increase in high achievement (Fostier & Carey, 2007); a meta study of published research on peer facilitated learning shows an average improvement of 15% obtaining A, B, or C grades (Gosser, 2011); and in another meta-analysis (Hattie, 2012) shows that every facet of a robust peer tutoring model has a high effect size. All forms of peer facilitated learning are designed to enable learners to grow as successful learners and as citizens who learn actively, thrive on such

learning and feel connected to their study and society.

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) provide a useful example of peer facilitated learning. I discuss it now in greater detail as a representative example of peer facilitated learning. The purpose of PASS is developmental, not remedial. It supports and supplements learning by employing the combined agency and power of tutors, student facilitators and learners working together in voluntary but usually timetabled sessions. It contributes to student engagement, retention and learner wellbeing; supports active and collegial learning, improves learner-tutor and peer relationships, opens channels of communication between learners and their discipline giving learners agency and voice (Zacharopoulou, Giles & Condell, 2015). By working in learning communities, learners become 'stakeholders' or partners in their own learning. According to Carey (2013) student voice is already a vital part of learning processes, through quality assurance and student feedback for example. But he suggests that such uses of student voice allow learners to speak while not necessarily being heard. Fielding (2004) argues that restrictive uses of learner voice must be expanded by learning that is active, democratic and contributes to decision-making about curriculum, learning activities and assessment processes. According to Trowler (2010) confident and proficient learners exercising their voice become co-producers of learning, active co-workers in organisational structures and identity builders in the wider community. Having exercised their voices in their own learning contexts, learners gain the potential to influence their occupation in the future.

Like other forms of peer assisted learning, PASS nurtures the use of learner voice and agency. It contributes to future proofing by supporting learners to become co-producers of knowledge and active citizens. Agency works on two levels. On one it shows appreciation of

learners' strengths in achieving their own learning goals and those of peers. Strengths-based teaching recognises that students bring cultural, age-related, educational, character-related strengths, among many others. According to Bushe (2013) recognising these strengths develops more agentic individuals who engage in independent and interdependent learning and feel competent to achieve their own and contribute to their peers' success. On a deeper level, agency is about students having the power to shape their own learning. Examples of agentic students sharing power in democratic classrooms have been published over the years (e.g. Ody & Carey, 2013; Shor, 1996). Ody and Carey report on a transition programme into higher education using senior student facilitators to prepare learners for university life. The programme enables learners to work with peers to learn necessary content, attitudes and skills; but also, how to take part in discussion groups focused on cultural, economic and political issues. Shor writes about a radical experiment in power sharing that led to autonomous peer learning. One former student reports that: "we decided what the class talked about. We asked the questions.... We shaped the class. We co-developed the curriculum" (p. 223).

PASS programs are widely offered internationally in secondary schools, further and higher education as well as in international PASS national centres (Keenan, 2014). Multiple case studies suggest that programs are typically organised in small groups and tailored to meet the needs of diverse learners and subjects. But they also share a remarkable consistency in approach. They often involve hour-long structured group sessions. Each session is facilitated by trained PASS leaders, often advanced learners from within the community of practice. Leaders are advised by an instructor who is familiar with PASS facilitation skills and the content underpinning the sessions. PASS sessions are voluntary and integrate how-to-learn with what-to-learn.

Participating learners review course content through active learning exercises and activities, work together to develop sound study techniques and strategies. They compare experiences and understandings, clarify readings and discuss, analyse, critique, question, solve problems and propose changes to programs and assessment protocols. Abilities in problem solving, understanding what is expected, key concepts and proficiency in the language of the vocation are all key competencies facilitating success. Also embedded in PASS programs are growth in self-confidence, critical reflection, planning skills, effective communication and relationship building.

Summary

In this paper I addressed the question 'what support do learners need to succeed in their study'? The answer offers a complex array of factors. They are complex because while *enabling education* offers a coherent concept of purposes and processes, it is also incredibly diverse. It seeks to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that prepare diverse learners to gain entry to full undergraduate university programs. I argue that to lay the foundation for their success in this complexity, they must achieve hard and soft outcomes set by universities and students themselves. Hard outcomes are measurable, officially set outcomes such as retention, completion and vocational competence. Soft outcomes are less measurable and include deep learning, wellbeing and active citizenship. These success indicators require three levels of support: a general policy orientation resulting in overarching *success frameworks*; student engagement pedagogy that engages both learners and tutors; and a learning programme that applies two specific practices found in *success frameworks* and student engagement facilitated peer learning and active citizenship.

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