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4. Negotiating the university environment: How first year students learn about university processes

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to make sense of the literature about how new university students develop an understanding of those university processes that are essential to their academic success. Whereas traditionally there has been a tendency to regard students as deficient if they had transition difficulties, such an approach fails to recognise the complexity of the process and the role of habitus, as explored by Bourdieu (1993), in rendering this task even more difficult for some students. The literature highlights the need for further research. We suggest the need to do so with regard to the complexity of students' experiences and the need to better appreciate the role of emotional or affective influences to that end. We also suggest that Bourdieu's concepts, especially those concerning habitus, would provide a sound foundation for the suggested research.
Keywords: Tertiary Education, First Year Experience, Bourdieu

INTRODUCTION

As university teachers, whose responsibilities have included teaching first year social work students and coordination of degree programs, part of our working lives involves responding to situations associated with the transition to being a university student. Most obviously this includes steering students in the right direction as they attempt to negotiate the myriad of academic, administrative and support systems which aim to assist them realise the goal of graduating with a recognised qualification. Nevertheless, it can be risky to assume that when students seek advice they know the range of issues which they are expected to be informed about. For students in their first year, in addition to gaining academic knowledge in their chosen disciplines, they are expected to master information about university admissions and enrolment processes, fees, timetables and being allocated to tutorials and assessment processes including how examinations are organised (Grenfell 2009). Even when there are opportunities for universities to streamline information and processes to make it easier for students to master the environment, these may not be realised (Trotter and Cove 2005).

The context within which students initially engage with higher education is changing, with the process of becoming a university student being increasingly more complex and with greater potential to be problematic. At times, other members of the university may bring individual students to our attention if they have particular concerns. On a systemic level, we may also be required to resource or contribute to university initiatives to orient new students and increase retention rates, or we may find ourselves responding to queries from university administrators about retention rates. However, irrespective of the circumstances in which we are required to address issues of transition, the needs for transitional support have grown in number and complexity. This has, in part, been driven by the transformation of higher education into part of the mass education system, and consequential diversification of the characteristics, aspirations, strengths and needs of students (Smith 2007).

This paper emerges from our attempt to make sense of the literature about how new university students develop an understanding of those university processes that are essential to their academic success, or in other words how they learn to navigate their way through the university systems. From our interactions with social work students, we are aware that our students have lives which are varied and complex with many competing demands, such as juggling study and employment demands. While there has been considerable interest in managing educational transitions (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes 2009), a number of recent articles have noted a lack of material focussing on students’ experiences of becoming university students (Kennedy et al. 2008; Rayle and Chung 2007; Smith and Zhang 2009). Although there is a strong tradition of writing about issues pertaining to higher education within social work, much of this writing about student’s experiences of becoming a student is emerging from other disciplines, but highly pertinent for social work educators.

THE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE OF NAVIGATION

There is a growing emphasis in Australian universities on the importance of the first year experience, and in particular how we might engage with first year students (Krause et al. 2005). This has particularly been the case as higher education has been transformed from an elite to a mass education model and subject to greater funding restrictions and competition. Universities now attract a much more diverse cohort of students (Gale and Trantner 2011).

Considerable efforts have been devoted to developing pedagogical processes which meet the needs of these new university students (Macken 2009), as well as programs to orient new students to universities along with ongoing provision of support to retain them (Burnett 2009). However, while such programs routinely report high degrees of effectiveness, there tends to remain a significant minority of first year students who remain unaware of key university processes and of staff in key roles who could assist them in their transition to university (Burnett 2009).
Until relatively recently, the focus of writing about becoming a university student has tended to be concerned with problems rather than how students have succeeded in navigating this transition. The literature has tended to assume a certain level of competence in new students, such that those seeking assistance were treated as exceptional. In those discussions, typically students were depicted as deficient (Lawrence 2002), lacking in the necessary skills (Smith 2002, 2004; Winterson and Russ 2009) or confidence (Burland and Pitts 2007), rather than a recognition of the complexity of university structures and systems with which they are expected to become familiar in a very short space of time. As such, the process of transition is treated as temporary and readily completed by the successful student.

Instead of focusing on difficulties, there is a growing body of work which is focusing on students accounts of how they have managed the transition to becoming a university student (Beard, Clegg and Smith 2007; Christie et al. 2008; Clegg, Bradley and Smith 2006; Jacklin and Le Riche 2009; Palmer, O’Kane and Owens 2009; Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003). This literature appears to better capture the range of external or informal supports drawn on by students and to better position the transition as part of a broader configuration of social relations. It also provides better recognition of the students’ agency and ability and has the potential to promote a far more neutral approach, or in other words one that does not assume a deficiency within the student. Furthermore, it recognises that the process of engaging with learning and with university life is not linear, and may involve set-backs and ‘unbecoming’ over time (Ecclestone et al. 2009, p. 7). However, one potential weakness of this approach is a possible exaggeration of the autonomy of the student, without regard to broader structural influences (Clegg et al. 2006).

Perhaps the most promising approach to considering how students navigate their way into university is the work of a number of authors who have drawn on Bourdieu’s (1993) concept of ‘habitus’. That is:

... the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups... a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories (Thomas 2002, p. 430).

Different social milieus will exhibit different habitus, with that difference reflected in participants’ experience of moving between them varying from unconscious and comfortable, to consciously uncomfortable, as Bourdieu put it, a ‘fish out of water’ (Thomas 2002, p. 431; see also Lehmann 2007, p. 101).

These different habitus can focus on a range of arenas, including peers or friends, family, gender and class. They can also, as Reay et al. (2001) emphasised, focus on particular institutions, such as secondary schools and universities. In terms of transition to higher education, at schools in wealthier areas there may be widespread encouragement of the student body to apply for a place at an elite university as a site of like habitus, whereas schools in poor areas may provide little encouragement even for its brightest students to do so, reflecting, in part, the differences in habitus and relevant ‘capital’ (Reay, David and Ball 2001). Students who then enrol at an institution with a significantly different habitus to that of, for example, their family or secondary school, are then at risk of not completing their course (Lehmann 2007; Thomas 2002). Equally this applies to adults who may have left school early and return to studies much later in life (Crossan et al. 2003; Gallacher et al. 2002). Conversely those who do succeed, may do so only by rejecting the cultural values – the habitus - of their families and communities of origin (Bland 2002).

TRANSITION FROM WHERE?

The notion of transition assumes that a student has been somewhere else prior to commencing at university, and it is not unexpected that much of this literature pertains to the transition from school to university. A key theme in this literature is the difficulty experienced by many students in losing the familiar, supportive structure of secondary school. The sheer size of the university results in many students experiencing ‘feeling lost’ (Christie et al. 2008; Hartmann 2001; Jackson 2003), particularly when combined with a dramatic reduction in contact hours (Ballinger 2003;
Issues of transition occur, even for students whose university studies are close in content to their final school year studies. Those students are required to tackle tasks in a much shorter time period than when at school and are increasingly expected to be 'independent' rather than 'dependent' learners. Furthermore, what university teachers and first year students regard as appropriate levels of direction and support often involve a much greater burden than those students expected (Smith and Hopkins 2005). In light of these various factors, it is unsurprising that the transition to university for school leavers leaves them feeling lost and has been described in terms of a 'shock' (Christie et al. 2008; Wilcox, Winn and Fryvic-Gauld 2005), being 'disoriented' (Ballinger 2003), and 'struggle' (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003).

To ease the transition into university, a number of writers have suggested the need for closer co-ordination between universities and schools (eg Ballinger 2003; Marland 2003; Smith 2002; Winterson and Russ 2009). While this may not always be feasible, it is worth noting that teachers of final year school students may be providing students with unrealistic expectations as to the level of support they will receive at university (Smith and Hopkins 2005). However, it cannot be assumed that new university students had a positive experience in secondary school. For some students, the repetition of school characteristics by universities may only reinforce previous negative experiences and adversely affect their transition (Crossan et al. 2003).

Although it has been suggested that students coming straight from school may have greater support needs than other students commencing university (Bartram 2008), a recent Scottish study found that for first time university students, even those who had attended some other form of post-school studies, the transition to university was daunting. In particular, the scale of the university campus, being in classes with hundreds of other students and even the enormity of the library were a shock for new students. As a result, students felt that the university was a large, and at times, off-putting environment; the academic demands made of them were higher than they had anticipated; and they found it difficult to manage the competing demands of university study, home and family, and in many instances, paid employment. (Cree et al. 2009, p. 891)

Difficulties negotiating the transition to study have also been reported among postgraduate students, particularly those returning to study after many years absence. Their new study environment, especially if becoming a postgraduate student or commencing studies in a different field, may be very different from what they experienced in their previous studies, especially if this was many years ago. Describing a phenomenon which they have labelled ‘learning shock’, Griffiths, Winstanley and Gabriel have commented that:

Many adult students return to an environment that they believe they know from earlier experiences; for many of them, their years as undergraduates may mark some of the happiest of their lives. Returning to education after many years can lead to feelings of confusion, disappointment and disbelief. Far from being a familiar environment, the university or the business school is experienced as an environment at odds with the earlier images, idealized or not, resulting in confusion and possible disappointment. (Griffiths et al., 2005, p. 278)

Some of the factors which were associated with these feelings included being exposed to different methods of learning, particularly those which involved a move away from teacher as expert who imparts knowledge to teacher as facilitator of student learning experiences. Another difficulty was for students who had previously studied in courses where there were right and wrong answers, but were now required to learn processes rather than facts (Griffiths et al., 2005).

Abbott-Chapman and Edward’s (1999) claim that diversity is now mainstream is noteworthy here and suggests that the experience of mature-age students is increasingly becoming the norm of student experience, rather than an exception (Clegg et al. 2006; Crossan et al. 2003). The literature concerning mature age students reports less engagement with university processes outside of direct learning activities.
given other, conflicting demands, such as paid work and personal relationships (in particular, caring responsibilities). The literature also highlights these students' difficulties in accessing access student support services which have been designed to service the needs of students who have entered the university as school leavers (Tones et al. 2009).

A CONFIGURATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

One key influence identified in the literature is the nature of the student's relationships. There is an extensive literature concerning the significance of inter-personal relationships in the process of becoming a university student. This includes relationships with university staff, relationships with other students, and the influence of broader structural relationships, such as class and gender. Much of this work can be traced back to the ideas of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987), who drew on Durkheim's theory of suicide to suggest that 'the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and academic and social systems of the college' (Tinto 1975, p. 94). Tinto drew on economic theory in presenting individual students as making decisions to drop out on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. Contrary to the recent emphasis on affect, Tinto's model was much more that of the rational actor from classical economic (and utilitarian) theory. That actor knew his preferences and was able to confidently calculate the advantages and disadvantages of his options. When applied to students in the midst of transition, it suggests a degree of confidence and security that may well be absent, as well as access to relevant information and the ability to assess it. Given that so many students report their experience in the more emotive, uncertain terms of 'feeling lost', their treatment as the mature, secure rational actor of economic theory is difficult to accept.

More recent authors in a similar vein have stressed the importance of 'belonging' (Pittman and Richmond 2008; Read et al. 2003; Yorke 2004) and 'mattering' (Rayle and Chung 2007). Although these may be important for all students, this may be particularly so for students who don't conform to traditional notions of who is a university student (at least in their chosen area of studies) due to their gender (Christie et al. 2008, Jackson 2003), class (Christie et al. 2008; Crossan et al. 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Read et al. 2003; Raye, Ball and David 2002), ethnicity (Hurtz and Martin, 2007, Read et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2002), or rural background (Polesel 2009). Others with particular needs or issues may include students who are the first in their family to attend university (Collier and Morgan 2008; Lehmann 2007), parents (Reay et al. 2002) and international students (Bartram 2008, Ramsay, Jones and Barker 2006; Skyrme 2007).

It is not surprising that commencing students often feel alienated by the university experience. In a study of first year students in Australian universities, one-third were not confident that at least one member of the teaching staff knew them by name (Krause et al. 2005). Relationships with teaching staff have been associated with positive effects on self-reported student learning, student retention and course completion (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). It has also been suggested that students who are known to their teachers are less likely to cheat in their assessment tasks (McKeachie 2002). It is nevertheless recognised that for some students, academic staff are perceived as not supportive or unapproachable (Clegg et al. 2006). Hence, the importance of social relationships with other students has also been stressed by several authors (eg Bead et al. 2007; Christie, Munro and Wager 2005; Crossan et al. 2003; Pittman and Richmond 2008; Ramsay et al. 2006; Rayle and Chung 2007). However, peer relations can be problematic for students who feel intimidated by the perceived talent of other students in their classes (Burland and Pits 2007).

It has been suggested that one key contribution which higher education institutions can make is the provision of appropriate spaces to facilitate the development and participation in social networks such as accommodation (Wilcox et al. 2005) and 'appropriate social facilities' such as students' union bars (Thomas 2002). Undoubtedly many students benefit from such initiatives. However, focusing primarily on the internal dynamics of the university campus, rather than situating the campus within the diverse dynamics of students' lives may fail to recognise the influence of other relationships on students' lives.
It neglects, for example, the fact that financial concerns often result in students spending more time in paid work than on campus (Abbott-Chapman and Edwards 1999; Christie et al. 2005; Leathwood and O’Connell 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Thomas 2002). Although involvement in paid work doesn’t necessarily impact on students’ transition to university (Brinkworth et al. 2009), many students seem to engage with university processes on a selective or strategic basis, and with a greater focus upon those seen to be most directly related to their studies and reduced participation in other social activities:

… changing conditions of students’ lives make more difficult institutional ‘socialisation’ into the student’s role, the creation of student identity and the development of a rich and vibrant campus life. The pursuit of university study is becoming more and more solitary, and less a group activity of a ‘community of learners’… More students are becoming ‘disengaged’ as pressures of employment, financial problems, family and community commitments take their toll, especially for the mature aged, and so becoming a student becomes more and more ‘a job of work’ (Abbott-Chapman and Edwards 1999, p. 6).

Consequently, any assumptions that students learn about a range of key university processes and support mechanisms through their relationships with other students and their participation in activities outside of the teaching spaces may need to be reconsidered.

THE DIGITAL ERA

Developments in online and cloud learning, supported by learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle or Desire2Learn, are increasingly being heralded by universities for their potential to create virtual learning communities which students can access 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is now over a decade since Marc Prensky (2001) coined the term ‘Digital Natives’ to refer to a generation who had spent their lives surrounded by technological tools and gadgets, and for whom he argued, related best to the new ways of thinking and doing enabled by such technologies. Prensky argued that rather than ‘Digital Native’ students having to adapt to the approaches of their less technologically minded teachers (known as ‘Digital Immigrants’), the educational system should be adapting to them. Given that many universities are now providing podcasts of lectures and a range of other learning materials online, to varying extents Prensky’s vision is being realised.

Notwithstanding the many benefits of the digital era for learning, an unfortunate possible consequence may be a belief that for many students personal relationships with staff and other students in the university are no longer essential. Furthermore, it is important not to confuse student comfort with information technology with competence, particularly in the learning environment (Blakeslee, Owens and Dixon 2001; Hartmann 2001; Kennedy et al. 2008). Access to, and use of, new information technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, does not directly transfer to the use of other forms or use of specialist technologies in the educational setting such as bibliographic databases which provide information about ‘unstructured’ resources such as books and journal articles (Hartmann 2001). Moreover, among first year university students, there is a significant proportion of who could not be classed as ‘Digital Natives’ (Kennedy et al. 2008) and the extent to which being a ‘digital native’ facilitates or hinders transition into being a university student is unknown.

DISCUSSION

The insistence by Tinto and his successors that developing relationships within the university is critical for student retention is no doubt correct. However, how those relationships have been identified and supported appears to have involved some important limitations. These have included a tendency to focus upon the students’ personal characteristics, the assumption of a relatively stable and rational self (in the modern, economic sense), a failure to promote any critique of the institution itself and not directly engaging with the students’ own experience (Yorke 2004). Furthermore, for some students making a decision to withdraw from their studies may be a positive and appropriate choice (Brunsden et al. 2000).

As university teachers, it is important to acknowledge the sheer complexity of the organisation in which students are expected to become au fait within their first semester of study. Universities are very different
to the institutions many current teachers enrolled in as undergraduates. The strategies and skills which enabled the successful transition to being university students in the past may not be available or what is required by contemporary students (Cleethorpe 2003). The context within which students initially engage with higher education is changing, with the potential of making that transition more complex and problematic. The transformation of higher education into part of the mass education system, and consequential diversification of the characteristics, aspirations, strengths and needs of students appears to have dramatically increased and complicated demands for transitional support. To consider one group of students, the emphasis upon examination performance within secondary schools and, with it, the promotion of dependent learning styles, has been argued to fail to prepare students for the more independent approach to learning demanded within higher education. The examination focus in secondary education and, with it, limited preparation for independent learning, seems, however, likely to be amplified by the movement towards assessment of secondary schools' performance and the production of 'league tables'. The capacity of universities to adequately respond to these heightened transitional demands maybe increasingly limited by parallel developments in higher education.

The emphasis upon assessing the performance of educational institutions is also applicable to universities, particularly in terms of student retention. Within the context of long-constrained/reduced funding, and consequently heightened workloads for both teaching and administrative staff, the timely and effective support of the transition of first year students to higher education is becoming increasingly difficult. The pressure to make savings and efficiencies in transition supports by providing standardized services seems to be increasing at the very time when demands for greater diversity and responsiveness are growing.

These combined pressures heighten the risk of poor student retention. The failure to provide adequate, appropriate transition supports also heightens the risk of replicating in greater detail the oppressive trends of neo-liberal policies within universities. Neo-liberal thought focuses on the individual with little regard to the context in which that individual operates. It assumes the hardy independence and consistent rationality of classical economic theory and provides little or no recognition of the relationships all people rely on in order to successfully act in the world (Jarmozik 2009). Neo-liberal theory takes no account of the inequalities and disadvantages with which so many engage in the world, and has no conception of the influence of those relations, and of emotions, on a person's capacity to act. Managerialist thought, neo-liberalism's accompanying approach to organisational practice, tends to ignore these obstacles and burdens as well, and fails to recognise the additional resources required to adequately address them. Some writers have expressed the concern that a successful transition to university (may require the compliant student to adopt a prescribed identity) will become a question of compliance or of adopting a prescribed identity (Bland 2002; Smith 2007; Thomas 2002) - that is, that of the 'traditional' student. Those students, however, tend to be those enjoying relative cultural and practical advantages, both making for a smoother initial transition to university and better positioning them to confidently engage with the system. There is the heightened risk of failure for the students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, and for universities influenced by neo-liberal/managerialist thought to locate the cause of these failures in those students rather than the institution itself. With this, there is the consequential risk of lower retention rates for the non-traditional universities, given their greater emphasis upon, and success in, attracting 'non-traditional' students (see Smith 2007), and hence greater risk of reduced funding for those institutions and consequently a reduced capacity to fund appropriate transition support mechanisms.

NECESSARY RESEARCH
Supporting the first year transition is not simply a matter of service provision by universities (Palmer et al. 2009). In the same way that the transition within lecture halls and tutorials demands a more student-centred approach, the transition outside those formal spheres demands a better comprehension of the manner in which students approach and construct the transition. Without such an appreciation of the students' perspective, it is difficult to be confident that any transition support will be successful,
A student-centred consideration of the transition experience is also driven by other key changes in the higher education environment. Further study, at least for school leavers, is no longer the prolongation of 'growing up', or in other words, a further stage in the preparation for adult life. The imposition of fees and reduction of other financial supports have promoted a greater dependence upon paid employment, and to have promoted a more limited, more instrumentalist approach to study by school leavers which is much more akin with the literature on 'non-traditional', ie non-school leaver, entrants to university (Christie et al. 2005).

In this changing environment, understanding how students interact with the university, and how they perceive and use support services, is vital. Moreover, the complexity and fragmentation of students' lives requires an understanding that is not limited to their formal learning activities, nor the university's own services and processes. It requires a better understanding of how the students themselves navigate their lives: in particular, how they engage with the range of academic, administrative and support processes within the university and what drives, helps and hinders those interactions, including those relationships ordinarily considered to be external to it, such as employment. Further research to secure that better understanding will need to engage with issues such as the following.

- The complexity and multiple dimensions of interaction between students and support services. This would include locations, hours of operation and cost.
- The tensions involved in the transition, and their ongoing and complex nature, including those arising from the competing demands of students' varied and changing relationships/identities.
- Recognising the character of the transition, and of engagement of supports, as emotional and cultural, and not just as cognitive.
- Specific issues in transition for social work students.

This range of factors also needs to be included in research concerning transitions within university study, ie from new student to later year student to graduate (Wilcockson, Correr and Joy, 2011).

Bourdieu's (1993) concept of 'habitus', and related concepts of 'financial', 'cultural' and 'social capital', appear to be particularly promising concepts with which to conduct this research. These concepts promote a better recognition of the various spheres in which students are engaged and of the manner in which those habituses provide 'capital' that may – or may not - support a successful transition to university. Bourdieu's framework has the capacity to both recognise the weight and difficulties of those influences, as well as the students' own agency. As a framework for research, it has the capacity to allow a better comprehension of how the difficulties faced by 'non-traditional' students may well now reflect the increasingly complex lives of most contemporary students.

While further research on the process of becoming a university student is undoubtedly required, our encounters with new university students cannot be put on hold pending the outcomes of such research. It is likely that such encounters will continue to variously intrigue, surprise and confound us as we contemplate the implications of such interactions for us as university teachers. Hopefully, they will also challenge any inclinations we might have to believe we fully understand the process of becoming a university student and remain open to furthering our understanding of this very complex process.

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