Learning My Way – Finding your own path through the world

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Summary

Students are faced with an inherent paradox: in this life phase 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 varying motivation levels, delay in completing studies and drop-out.

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 failure experiences 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 through studying and life. 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 show 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. Additionally, LMW generates precise information about the specific contribution of particular courses to competence development.

At present, we are working hard on developing *Learning My Way*. With innovation grants and the research linked to these, we hope to explore the LMW approach and implement it widely within the regular higher education curriculum.

What is 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, combined with the pressure of performing well academically and building up an impressive CV (RIVM, 2018). At national and European level, there are urgent calls for more attention to be given to students' wellbeing.

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 often 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* deliver?

With *Learning My Way* (LMW), students 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, and charts are used to compare this development with their self-chosen professional and personal future vision.

This systematic online self-assessment will in future also make it possible to evaluate courses in terms of their impact on personal development. Using pre- and post-measurements, aggregated learning analytics will 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.

Structure of *Learning My Way*

Learning My Way uses an intensive form of blended learning, which on the one hand reinforces the reflective process set in motion by the intervention, and on the other hand activates the students to apply their acquired insights in their own learning and social environment. The intervention currently comprises three face-to-face seminars and individual coaching contact. Each seminar is preceded by an Online Preparation assignment (*OnlinePre*: reflection on yourself) and 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 the next seminar. Each seminar utilises a number of different learning methods, including individual reflection (*Time-ins*) and interaction in pairs or larger subgroups (*Time-outs*).

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

The intervention has a modular structure (see also Figure 2) with a preference for a specific sequence in the approach:

1. Module I: ***Personal & professional purpose***
   a. OnlinePre1: Puzzling about Purpose; CompetenceSliders
   b. Seminar1: Identification of Core Purpose (Filling in diagram on the spot)
   c. Transfer1: Own competences in the wild (CompetenceSliders instrument)
   d. OnlineInt1: Upload competences and photo 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 dragons
   c. Transfer2: Buddy interview & talent/ observation in the wild
   d. OnlineInt2: Upload buddy interview & talent observation
3. Module III: ***Vision of the future***
   a. Seminar3: Present and future: Future Self and future plans
   b. OnlineInt3: Upload Future Selfie, future briefing
   c. Individual coaching session (can be optional)

All the instruments were developed by the author specifically for the LMW approach. The *CompetenceSliders* 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 universally applied definition and categorisation of competences. *Puzzling about Purpose* is an open online questionnaire tool used for reflecting on the most central motives and ideals in one's own life. By exploring the 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 update option.

An important aspect of blended learning is the online workbook, for which we are currently developing knowledge clips and literature links with theoretical substantiation for the assignments and acquired insights.

The *Learning My Way* ICT environment will in the future accommodate the personal online portfolio. This contains not only the student's own insights and assignments but also the peer feedback, personalised profile scores (VSNU Competences), the student's own course feedback and (in about a year's time) a chart showing the match between his/her own scores and possible professional profile.

The basic principle is always that students themselves have and retain ownership of their own learning track. The set of instruments therefore focuses on self-reflection and development (intrapersonal). It is not designed for comparative and competitive use. This means that students can reflect and communicate honestly (validly) about their own situation without social adaptation for reasons of social norms or competition. The innovation is GDPR-proof. Students themselves determine explicitly whether/ when data are disclosed to third parties. They do this by means of 'tokens' that selectively give other people temporary access (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 about the content.
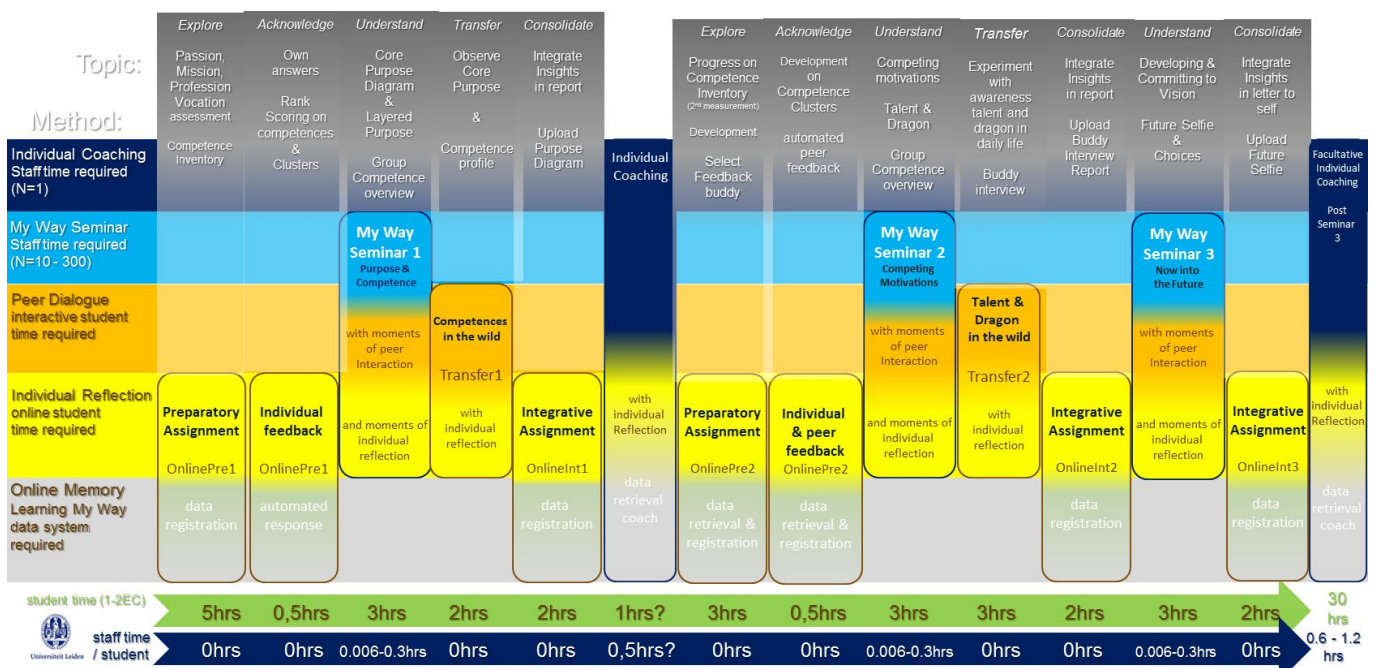

Figure 2: Blueprint of the Learning My Way blended-coaching track

Innovative elements in *Learning My Way*

Learning My Way is a reliable, low-cost, 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:

- Thematisation 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 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.
- Chart 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), which forms the basis for setting priorities during the study programme (see Figure 3).
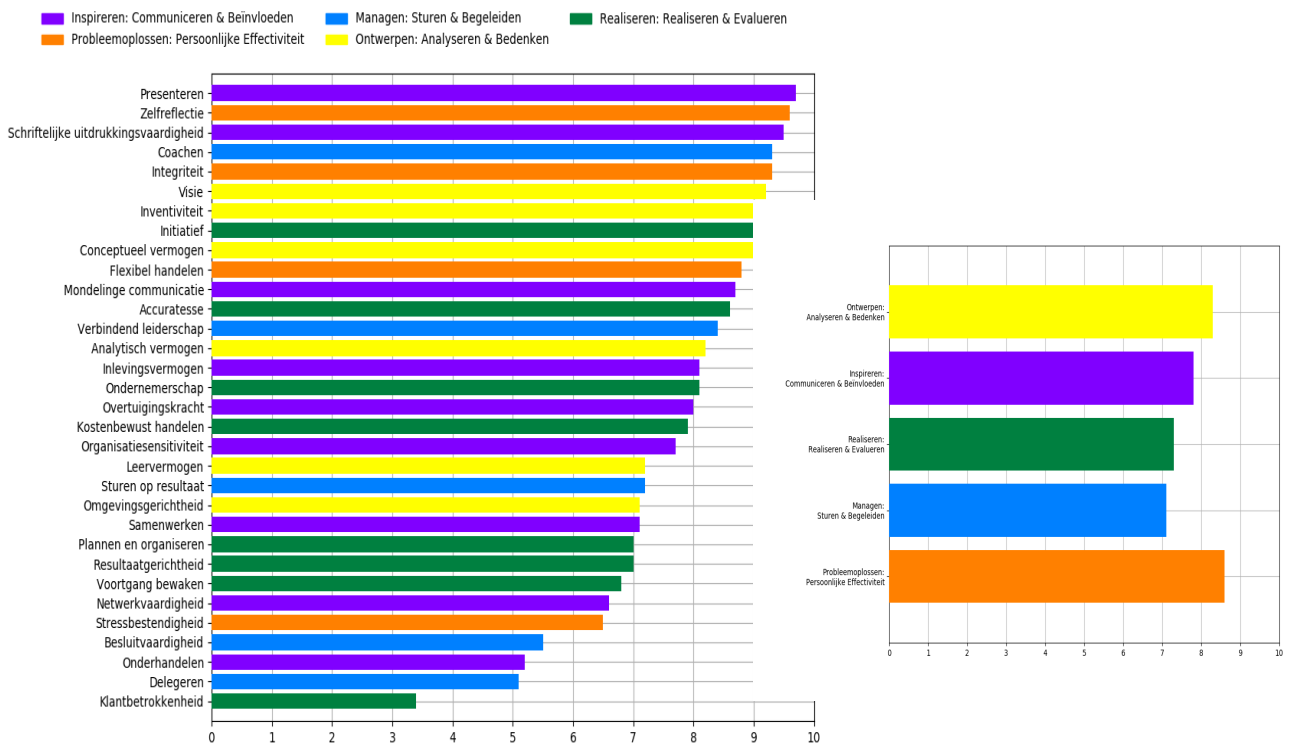

Figure 3: Example of a chart generated by the LMW system, showing the competence profile and cluster scores, reported to the individual student

Pilots with *Learning My Way* instruments

Over the last few years, instruments included in *Learning My Way* have been tested in pilots within a diversity of contexts.

In 2017:

- Leiden University – Psychology (bachelor's Year 2) course *Perspectief op Carrière Planning* (NL) and *Perspective on Career Planning* (ENG): N=approx.700 (PoCP Module II).
- Leiden University – Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences *Skills Academy* extracurricular course (ENG, bachelor's Years 2 and 3, and master's) N=approx.40.

In 2018:

- Haagse Scholen – Samen10+ (The Hague Schools – Samen10+) track for head teachers of schools working within this 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 – Cultural Anthropology *Personal & Professional Impact (PPI)* 5EC elective (bachelor's) course (ENG, bachelor's Years 2 and 3, and master's) N=approx.35.
- Leiden University – Honours College Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences. Course: *Personal & Professional Development* (PPD: NL and ENG) as part of the 2EC coaching track; bachelor's Years 1 and 2; N=approx.150.
- Leiden University – Law & Criminology *Learning My Way* (LMW stand-alone) will in future be linked to study advice and career development. Learning track with course certification, offered in Law and Criminology bachelor's (Years 2 and 3) and master's programmes (Pilot, N =approx.85).

(Photos: Taco van Erb)

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

What do students think of it?

The LMW interventions are closely monitored; one source is that soon after each seminar students complete a so-called *Reflection Point* in the Online Integration assessment. Here they report both quantitatively and in open statements on what they found valuable in the seminar and the various instruments. The students' evaluations of the seminars and their preparation are usually highly positive (on average more than 4 on a scale up to 5), with an especially high score given for relevance (usually around 4.5 on average). More information about evaluation can be supplied on request.

Future of *Learning My Way*

We hope that in the future *Learning My Way* will be widely used in higher education in both research universities and universities of applied sciences, and in secondary education. Leiden University recently gave €10,000 as an incentive to develop the learning analytics component, and there is also hope of being awarded an NRO Comenius Senior Fellowship 2019 for educational innovation.

A multiyear implementation and (PhD) research project is also currently in preparation, with scientific longitudinal research on the effects and efficacy of LMW interventions. We hope that student wellbeing will increase as a result of intrinsically motivated and relaxed (study) track choices, where students use the study programme more consciously for their own development towards a future profession.

If we receive the Comenius Fellowship, we will start a 2.5-year track to further develop the matching of students with their envisaged professional profile. The ultimate goal is for *Learning My Way* to be embedded in the basic curricula of as many study programmes as possible in universities (both research and applied sciences) in the Netherlands and beyond. An online *Learning My Way* workbook (Dutch and English) is being prepared at the moment. The first draft of this will be put into practice in educational programmes at the beginning of 2019.
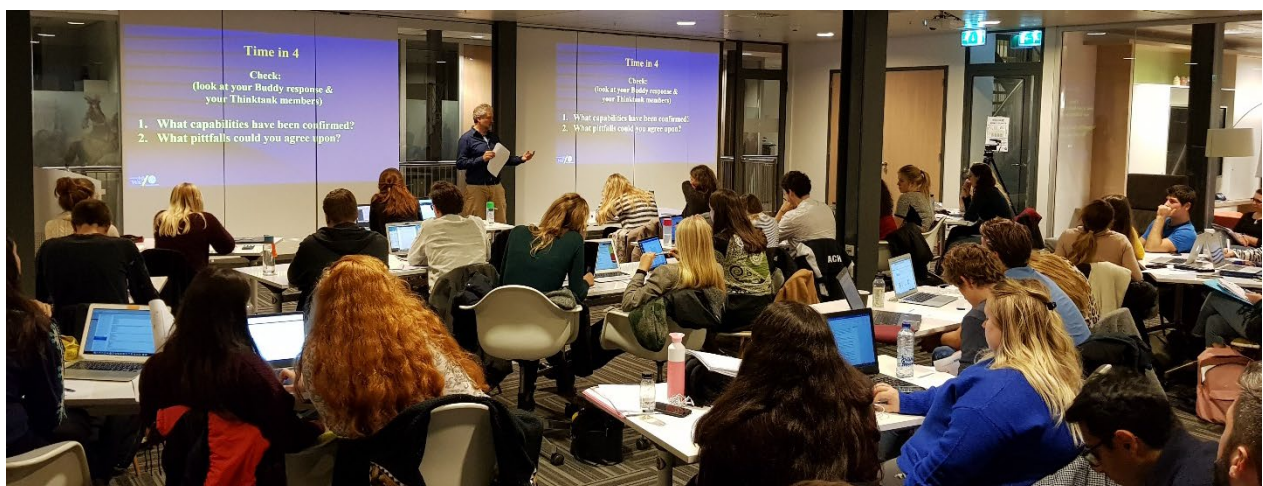

Figure 5: Example of a Time-in during Seminar II, international students Honours College, November 2018. Individual moment for self-reflection on the basis of an earlier buddy interview (viewed online). (Photo: Justin Sijtsma)

Relevant literature

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