Free your mind!

LTA Education Conference *magazine*

Universiteit Leiden

Contents

Introduction

The Leiden Teachers' Academy (LTA) brings together educators at Leiden University who share, test, and showcase innovative teaching practices with and for colleagues. On Wednesday 10 June 2026, the LTA hosted the LTA Education Conference: "Free your mind! From product to process in academic learning". It was an afternoon focused on strengthening learning processes rather than primarily formal examinations, and on exploring educational approaches that respond to both the challenges and opportunities of GenAI. This magazine is created to extend that conversation beyond the conference itself, capturing key insights, concrete examples, and takeaways from the workshops and discussions, so the outcomes of a rich, community-building event can continue to inform and inspire academic teaching. Our sincere thanks go to the students who supported this magazine by reporting on the conference's various workshops.

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, (1994, p. 12)

Foreword

Astrid Van Weyenberg and Pieter Slaman

We were very happy to welcome many colleagues from different faculties and disciplines to the 2026 Leiden Teachers' Academy Education Conference 'Free Your Mind! From Product to Process in Academic Learning'. The central aim of the Leiden Teachers' Academy is to bring together educators from across Leiden University who are committed to teaching innovation. Many of the colleagues who presented workshops are LTA members, making this conference not only a space for exchange, but also a reflection of the diverse innovations that emerge within the LTA community.

The purpose of this conference was to exchange experiences and ideas about a topic that many of us are grappling with: how to place greater emphasis on the process of learning itself. Universities have long been organized around products: grades, papers, theses, and diplomas. These outcomes play an important role in assessing what students have learned, but their prominence can overshadow what matters most: the process through which learning takes place. It is precisely in that process that students develop academic skills, are challenged to navigate uncertainty, make and learn from mistakes, and, in conversation with their lecturers and peers, gradually build their knowledge and expertise.

But this process is increasingly under pressure. Higher education today operates in a context that emphasizes measurable outcomes and efficiency. At the same time, universities have to navigate financial constraints, changing student populations, and a political climate in which the legitimacy and public value of academic expertise is repeatedly challenged. In these circumstances, it is becoming more difficult but also more important to protect the time and space that meaningful learning requires. After all, critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, creativity, and intellectual growth cannot easily be measured or accelerated and depend on what is becoming a scarce resource in higher education: time.

There are additional reasons why attention to the learning process is more urgent than ever. The rise of generative AI (which sparks much debate across our university) challenges us to rethink what exactly we assess and value in higher education, and what we mean when we talk about 'academic skills'. At the same time, many students would benefit from more personal attention, feedback, and interaction, while lecturers face increasing workloads and growing administrative responsibilities. This raises a fundamental question: how can we support meaningful learning processes within these realities? And, more importantly, should we simply accept these realities as given? How can we create space for practice, reflection, feedback, experimentation, trial and error, and intellectual growth in ways that are sustainable for both students and staff? And how can we reconnect with the central purpose of the university: not the production of outcomes, but the cultivation of learning itself.

This conference did not aim to provide a single answer to that question, but to create a space for conversation. To that end, colleagues from different faculties demonstrated how they make learning more visible, engage students more actively, and place the process of learning more explicitly at the centre of their teaching. This magazine gives you an impression of their workshops. We hope it will provide inspiration and spark discussions, not only about how we teach but also about the conditions under which meaningful learning can take place.

Workshop: **Autonomous Learning** / Anouk van der Weiden

Empowering students in their autonomy and attitude

In our study programs, we would like to stimulate more student autonomy. The level structure in the Leiden register of programmes presupposes an increasing amount of learning autonomy over the years in each programme. However, our students ask for more guidance and structure. So, our challenge remains: how do we support them in being more autonomous? In the Psychology programme, over the subsequent years more room is created within the curriculum for the student's own initiative and choices. In order to enable this, each course needs to start with a thorough introduction, including clear expectations. In addition, we need to adopt broader assessment criteria.

More student autonomy = more opportunities

When studying more autonomously, we expect students to be more motivated and more consistent in their approach. For this vision to become a reality, we need to have a critical look at the way we use our student contact moments, the learning opportunities we provide and the assignments we hand out. The debate which followed the explanation of this vision by Anouk was lively and full of inspiration. Doubts were shared on how well students were actually ready and their ability to focus for a longer period of time. Another important point of debate was whether students will learn more from sparring sessions with you as a teacher or with each other rather than working by themselves. Furthermore, it could create more work for tutors, who might just not be so enthusiastic about this way of student guidance. One of our LUMC-colleagues shared the insight that not all knowledge and theory needs to be passed on in college halls, but can also be provided in video's – certainly for subjects where no interaction is required. This leaves the question: what is our job as teachers?

Coaching and guiding students

So what is lost when we interact less with our students? Will the motivation keep up and will instructions be followed up as intended? We'll need to meet up with teachers from different faculties in order to share our thoughts and insights. On engagement, providing clear course overviews and our demands when it comes to meta-cognitive development. After all, today's knowledge and jobs might be different from tomorrow's.

Less is more

When asked about the take aways from this workshop, one of our colleagues mentioned "the importance of quality above quantity when it comes to contact moments as well as providing instructions. Too much details will lead to passive attitudes. We'd rather create awareness about intrinsic motivation: first and foremost, be truly aware of why you're studying this subject."

Digital space

Another colleague mentioned making the most of our digital opportunities. "Using video's and giving students different roles in our digital space creates an interactive setting in which students can ask questions within communities. Whilst other students will help each other with goals, planning and specific answers, we teachers can monitor what happens without handing out grades. First of all, we'll need to educate our teachers!"

Written by **Pieter Slaman**

Cultivating Controversy as a way to Depolarize

What happens when students begin to drift further and further apart in their views, entrenching themselves on opposing sides? In this workshop, Assistant Professor of Modern Middle Eastern Studies, Noa Schonmann argues not for avoiding such divisions, but for engaging them head-on. She advocates for the deliberate cultivation of critical debate, not only within the university classroom, but also by extending these conversations into the public sphere. Drawing on her course *Radio Palestine-Israel*, Schonmann encourages students to confront sensitive topics, learning to navigate disagreement and develop more nuanced perspectives on opposing viewpoints.

Polarisation

'Since 7 October 2023, I started to see the class breaking into two groups. One group who found it paralyzing and one group who was fired up and wanted to use the space to express their convictions.'

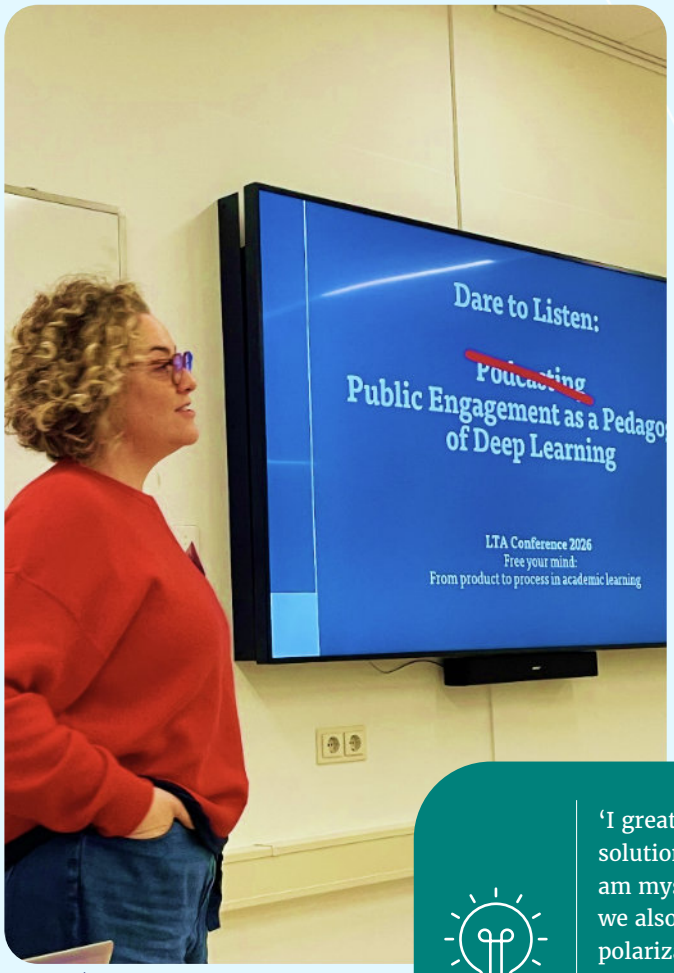
For Schonmann, this divide underscored the need for a more deliberate space for dialogue. She set out to design a classroom environment that could accommodate disagreement without shutting it down. The result was a podcast project developed in collaboration with journalist Rajaa Natour. The tasks were clearly divided: Schonmann provided students with historical and multi-perspective insights into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while journalist Natour guided the students through the podcast production.

The Podcast

The MA course is open to all interested students. Participants are divided into teams of six, with each group producing its own podcast. The assignment centres on conducting interviews with guests who hold challenging or opposing viewpoints. A key requirement is that each guest must be a public figure, such as a journalist or politician, who is directly engaged in, or personally invested in, the Israel-Palestine conflict. According to Schonmann, the university offers a rare space to engage in difficult questions. 'I don't want my students to become more moderate,' she notes, 'but I want them to face the danger.'

Political voices

Another element of the *Radio Palestine-Israel course*, is to practise with different political voices. 'There are many more ways of being political than expressing certainty. To be political does not mean that you always have to convince the mind of someone else.' She encourages students to bring these perspectives together: 'Bring your emotion, bring your passion, and at the same time remain open with a willingness to listen.'



Noa Schonmann

‘I greatly admire how Noa seeks and finds solutions in the painful Palestine-Israel conflict. I am myself involved in secondary education, where we also have to deal with extreme opinions and polarization. I think that it would be helpful to integrate the kind of exercises of cultivating controversy in secondary education as well.’

Elise Storck – History didactics specialist and teacher trainer – ICLON

Key takeaway from this workshop

Reframing

During the workshop, participants were asked to take part in the same exercise used in the *Radio Palestine-Israel* course. Each person had two minutes to voice a frustration they had experienced within the university environment, speaking freely and without interruption. This was followed by a two-minute inquiry from their partner, focused on understanding the frustration without judgment. Finally, the listener was asked to introduce the speaker to the group, without naming the original complaint. The exercise aimed to show how listening can go beyond passive reception. Through reframing, the listener is encouraged to uncover the underlying values behind a frustration, an act of curiosity that does not require agreement. At its core, the practice shifts attention from winning arguments to what Schonmann calls ‘cultivating controversy,’ grounded in active listening, inquiry, and reframing. It offers students a way to engage with disagreement less defensively and with greater nuance.

Written by **Sofia Seelen**

Generative AI in the classroom
Building educational chatbots with LUCA

Workshop: **How Gen AI chatbots help students to understand and learn** / Mario de Jonge, Ludo Juurlink

During the workshop by Mario de Jonge and Ludo Juurlink, participants explored how generative AI can support teaching and learning. The workshop included practical guidance on how to use LUCA, explain what it can provide to the students and spurred up discussions on copyright.

As is usual with digital tools, the workshop started with some login struggles, but it quickly turned into an informative and interactive session. Mario de Jonge and Ludo Juurlink introduced the participants to LUCA, the Leiden University Cognitive Agent, which is a platform that allows teachers to create their own AI agents and educational mini games.

Research about the impact of generative AI

The workshop combined both research and experimenting with LUCA. De Jonge first presented findings on the impact of generative AI on student learning. Using the ISAR model, he explained several ways AI can be used in education. From inversion – outsourcing cognitive processing to AI – to ways that enable the student to learn better than previously possible (redefinition). One example that stood out was the use of roleplay. A chatbot created with LUCA can enable students to 'speak' with historical figures or practice professional scenarios in a safe environment. AI then becomes less of a shortcut and more of a tool to encourage interaction and engagement with the course material.

De Jonge also discussed recent research showing positive results for AI tutoring. In one controlled study, students working with an AI tutor improved even more than students in an active classroom setting with teacher support. According to Juurlink the important factor of improving your skills with AI is not just the use of AI itself, but the way students apply AI to their learning process.

"If you actually want to learn something, you first do it yourself and then ask AI."

Practical guidance on building chatbots

After the introduction, participants were invited to build their own chatbot with LUCA. The workshop focused on writing effective prompts and learning how to give the AI clear instructions. Participants were encouraged to think carefully about the role of the chatbot, the intended users, the tasks students should complete and the specific rules or requirements the AI should follow. The most important advice Juurlink gave was "be specific and keep track of your progress".

The workshop also demonstrated how LUCA can be used in combination with interactive mini apps. These smaller tools allow students to interact with the course material in a playful way, helping them learn through doing, rather than only through conversation with the chatbot.

Using AI for AI?

The practical exercises led to plenty of discussion among participants. Some exchanged ideas about how an AI chatbot could support themselves in their work, while others debated if other LLM could be used to help write the prompts for LUCA. Besides the practical side of chatbot design, the workshop also discussed questions surrounding privacy, copyright and data security. According to the presenters, materials uploaded into LUCA remain within the protected platform environment, which currently operates on a European server infrastructure.

What added to the session was the overall perspective on AI in higher education. The workshop did not present AI as something that will replace teachers, nor as a thing that damages the students learning abilities. Instead, the presenters focused on how teachers can be actively involved in the learning process of students outside of the classroom and how AI could provide a deeper way of learning than previously possible.

Although LUCA is still being developed, the workshop gave participants a concrete sense of how generative AI could improve educational practice.

Written by **Yke van der Ham**

Ungrading for the Rehumanization of Education

"What I take away most is how working with pass/fail, or ungrading, can make students feel more at ease, and more willing to take risks. That's very valuable and, I think, ultimately what I want them to be able to do in my classes."

In their workshop on Ungrading, University Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature Esther Edelmann and Assistant Professor in Literary Studies and Gender Studies Looi van Kessel made the case for shifting grading to pass/fail. They shared experiences out of their own classrooms and illustrated how impactful this shift can be for students.

The Downsides of Grading

Grading is a crucial part of the Dutch education system. Yet, Edelmann and Van Kessel advocate for the implementation of ungrading in our university, because, they argue, grades are a fiction. Moreover, the pressure that comes with seemingly precise grades is felt strongly by students. When students see assignments and exams as exclusively means to grades, they are discouraged from seeing them as learning opportunities. The rise of GenAI use is also correlated to this fact: students, under pressure, pivot to AI so they can finish their work on time, and out of fear for lower grades. Similarly, grade fear also inhibits risk-taking and disincentivizes students from showing when they do not understand something.

Why Ungrading Then

Ungrading can therefore offer an alternative. Edelmann and Van Kessel shared that in their classrooms, their experiments with ungrading have relieved many of the previously mentioned issues. Students feel less pressure, take more risks, and are more empowered to shape their learning process in their own way, rather than trying to align with what their teacher wants from them. Edelmann provided an illustrative example of a presentation assignment. For this class, students were explicitly prompted not to deliver a polished presentation. Rather, the instructor asked them to present their process: how did they try to wrap their head around material that they did not understand? Which sources did they consult? By focusing on how a student learns, and making that the object of assessment, Edelmann centers the process, rather than the product.

Focusing on Growth

Although the moderators originally planned to have the participants revise learning goals for their courses in line with the ideals of ungrading, they ended up spending the latter half of the session answering questions. After their explanations, they were met with an eruption of questions. What made the discussion particularly interesting, is that the room was filled with colleagues from across the whole university. Some participants raised questions that are would be relevant if entire programs got ungraded: ‘How do we recognize excellence without grades?’‘What about jobs, that sometimes require GPAs?’ ‘How does ungrading work for a course of 200+ students?’ Indeed, the moderators responded that these questions remain unresolved. But, they pointed to the significance of introducing ungrading at the course-level, or even at the assignment-level. The benefits that were mentioned earlier already emerge when a course or assignment is ungraded.

Issues with Implementing Ungrading

Although ungrading might seem unorthodox, a participant rightly commented that, at least in the Netherlands, we are used to ungrading at the elementary and middle school level of education. Yet, the university seems to hold on tightly to grades. Multiple participants mentioned how the OER and Exam Board reluctance make ungrading at the course level challenging currently. Across faculties too, participants mentioned that implementing ungrading may have to look quite differently, but the potential should be there. The group ended up concluding that, not just for ungrading, but for teaching innovation in general, more space for interfaculty learning should be created.

Written by **Adam el Amraoui**


de KEMPEN

Rethinking Education: New Ways of Learning and Assessing in times of AI

This first workshop draws a full house. Curiosity and excitement are clearly felt throughout the room. The opening PowerPoint-slide displays the core ingredient of the workshop, The unessay, and draws attention to the playful background of games, preluding the possibilities this workshop brings. In this workshop, Assistant Professor in Human Osteoarchaeology, Rachel Schats, delves beyond the traditional essay, into the playground of meaningful alternative assessing. What are new ways of learning and assessing student progress in an era shaped by AI?

What is the unessay?

'Yes, the traditional essay has its own purpose, it is free and has a flexible design, but it often also favours particular skills.' Schats promotes the unessay, as a different approach to academic assessment that moves beyond conventional written formats. She describes it as an assignment that centres the student's perspective, giving them the freedom to choose both the topic and the form in which their work is presented. In practice, this can take many shapes: a student might bake a cake, produce a podcast, design a website, create a stop-motion video, or develop a poster. On the one hand, it seems that the unessay gives the students a great deal of freedom, but at the same time, the student carries the full responsibility to deliver a final product that is effective, compelling and of high quality.

A real life example

Schats illustrates the unessay through her experience in her master's course titled Scientific Methodology in Archaeology. In this course, the unessay accounts for 60 percent of the final grade, while the remaining assessment consists of a quiz designed to test students' knowledge through a combination of multiple-choice and open questions. Before beginning, the students must submit a pitch explaining their choices. At the heart of the assignment, students choose their own topic, and in doing so also define their intended audience and the medium they consider most appropriate. According to evaluations, student responses have been largely positive about the unessay.

Rubric and grading

One of the main challenges of the unessay lies in bringing diverse outputs together within a single assessment framework. How, for instance, can a cake be fairly compared to a website, or a podcast to a written report? To address this question, Schats has developed a dedicated rubric over recent years. The framework is divided into five equally weighted categories: topic, audience, production value, appropriateness, and quality of information. According to Schats, this approach has so far proven effective in evaluating, from cakes to podcasts, within the same consistent grading structure.

Challenges

Despite the optimism in the room, the unessay also raises a number of challenges that still need to be addressed. One key question, is what it means for assessment if students effectively never fail. At present, the only students who fail the unessay are those who miss the deadline. Schats responds by shifting the focus back to the purpose of education itself: 'What is important, is that we carefully consider what we are teaching students and what they take with them when they finish their degree. I believe that assignments other than traditional exams or papers should have an important place in the curriculum.'

Other developments

Besides the progress made on the unessay, there are also other changes on the planning. 'We are currently actively exploring whether we can reintroduce oral examinations for all bachelor's theses in the archaeology faculty. Namely, if you are expected to orally defend your work, you must also be able to demonstrate, without the assistance of AI, what your thesis encompasses.'

Written by **Sofia Seelen**

Key takeaways from this workshop

'I will take back to my co-teachers everything we have heard in the workshop of the Unessay, and I will use it as a starting point to develop an assignment in our new bachelor's program called Science for Sustainable Societies.'

Emily Strange – Assistant professor - Science for Sustainable Societies

'I take home the idea that we should not be afraid to try things out. I come from secondary education and have now moved into higher education. I notice that many things are still somewhat outdated at the university. The unessay and ungrading are already applied in secondary education, which is why I think that primary, secondary, and higher education could really benefit from closer communication in the future.'

Rosanne Govaarts - Researcher - LUMC Radiology

Workshop: **LAssO** / Leiden Assessors Council

Student participation & engagement – what is the problem, and how can we fix it?

This workshop on student participation and engagement was hosted by Mette and Robin, students from the Assessors Council. They started the workshop with a presentation about statistics on student engagement and participation, and the participants engaged in discussions on the problem in student attendance and possible solutions.

Student engagement is about students feeling like or being a part of the university community. Participation is the extent to which students take on active roles and their participation. In general, both engagement and participation have gone down in the last years, although this differs among faculties. Research shows that students have been spending less time on studying, while the hours spent on working have increased. To the question of where the leftover hours go, the group quickly agreed: social media. But unfortunately, research has given no real answer yet.

Types of students

Not only has time spent studying gone down, but participation as well. Here we can split students into two groups: general students and active students. The general group goes to class to get the degree. Among this group, there is lower lecture attendance. The active students are the people who, for example, are candidates for the student elections or program committees. They are more active in the university community.

Causes

Different causes for declining student participation were also mentioned. With changing times come changing student needs and frames of reference. There is growing pressure to perform well and build a CV, which means students will look for opportunities that are more available outside of the university. And financial

"Learning from other faculties can help in understanding the situation. And we have to adapt to changing situations."

situations play a part. That means that sometimes work will take priority over studying. The group discussed this as well: do the students know how much a year of studying costs? Is five hours of work worth an extra year of studying? But less financial means can also mean that more students live at home, which causes extra travel time and less participation.

Recognizing the problem

The group went on to discuss their own experiences with student participation and think of solutions. Classroom attendance was a big topic. Every faculty has its own policy on attendance. For the humanities faculty lectures aren't mandatory, but that also means declining attendance. Other faculties use a minimum attendance, for example 75% of lectures being mandatory. However, that only works if either the lecturer or supporting staff can enforce it.

Another discussion point was the cost-benefit balance of students. What can teachers do to shift that balance, and give students more motivation to come to class? Part of the group recognized a difference in attendance depending on when a course is scheduled. Attendance can be higher when a course is scheduled at the end of a bachelor's degree and is necessary to receive a diploma. Or whether a class is scheduled in the fall semester, or in the spring when the sun comes out and students are enjoying the improving weather.

Brainstorming solutions

The group worked together to discuss possible solutions. In this discussion the differences between faculties added to the conversation. The size of lectures is a point of discussion. Bigger groups mean students get less attention from a lecturer, which makes it easier to skip a class. Peer pressure was also mentioned. Students care more about the opinions of their peers than those of their teachers. If their peers expect them to be present, they may be more inclined to show up. Journaling as self-assessment, or longer courses with little to no homework also seem to help students attend.

Concluding

The discussions and workshop produced a few ideas to improve student attendance. Making obvious why students should attend class, and making class interactive instead of repeating a textbook make it more interesting for students to attend. Another thought is to take more time for academics in the introduction period, so every student (whether they want to party or not) can make connections with other students that may share their interests.

What do you take home from this discussion?

"Learning from other faculties can help in understanding the situation. And we have to adapt to changing situations."

Written by **Jente van Sark**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Learning Outcomes: flexible learning tracks in higher education

What happens when educational programmes are organized around the abilities of students, instead of the courses they have completed? In this workshop, Mariska Krijgsman explored how Learning Outcomes can create more flexible and student-centered ways of higher education.

Mariska Krijgsman, who works in curriculum development at Hogeschool Leiden and studied herself at Leiden University, structured the workshop around three central questions: why, how and what? Throughout the session, she encouraged participants to rethink traditional views on education and apply the concept of Learning Outcomes on their own goals and profession.

The workshop started with explaining the concept of learning outcomes. Krijgsman made the distinction between learning objectives and learning outcomes: while learning objectives describe what students are expected to learn, learning outcomes focus on what students are actually able to demonstrate as a result of their learning and experience.

Pathway independent

An important aspect of this approach is that learning becomes 'pathway independent'. This means that it matters less how or where students acquired certain skills or knowledge, as long as they can demonstrate the required level. Students would not be required to complete every part of a traditional programme if they can already show relevant competencies through previous education, work experience or informal learning.

To illustrate this concept, Krijgsman asked the participants to imagine a programme or degree they would still like to pursue. They then reflected on which skills, experiences and prior knowledge they would already bring into that programme. The exercise led to open discussions about professional experience, previous learning and personal motivation.

One participant interested in studying sign language described already having experience with language learning and research skills, as well as a very basic knowledge of sign language through having learned about baby sign language.. Another participant discussed that if he would pursue a degree in history, after working as an environmental scientist, it might require him to unlearn certain professional assumptions and biases.

The fulltime student doesn't exist anymore

Throughout the workshop, Krijgsman connected the concept of Learning Outcomes to larger trends in society and higher education. Students increasingly combine their education with work, caregiving responsibilities or other commitments. "There is no such thing as a fulltime student anymore." AI was also discussed during the workshop. In a time where information is very easily accessible, education may need to focus less on memorizing knowledge and more on applying knowledge and reflecting critically.

"In this system, trust is the key word."

This idea of trust returned several times during the workshop discussions. Participants talked extensively about the practical challenges of

> “I really appreciate the idea of trust as a foundation. Trusting teachers to assess whether someone already has certain skills, while also trusting students to honestly demonstrate in a portfolio what they are already capable of.”
>
> Anne Land

incorporating Learning Outcomes within university courses. How can institutions offer flexibility while maintaining clear academic standards? And how can teaching teams agree on the level of quality students should demonstrate?

Lifelong learning

Krijgsman also connected Learning Outcomes to the idea of lifelong learning. Higher education could more often support people that are at different stages of their careers, rather than focusing mainly on students form the age of eighteen to twenty-something. Flexible learning pathways could help make education more accessible to professionals who want to continue developing their skills.

To illustrate this concept of lifelong learning, Krijgsman told the participants about an experience with a teacher who already had all the knowledge and skills to teach but only had experience with teaching ages twelve to fourteen, and now wanted to be able to educate younger students. Instead of him having to follow a complete course, he now only had to demonstrate that his existing skills and knowledge could also be applied to younger students.

The workshop made clear that the approach of education with Learning Outcomes is still developing and raises some practical questions. At the same time, the discussions during the workshop showed a great amount of interest in higher education that allows for more flexibility and lifelong learning.

Written by **Yke van der Ham**

The learning mindset – using personal values in education

David Ehrhardt

Esli Verheggen

"It's important to talk about values with your students. Not only in academic context, but because these are also they can use for example to formulate their own opinions in elections. The education system is there to teach students, not to indoctrinate them."

The learning mindset was a workshop led by associate professor David Ehrhardt and study advisor and PHD-candidate Esli Verheggen. Together they introduced the group of participants to the Learning Mindset program and the use of students' own values in learning.

The workshop opened with an introduction to the Learning Mindset program by David Ehrhardt. This program introduces students to autonomous learning, and incorporating their values and personal goals in their studies and forming a learning cycle. We are facing a shifting education landscape, with growing numbers of students almost everywhere, changing motivations for students. The growing influence of artificial intelligence, and uncertainty about the future. The Learning Mindset helps students take control of their education by encouraging reflection and self-regulation.

Personal values in higher education

Esli Verheggen continued the workshop by discussing research on how personal values can help students navigate their own lives. Understanding their own values matters because they can act as a compass, guiding behavior. They can help understand disagreement, and they can help provide a sense of purpose and foster psychological wellbeing.

Research has shown that valuing one thing may result in valuing the opposite less. Recent experiments consisted of creating scenarios with the help of students, in which two types of reactions are given to choose from. In another experiment students were given a questionnaire to complete. The results of this questionnaire gave them an indication of which values were important to them, according to their answers. In most cases the students agreed with these results. An interesting result with these questionnaires is the combination of values. Many students indicated that they wanted to have impact on the world in some way, but almost no students said they valued power. The group discussed this; making change is very difficult without some kind of power.

Goal systems

Another topic that was discussed was goal systems: the way we can connect learning goals to personal values. Students in a statistics course were given the assignment to connect the learning goals of the course to a few values. This can help students see what they will learn in the course and how the learning goals apply to them. It was also discussed with the group how applicable this experiment is to other courses than statistics. Mainly the timing of the exercise matters instead of the type of students that participate; older students may give different answers than first-year students. Right now, the educational system signals they value achievement most, while other values are not emphasized enough. The goal systems can act as a starting point for reflection,

Teachers exercise

Finally, to wrap up the workshop, the group did an exercise themselves. The participants tried select a value, and thought about the ways they implement those in their own courses. An interesting discussion took place, when some teachers found they encourage values through their learning goals, they don't personally value at all. The workshop ended with a discussion of the results of their own experiment. Finally, a short moment was spent on the formulation of the values; in the end, some students did choose power as a personal value, but indicated they thought of it more as leadership. This shows that choice of words is also important in researching the values of students in education.

Written by **Jente van Sark**

Liberal Education: Centering Teachers in the Work of Teaching

In his workshop on Liberal Education, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Politics and Economy Brandon Zicha, called for the recentering of teachers in the way we think about teaching. He argues that since teachers are a valuable resource to one another, they should sit down together more often and simply talk. So during the workshop, that's exactly what participants did.

The Human Element of Teaching

"Today we are just going to talk, like colleagues." What sounded unassuming, was actually a rather radical start to the workshop. According to Zicha, teachers do not talk to each other enough. But, they should. To start the discussion, he posed two questions. 'What made your greatest teacher a great teacher?' and 'When have you learned something crucial about your teaching?' To the first question, participants answered with qualities like 'care', 'curiosity', 'capacity to inspire': human qualities. What we appreciate in good teachers is relational and human. The answers to the second question revealed that teachers often learn most in their encounters with students. This was not surprising, but the lack of exchange regarding these learning moments is puzzling. Would it not make sense if teachers sat down more structurally to discuss their experiences, as a means of teacher development.

Learning from each other

That is a big part of the case made by Zicha. He sees a problem with the information-centered nature of current education, where teachers are increasingly stripped of their ownership and autonomy over their work. As bureaucratic overhead takes more and more time, teachers are less incentivized to sit down with each other and simply talk. All the while this could be a more fruitful way to spur teacher development, in contrast to the myriad bodies set up in the university. According to Zicha, the expertise on teaching in-house is large, and teaching staff should get more structural space to learn from each other. Zicha's plea was met with resounding recognition. Many of the participants agreed that, indeed, while their colleagues are often sources of great knowledge, they spend little time discussing with one another. Multiple participants noted that communication with other instructors usually focuses mainly on either shared research interests or matters concerning administration. There is no structural space for teachers across different research specialization to share insights on teaching.

Is Talking Enough?

Although many participants agreed with the call, different colleagues questioned the call for more mutual learning. 'How do we facilitate these conversations, when we are already swamped with work?' 'What is the next step after talking?' Even if time and money is invested into organizing these

Brandon Zicha

"I felt that this session gave words to a lot of the feelings I have in my work. I have in fact learned a lot from my own teachers, and also my colleagues. It is indeed quite weird that we do not sit down together more often to think about what we are doing."

conversations repeatedly, what happens when ideas about teaching development diverge between different levels of administration? If there is a top-down call for homogenizing examination systems for example, but teachers come to the conclusion that this is not optimal, talking is insufficient. The conversation therefore shifted to another, closely related issue: the marginalization of the teacher in thinking about teaching. "Teaching should be seen as an art, rather than a technique." Ultimately, what seems at stake here is that the experiences and insights of teachers should be recentered when it comes how we think about teaching.

Written by **Adam el Amraoui**

Creating Space

Closing remarks from
Rector Magnificus **Sarah de Rijcke**
at the LTA Education Conference, 10 June 2026

In our research, we accept a considerable degree of uncertainty. We want the outcome of our work to retain an element of unpredictability; we do not want to know in advance exactly where it will lead us. Good research leaves room for surprises, unforeseen turns, and new questions.

Good research also requires continual self-criticism and constructive disagreement. A healthy academic culture of quality ensures that everyone feels able to question others critically, even when those others claim higher status or greater authority. This cultural dimension has been emphasized time and again in our recent search for a better secured research integrity and it has been incorporated into our codes of conduct.

It is supposed to be a small step from research to academic education. In the spirit of Humboldt, we would like our teaching to be derived from research—or rather, to be a way of introducing people into the culture and practices of scholarship. Alongside the knowledge and skills that students acquire, exposure to that culture can be profoundly formative to them personally. There is a democratic dimension to this formative nature: the idea that everyone may participate critically in the conversation and that the quality of arguments should ultimately be decisive. There is also a social dimension, because scientific debate can only flourish in an atmosphere of mutual respect and a sense of shared purpose. And then there are the qualities that serve academics and the citizens of this world alike: an open and inquisitive mind; patience; precision combined with the flexibility to embrace the unexpected and the new. Hopefully, a university education can also help students, as citizens, to maintain a clear distinction between truth and manipulation—a crucial skill for the immediate future.

If this formative side of academic education is so important, we must ask whether our assessments and examinations sufficiently address it. With our first-year students, we test a great deal of theoretical knowledge, but do we also have a sense whether they understand that this knowledge is the product of an ongoing discussion and an open culture of debate? Our master's students write theses that demonstrate their mastering of the techniques of research. But do they understand that these techniques are merely a means and not ends in themselves? Have they internalized social values that belong to scholarly inquiry?

Today, we have heard contributions aimed at creating space. *Free Your Mind* is the theme of this conference. If, in our teaching, we can limit our tendency toward one-sided measurement and assessment to what is truly necessary, perhaps we can give our students more opportunity to engage with scholarship as a culture and as a path toward becoming a richer human being—in the figurative sense of the word. This does not mean that the teacher steps back, because it is precisely within that newly created space that much important work has to be done. Here, students should experience, through close interaction with their teachers and fellow students, what an academic culture truly is.

I hope you will leave this conference with renewed motivation to pursue this goal, and with practical ideas about how to do so. At our incomparable LLInC, experts are always ready to help you design education that creates space for a formative university education.

Colophon

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Editorial Team
Adam el Amraoui
Yke van der Ham
Jente van Sark
Sofia Seelen

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