



Learning My Way – finding your own path through the world

Marc Cleiren – August 2020 – Information for interested organizations

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Summary

Students are faced with an inherent paradox: in this phase of life they want to widen their horizons but they also have to choose specific educational tracks and their future profession as soon as possible. This dilemma translates into choice overload, stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, students lead multiple, parallel lives, where studying, social contacts, online activities and work exist side-by-side as separate ‘bubbles’ with very few connections between them. The staff of study programmes are thus confronted with fluctuating motivation levels, delay in completing studies and drop-out. Given the COVID-19 situation, and the professional insecurity this entails regarding the professional future, interior anchoring of motives and choice have become imperative for autonomy during and post educational trajectories. It is quite rare for study programmes to cover the topic of developing your own future vision based on personal and professional identity, often because of the presumed high costs of individual supervision time or lack of space within the curriculum. Many students therefore have insufficient personal anchoring of their own vision and commitment. This makes our education system an expensive labyrinth of trial-and-error, where students often learn the hard way what is (and isn't) right for them, and have more experiences of failure than necessary. An alternative to all this is the *Learning My Way* approach. The mission of *Learning My Way* is:

- To help students find a flexible learning path that leads them towards realising their unique contribution to the world;
- To support students in becoming healthy and engaged professionals in both life and work, who are able to deal autonomously with setbacks and uncertainty in all areas of life.

Learning My Way (LMW) aims to help students become the owners and designers of their own path in both their academic career and in their life in general. It helps them light their path toward making a real impact in the world. Assisted by smart ICT and seamlessly integrated intensive seminars, participants learn to develop ownership in navigating by autonomous motives, forming a future vision, and recognising their own talent and pitfalls. Charts can illustrate an individual's position within different educational and professional profiles, and his/her development over time. The blended approach enables intensive individual work in large groups with a relatively low staffing load (see also Figure 2). Additionally, LMW generates precise information about the specific contribution of particular courses to competence development.

We are continuously broadening the methodology and toolset of *Learning My Way*. With innovation grants and research linked to these grants, we currently deepen and broaden the LMW approach and are implementing it in the regular higher education Ba and Ma curriculum of Leiden University of different faculties, TU Delft, and Utrecht University.



What is the scope of the problem?

Many students struggle with mental health issues (Boot, Vonk, & Meijman, 2007; Dopmeijer *et al.*, 2018; Gaspersz *et al.*, 2012; Gorter *et al.*, 2008). More than three-quarters experience pressure to perform and this number is increasing (RIVM, 2018). In addition, 50% report problems with anxiety and depression, and 25% experience burn-out symptoms (Dopmeijer *et al.*, 2018). Various sources (RVS, 2018) identify the cause as the increasing pressure on students to complete their degree quickly. Cuts in student grants mean that they often need to take extra jobs to ensure sufficient income, which comes on top of the pressure of performing well academically and building up an impressive CV (RIVM, 2018). At both national and European level, there are urgent calls for more attention to be given to students' wellbeing, and increasingly so in the current COVID-19 situation (Super & van Disseldorp, 2020).

Pressure and insecurity are made worse by developments within society. Traditional careers are disappearing from the job market and uncertain careers are becoming the rule (Pryor & Bright, 2011; WEF, 2016; OCW, 2015). As a result, self-regulation is becoming an essential ability. Professionals are expected to be responsible for their own career and to take charge of it themselves (Meijers, Kuijpers, & Winters, 2010). This therefore requires not only self-regulation but also self-knowledge regarding the desired life direction and professional identity (Wijers & Meijers, 1996).

Unfortunately it is rare for the development of a future vision and professional identity to be included as a topic in curricula. Guidance is only requested via the career service or student psychologists when evident questions or problems arise. For the average student, there is very little anchoring of their own long-term vision in relation to the study programme. Yet the role of this should not be underestimated.

Having a clear picture of your own future vision is correlated with health, psychological wellbeing, and greater perseverance (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Pallant & Lae, 2002; Vignoles *et al.*, 2006). We also know that students with a clear future vision display greater resilience, especially when they experience stressors, such as disappointing study results (Pallant & Lae, 2002). They are more likely to use adaptive strategies, are more committed to the study programme, perceive it as more meaningful, and achieve better results (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; Yeager & Dweck, 2014). Greater commitment to studying before the start was found in our own students to be directly correlated with academic performance after a year (Meijer, Cleiren *et al.*, 2018).

Projecting a specific, meaningful role for the future allows students to redefine unappealing, difficult or boring aspects of a study programme as (necessary) steps on their own path. Having self-knowledge leads to navigating by your own compass and the ability to motivate *yourself* to take action and set priorities. Given the scale of the problem, we agree with Dopmeijer *et al.* (2018) that we should build online and blended structures that support the wellbeing of students.

What does *Learning My Way* offer?

Learning My Way is used in student populations ranging from high school to PhD level, as well as post-initial and executive education. With *Learning My Way*, participants explore, anchor and monitor their own professional and personal development over time. This is encouraged by means of an inventive combination of provocative questions posed during (online) preparation, 360-degree feedback from the student's own social circle, and processing of findings during intensive seminars, which also incorporate intensive peer interaction and reflection. The students additionally record their own competence development online over time, and charts are used to compare this development with their self-chosen professional and personal future vision.

This systematic online self-assessment will, in the future, also make it possible to evaluate courses in terms of their impact on personal development. Using pre- and post-measurements, through aggregated learning analytics we can identify the competence profiles associated with

particular courses. This will give future students a reliable picture of the contribution that a specific course can make to their own competence development.



Figure: Reflective online preparation (left) and upload of seminar results (middle) using web access via a smartphone (right)

Structure of Learning My Way

Learning My Way (LMW) uses an intensive form of hybrid, blended learning with *online* or *on campus* live seminars, with clear pre- and post- portfolio tasks. This systematic approach reinforces the reflective process, as well as activates students to apply their acquired insights to their own learning context and social environment. The LMW intervention currently comprises three to five face-to-face seminars and individual coaching contact. Seminars are preceded by an Online Preparation assignment (*OnlinePre*: reflection on yourself) often followed by a Transfer assignment (*Transfer*: implementation of the learned insights in concrete activities) and finally an Online Integration assignment (*OnlineInt*: consolidation of the learned insights). Students upload their results before each seminar. Seminars themselves entail different educational methods, including break-outs for individual reflection (*Time-ins*) and interaction in pairs or larger subgroups (*Time-outs*).



Figure 1: International and Dutch Honours students during Seminar I in non-COVID times. (March 2018, photo: M. Cleiren)



The LMW intervention has a modular structure (see also Figure 2) with a developmental sequence. Currently, five base modules are employed that are selected and combined according to the needs of the specific student context:

1. Module I: **Personal & professional purpose**
 - a. OnlinePre1: Puzzling on Purpose; Competence Sliders
 - b. Seminar1: Identification of Core Purpose (Filling in diagram in-seminar)
 - c. Transfer1: Own competences in the wild (Competence Sliders instrument)
 - d. OnlineInt1: Upload competences and record of Core Purpose diagram
 - e. Individual coaching session
2. Module II: **Conflicting motives**
 - a. OnlinePre2: Buddy invitation (online 360-degree feedback); VSNU Competences (delta)
 - b. Seminar2: Conflicting motives: talents and debilitating patterns
 - c. Transfer2: Buddy interview & talent/ observation in the wild
 - d. OnlineInt2: Upload buddy interview & talent observation
3. Module III: **The Learning Quest**
 - a. Seminar3: Taking ownership of learning
 - b. Transfer3: Undertaking learning & vision quest (exercises).
 - c. OnlineInt3: Upload harvest of learning & vision quests
4. Module IV: **Commitment**
 - a. Seminar4: Commitment as a multiple yes; how to commit; choosing a witness
 - b. OnlineInt4: Upload SMART commitment with buddy picture
 - c. Transfer4: Exercise free will (exercising in the wild)
 - d. OnlineInt4: Upload experiences with exercises, report commitment outcomes.
5. Module V: **Harvesting knowledge & achievements & Vision of the future**
 - a. Seminar5: Present and future: Future Self and future plans
 - b. OnlineInt5: Upload Future Selfie, future briefing
 - c. Individual coaching session (optional)

All LMW instruments are based on state-of-the-art educational insights and have been developed specifically for this approach. The *Competence Sliders* instrument allows students to evaluate themselves (or be evaluated by 'buddies') by means of 'sliders' on the 32 competences in the classification used nationwide by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) for all academic and non-academic professions, thus offering a nationally applied definition and categorisation of competences. If desired, the VSNU system can also be replaced with other skills and competence-categorizations. *Puzzling on Purpose* is an open online questionnaire tool used for reflecting on the most central motives and ideals in one's own life. By exploring these issues, students will arrive at a provisional ranking, which is produced during the first seminar and can be consulted later via the LMW system with an option to update their views.

Supporting LMW blended learning is the online workbook that contains theoretical substantiation for the assignments and acquired insights. Under development is the *Learning My Way* ICT environment that accommodates the personal online portfolio. This contains not only the student's own insights and assignments but also the peer feedback, personalised profile scores (i.e. Competence score development) but also the student's own reflection on the course.

Fundamental to the LMW approach is that students themselves obtain and retain ownership of their learning track. The set of instruments therefore focuses on self-reflection and development (intrapersonal). LMW is not designed for comparative and competitive use. This means that students can reflect and communicate honestly (and more validly) about their own situation without social

desirability influences or masking for reasons of social norms or competition. As part of the disciplinary curriculum, teachers may ask for papers or exercises that propose the student to integrate their self-knowledge obtained in the LMW trajectory. In this way, fruitful integration is promoted between personal insights and study related activities (e.g. in tutoring and mentoring, in study choice, or curriculum planning).

The LMW 2.0 ICT application is GDPR- (AVG) proof. Students themselves determine explicitly whether and/or when data are disclosed to third parties outside the LMW teaching context. They can do this by means of ‘tokens’ that selectively grant specific people of their choice temporary access (i.e. coaches within and outside the students’ own study programme, lecturers, tutors or mentors), enabling them to view the work on request together with the student, and give feedback on the content.

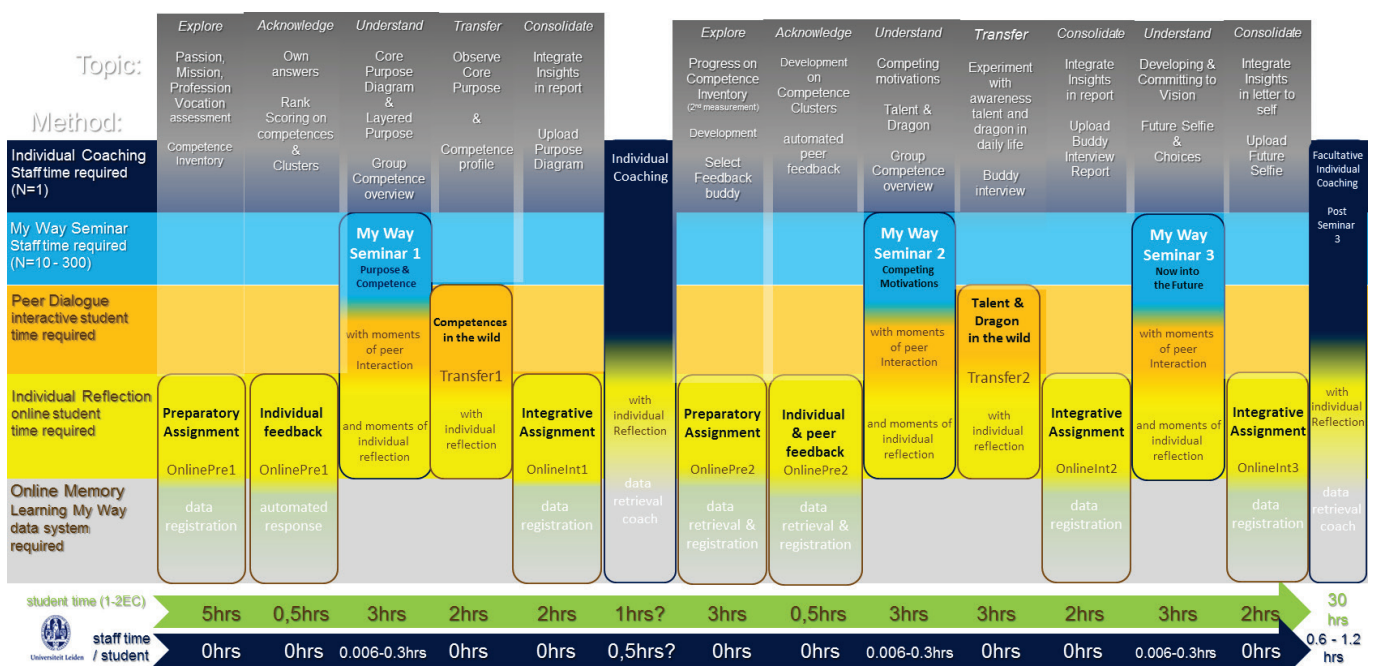


Figure 2: Blueprint of a Learning My Way (3 seminar) blended-coaching track.

Innovative elements in Learning My Way

Learning My Way is a reliable, scalable, blended, and transferable set of didactic instruments (GDPR-proof by design), which students can use to identify, validate and monitor their development track over a longer period during their studies, with partly automated portfolio creation.

Innovative elements that are combined in LMW are:

- Identification and application of personal mission, competence and vision development as a core element of promoting wellbeing.
- Clear theoretically/empirically substantiated educational approach centred on *Purpose in life & profession*, with a focus on wellbeing and professional development.
- An insight-giving blended learning ICT system, which:
 - places ownership of personal data with the student;
 - facilitates, visualises and anchors personal insights relating to a student’s own (professional) future vision, and helps him/her to remember them;
 - is suitable for large-scale and transdisciplinary use.

- Subjective and intersubjective competence profile analysis in graphic form, which can be used for monitoring personal progression over time, and can be accessed via the LMW portfolio.
- Dynamic interactive charts of a student’s own competence profile compared with course profiles, graduate profiles of study programmes and/or professional profiles (VSNU-NOA or defined in another way in the future). This chart forms the basis for setting priorities during the study programme (see Figure 3).
- Potential of signalling problematic development to students themselves, offering specific assistance propositions and possibility to obtain (one click) support (under development).

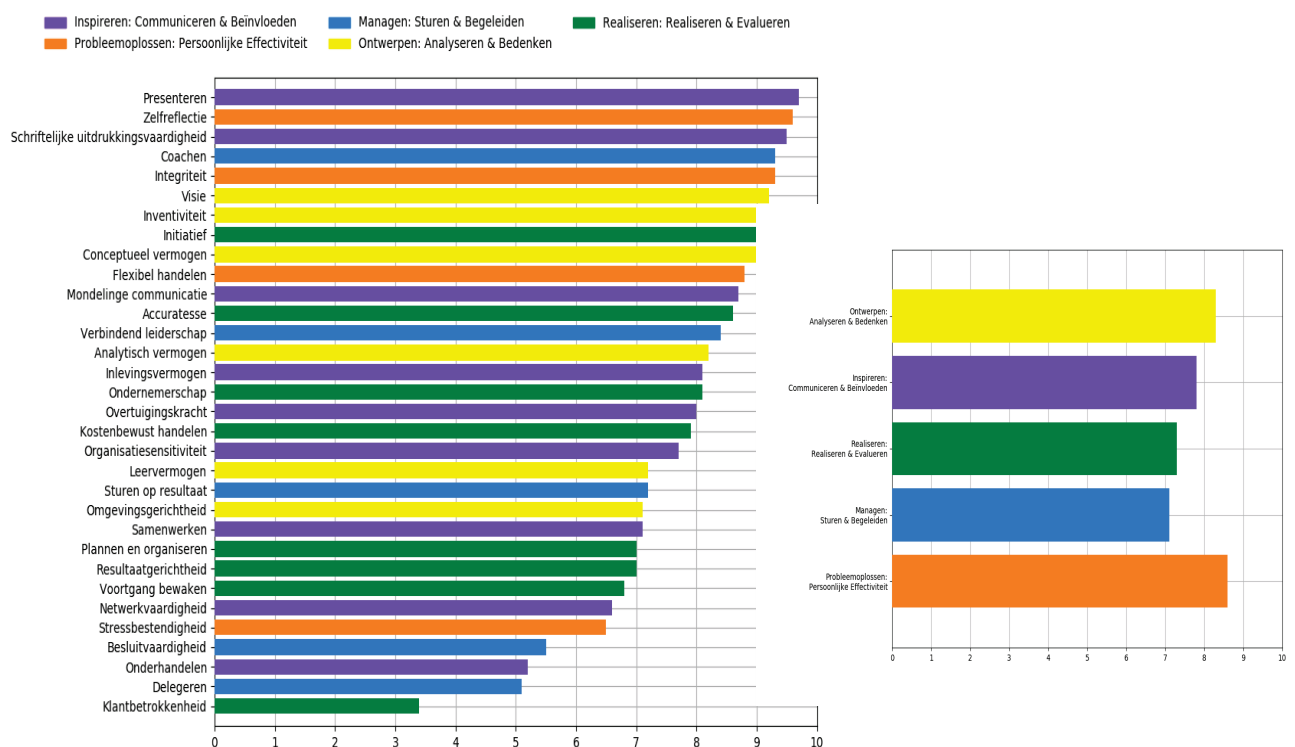


Figure 3: Example of a chart generated by the LMW system, showing the competence profile and cluster scores, reported to the individual student.

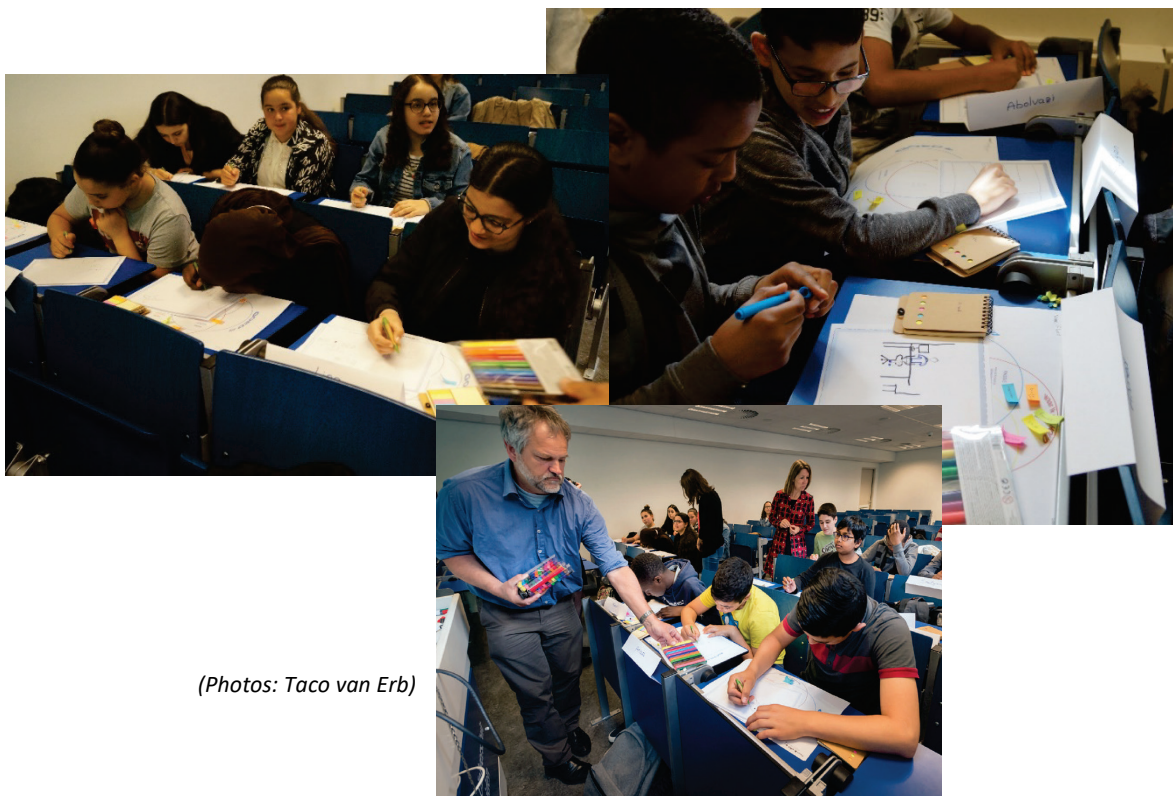
Trajectories employing Learning My Way

Over the last few years, *Learning My Way* has been developed and successfully applied in diverse contexts. Currently it is increasingly being implemented as part of regular curriculums in secondary and higher (post initial) education.

Examples:

- TU Delft – Ba Technische Natuurkunde – Learning My Way 3 seminar design embedded in tutoring trajectory Year 1 2020-2021 (N=260);
- Utrecht University – Masteropleiding Management van Publieke Vraagstukken 2019, 2020 (pilot LMW system & seminar).

- Leiden University – Honours College Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences. Course: *Personal & Professional Development* (PPD: NL and ENG) integral part of the 3-year Ba coaching track; (N=approx.300).
- Leiden University – Law & Criminology Masters *De Ongebaande Weg* (LMW summer course for Ma students finishing their studies).
- Leiden University – Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences *Skills Academy* extracurricular course (ENG, bachelor's Years 2 and 3, and master's) N=±40.
- Leiden University – Cultural Anthropology *Personal & Professional Impact (PPI)* 5EC elective (bachelor's) course (ENG, bachelor's Years 2 and 3, and master's) N=approx.35.
- Haagse Scholen – Samen10+ track for head teachers of schools working within the Samen10+ collaboration in the Schilderswijk neighbourhood of The Hague (try-out of Modules I and II).
- Kopklas (extra year between primary and secondary school) Leiden – LMW variant of Module I in a class of mostly refugee children (see Figure 4) N=20.
- Leiden University – Law & Criminology *Learning My Way* (LMW stand-alone).¹
- Leiden University – Psychology (bachelor's Year 2) course *Perspectief op Carrière Planning* (NL) and *Perspective on Career Planning* (ENG): N=±700 (PoCP Module II).



(Photos: Taco van Erb)

Figure 4: Working with the LMW Purpose in Life diagram in Kopklas (11- to 12-year-olds).

How do students experience LMW?

The LMW interventions are closely monitored. Routinely, after each seminar students complete a so-called *Reflection Point* in the Online Integration assignment where they report both quantitatively and in open statements what they found of value in the seminar and the various instruments. Student evaluations of the seminars and trajectory are usually highly positive (on average around 4 on a scale up to 5), with an especially high score given for relevance (usually around 4.5 on average). After transition to complete online versions since March 2020, valuation has been particularly high,



with student appreciation across the board averaging over 8.0. More information about evaluations can be supplied on request.

"The structure of the teaching was very good. The alternation between listening and being busy yourself worked very well. I found it difficult to fill in the purpose diagram at the beginning, but it got better once you got started. The discussions with fellow students were also very helpful."

Law student, Leiden University 2018

"I look back on a valuable day. A pity that we had to do this online, but your enthusiasm made it easy to keep your attention. Thank you!"

Professional in one-day seminar
Utrecht School of Business & Organization - Utrecht University 2020

"I was very pleased I got to know myself a lot better in several areas. I am very happy with the way the seminars were given: approachable and informal. The coaching conversation was also very useful to me."

Law student, Leiden University, 2019

"I think the Dragon and Talent approach is great and really made me think about myself in a different way. By this I mean I often try to not think about my patterns and things that make me uncomfortable. Through these exercises, I was able to not only pinpoint my patterns but also how to address them and use them."

Honours student, Leiden University 2019

"Learning My Way has given me many insights."

pupil of Pre-University College, The Hague, 2020

Future of *Learning My Way*

Learning My Way is on its way to become widely used in higher education in both research universities and universities of applied sciences, as well as in secondary education. Currently an upgraded LMW 2.0 ICT system is under development with a high level of teacher and student side manageability. *Learning My Way* is integral part of 2.5 year the Honours College programme at FSW, is part of The Hague Pre-University College, and the compulsory Ba3 curriculum of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology. Preparation of new implementations is underway at and explored as regular implementation in the Ba and Ma phase of studies at different universities.

A multiyear implementation and research project is underway with integration of the FW&N E-learning skills system, with scientific longitudinal research on the effects and efficacy of LMW interventions. Ultimate aim is to have *Learning My Way* embedded in the standard curricula of study programmes in universities (both research and applied sciences) in the Netherlands and beyond. An online *Learning My Way* workbook (in Dutch and English) is under development.

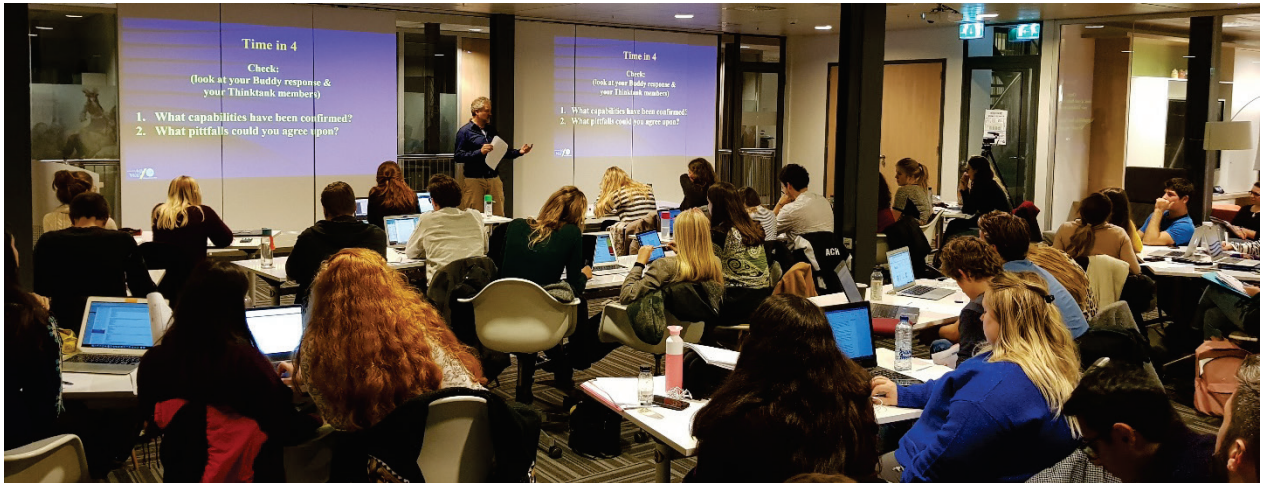


Figure 5: Example of a Time-in during Seminar II, international students Honours College, November 2018. Individual moment for self-reflection on the basis of an earlier buddy interview (viewed online). (Photo: Justin Sijtsma)

Options for a *Learning My Way* implementation

The way LMW is designed in such a way that a trajectory can be scaled and tailored to the purpose and financial means of the client programme or organization. The variation in options detailed below differ in the level of autonomous application, intensity of involvement of staff at customer side and the intensity of the guidance/support of the Personal Development Centre (PDC) acting as the facilitator of *Learning My Way*.

- Option A: the PDC provides a full LMW trajectory, with no requirement for training or workshops for staff of the client organization/discipline. This means that trained and certified PDC staff will cover all teaching and coaching of the student group during the trajectory. Aim is to provide the teaching (for internal Leiden University programmes) on a level that can largely be covered by standard (full) financial AEG-Tariffs.
- Option AB: the PDC provides a LMW trajectory, and also includes a train-the-teacher curriculum in the first run. This is aimed at programmes that already employ high level skills teachers and want to create a structural place for LMW in their curriculum. Individual coaching of students is provided by trained specialized PDC -LMW coaches.
- Option ABC (Autonomy oriented): the PDC provides a LMW trajectory, with inclusion of a train-the-teacher, as well as a train-the-coach curriculum. Curricular application of LMW is preceded by workshops for all staff involved (e.g. teachers as seminar leaders and study advisers as coaches). This option is only warranted when on clientside qualified personnel is available and it suffices to update knowledge and skills on LMW. Client organizations in the ABC variant will be able to implement modules in their own curriculum/organization in the future. Whether ABC is a viable option is always be examined in cooperation with PDC.

For more information:
please contact the FSW Personal Development Centre at
LearningMyWay@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Relevant literature

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