

Supporting transition into higher education through social affordances: The Pod experience

Sharn Donnison and Jennifer Masters, Faculty of Education, La Trobe University

We know that social engagement is critical for first year transition but often initiatives to promote social connectivity are cursory and peripheral to academic engagement. This paper is concerned with how to best structure students' social interactions as a bridge to their academic learning. The paper reports on a La Trobe University, Faculty of Education initiative to support first year students' transition into first and subsequent years of their degree using structured social interventions called 'Pods'. We present and discuss two years of data on the effectiveness of classroom-based Pods and argue that they are an effective transition strategy that enables social, academic, and institutional engagement. We also argue that Pods are best implemented for first semester, only, and that it is crucial that systematic and explicit scaffolding is undertaken during that first semester to prepare students to be independent and autonomous learners.

Introduction

This paper reports on the second phase of a Faculty of Education based initiative to support students in their first year of higher education at Bendigo campus, La Trobe University and to scaffold their transition and initial progression through the remainder of their degree. This initiative included structural and sustained intervention at the classroom level to foster social connectedness as a bridge to academic learning. Called "Pods", these structured groups were integral to the redesign of the Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Physical and Health Education programs. Data on the effectiveness of this arrangement as a transition and progression strategy have been collected over the past two years. This paper reports on data collected in 2009 after changes were made to how Pods were implemented in 2008. These changes were informed by concerns for the students' progression beyond first year and about how best to transition them into their second year.

Background to the study

This paper sits within the First Year in Higher Education literature and especially within that body of literature that recognises social support as integral to first year transition (Tinto, 1993). In this paper we adopt Gibson's (1979) conceptual use of the term affordance to refer to the range of possible actions or perceptions within an environment given the actor's capabilities. Bryson, Pajo, Ward, and Mallon (2006) explicate the concept by referring to workplaces. It is also applicable to higher education:

...workplaces [or institutions of Higher Education] can be viewed as learning spaces with differing invitational qualities that reflect diverse activities, opportunities and support for learning. For instance the workplace [institution] may afford opportunities ranging from structured or guided learning like mentoring, coaching, and questioning through to learning derived from everyday participation at work [university]. These invitational qualities or workplace affordances are thought to impact on the quality of learning experiences, learning outcomes and ultimately workplace [academic] performance. (p. 283)

In this paper we specifically focus on social affordances whereby environments can be structured to maximise potential opportunities or affordances for social interactions (Kaufman & Clement, 2007).

To situate our study, we firstly examine some of the First Year in Higher Education literature with a particular focus on strategies targeted at enabling social affordance. The First Year in Higher Education corpus is extensive and not surprisingly so, as it has been a research focus and concern since the 1950s (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Over the past decade there has been renewed interest in the first year experience. Arguably, this has been driven by economic imperatives concerned with the cost of failing to retain and transition future graduates and recognition of the needs of an increasingly diverse first year student population (Huntley & Donovan, 2009; Harvey et al., 2006). Given the depth and breadth of the literature, it can be a daunting task to identify relevant research and literature in specific areas of transition and retention. To address this challenge there have been numerous endeavours to collate, organise, and review the First Year in Higher Education research and institutional materials in an effort to make them more accessible and useful for those working with first year students (e.g. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Harvey et al., 2006).

These massive undertakings identify recurrent themes and foci. For example Harvey et al. (2006) examined over 900 documents, research papers, and literature reviews to identify four common areas of research. These were academic performance and retention, factors impacting on academic performance and retention, learning and teaching, and support for first year. It is the fourth area of support that is particularly appropriate to this study.

The range of support for first year students is wide-ranging and includes strategies such as the traditional orientation period at the commencement of the student's first year, new students websites (e.g. Griffith University), personnel (often academic staff) who act as first year advisors, workshops, and classes to develop specific academic and life skill sets, student counselling, student guidance services, and student mentoring programs.

It is increasingly recognised in the literature, by tertiary institutions, and by those who work with first year students that providing opportunities for social interaction is also critical to students' successful transition and retention (Duff, Quinn, Johnston, & Lock, 2007; Krause, 2007; Tinto, 1993; Wilson, 2005-6; Wintre & Bowers, 2007). As Krause (2005, p. 7) notes, students not only need social integration and support but are, indeed, used to it and Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea (2008) suggest that a student's successful orientation and engagement is often dependent upon the social networks that they have formed (see also Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Strategies that assist students to interact with each other, develop a network of supportive friends, and become part of the social communities at their institutions are common during orientation; a critical stage in the transition process (Krause, 2005). Such measures include social functions, quests (Duff et al., 2007), meet and greet activities during information sessions (Wilson, 2005-6), retreats, and peer mentoring sessions. Sustained measures to foster social interaction are also common throughout the first semester of study, although less so throughout the entire first year, and include such initiatives as ongoing peer tutoring and mentoring (Boyd & Lintern, 2006), formalised study groups, regular social events such as

first year student barbeques, breakfasts and morning teas, and the promotion of student sporting and academic clubs and groups (Colvin & Jaffar, 2007).

The classroom is also critical to transition and persistence (Tinto, 2003) and priority is sometimes given to using classrooms as a social affordance context. Such initiatives have included the careful allocation of students into assigned tutorial groups, having smaller tutorial groups with a teaching staff member as personal tutor (Wilcox et al., 2005) and incorporating group building and social interaction activities in teaching, learning, and assessment.

The Pod concept was designed and implemented based on an understanding that environments that enable social affordances are important for transition into higher education (Harvey et al., 2006) because having access to a support network of peers helps students adjust to the demands of an often confusing tertiary discourse.

Connecting with Education: The First Year Experience

“Connecting with Education: The First Year Experience” project was first implemented in 2008. It stemmed from a periodic review of the Bachelor of Education and featured a common first year for Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Physical and Health Education students. Underpinning this project was a strategic emphasis on addressing and strengthening social support for first year students.

Prior to 2008, support for students primarily focused on academic support. Each year level in the Bachelor of Education had an assigned academic as Year Level Coordinator. This person may or may not have been involved in the teaching program for their cohort. First year support was not significantly different from support offered to other year levels and it was the individual student’s responsibility to partake of this support. While the Student Association organised social events for new students, the social/study nexus was mostly separate, with little recognition for the concept of social learning.

Learning through social interaction was a focal point in the redesign of the new program, thus the Pod concept. A Pod can be likened to a primary school class, where approximately 25 students remain in a tutorial group and complete the same classes together throughout the semester. We believed that this arrangement could potentially build strong, natural social bonds between Pod members and thus aid academic engagement and transition.

The Pods were carefully timetabled to ensure that all students had a balanced arrangement of classes that included mandatory class times and six or seven hours of “wait” time between classes where students could work collaboratively, go to the library or computer lab, or just eat, relax, or talk to friends. The Pods were implemented in the first semester of 2008 and, as midyear informal student feedback indicated their popularity, they were continued for the second semester (Masters & Donnison, 2010).

At the end of 2008, we formally collected student data on The First Year Experience using an anonymous Likert five scale survey and open response questionnaire. We also interviewed academics teaching into the program about the Pods. Masters and Donnison (2010) report more fully on this data; a brief synopsis is given here as a precursor to discussing 2009 findings.

Pods 2008

From the students' perspective the Pods were a definite success. They felt supported, developed meaningful friendships, found study partners, and were assisted with their academic learning, "*Having a Pod group was fantastic for me both socially and academically*" and "*Developing relationships with group members over the year has really excelled [sic] my learning experience*".

The academics agreed that Pods seemed to be effective in helping students develop a sense of community and collegiality. They also noticed that students' interactions with their peers were more positive and frequent, and that they visibly supported each other academically, emotionally, and through shared use of resources. In comparison to previous years, the students appeared more confident in class and less anxious about academic learning requirements.

Pods 2009

Pods were re-established in 2009. As in 2008, students were allocated to Pod groups at orientation and remained with those groups for first semester. In contrast to 2008 though, the students were advised that the Pod arrangement would end at the end of first semester. This decision was based on concerns about whether 2008's intensive support equated to the best possible outcome for the students' progression in the long term and in order to bridge transition into the second year. As the Pod experience was different between 2008 and 2009 data collected in 2009 enables a comparison across the two years and potentially informs the optimum length of time and structure for future Pods.

Method

As in 2008, an anonymous Likert Scale survey comprising 87 statements related to the course structure and individual first year subjects was administered at the end of Semester 2 in 2009. This research was covered under La Trobe University ethics' approval #HEC R037/08. The response rate to the survey was 39.2% (98 responses out of a possible 250). Students responded to five Pod related statements that were the same as 2008 except for question four which had previously read: *I was glad that Pods were kept the same for second semester, where possible*. Because Pods had been disbanded at the end of Semester 1, the new statement read: *Pods are only necessary for first semester*. The five Pod related questions are:

1. Being a member of a Pod gave me a strong social base from which to learn effectively.
2. Pod members supported each other academically.
3. I would rather choose my own timetable than be in a Pod.
4. Pods are only necessary for first semester.
5. Being a member of a Pod was beneficial to my academic success.

As in 2008, there were also open responses which resulted in significant qualitative data:

1. I would like to comment on the program structure and organisation.
2. What features would you keep the same for implementing this program in 2010?
3. What features would you change for implementing this program in 2010?

The survey and qualitative data were analysed using simple descriptive statistics (Gray, 2006) and grounded theory processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The results from the five Pod related statements are shown in Figure 1. This table compares responses to Pod statements for 2008 and 2009.

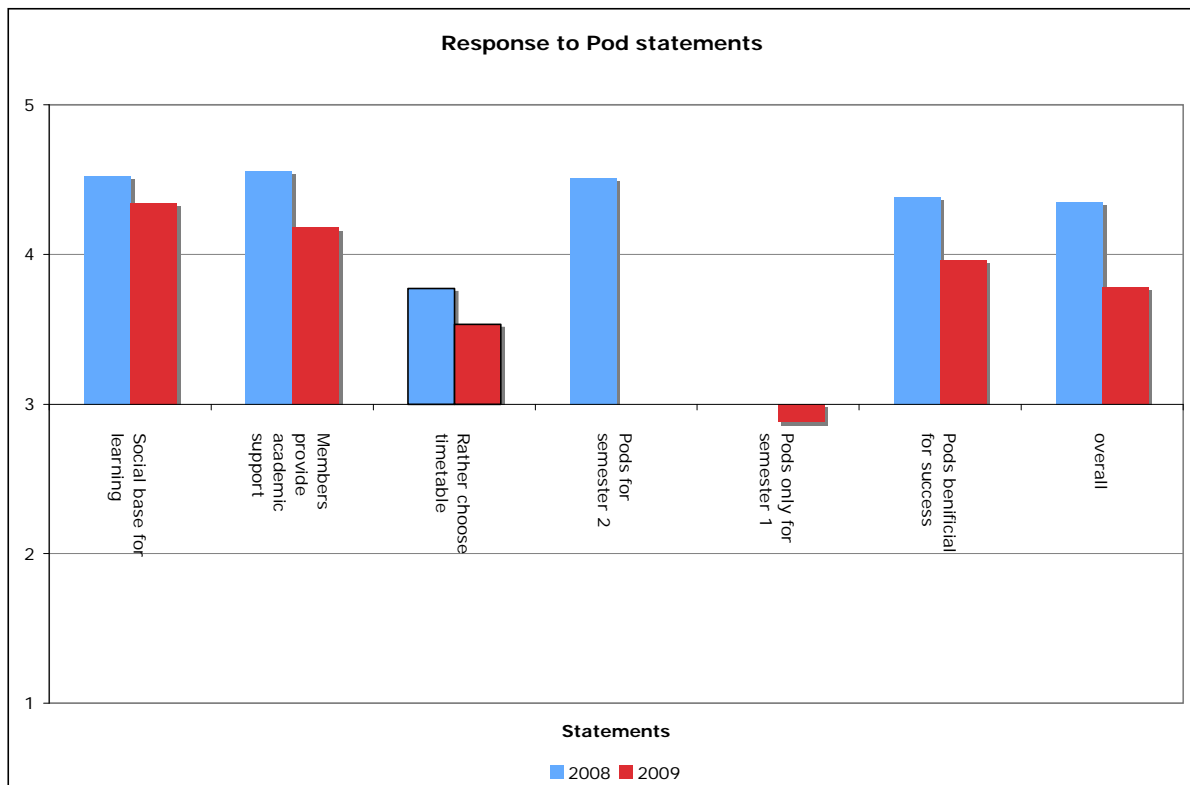


Figure 1. Responses to Pod statements 2008 and 2009

On the graph “3” represents neither agree nor disagree with the statement, while “4” is agree and “5” is strongly agree. The overall score for the Pod statements, displayed on the left hand side of the graph is the average of how the students felt about the Pods. The third item, “I would rather choose my own timetable than be in a Pod” is outlined in black because this statement was framed in a negative context. The result displayed here has been inverted, i.e. the more students disagree with this statement, the higher we represent the result in this graph.

The graph indicates that students in 2009, while still positive about Pods, were slightly less enthusiastic than the students in 2008. This may have been simply because the cohorts were different, the students in 2009 were less dependent on the Pod structure, or the group dynamics were a little less effective. It may also relate to the timing of the survey. Students had been working in a non-Pod structure for eight weeks and may have recognised that it was OK to study with different groups. In general though, the students from 2009 were supportive of Pods and recognised that social networking was important for their learning and attributed academic success to the Pod arrangement.

Perhaps the most significant item is the students' response to the statement that discussed Pods in both semesters and then only in one. In 2008, the response to the statement "*I was glad that Pods were kept the same for second semester, where possible*" rated 4.51, suggesting that the students were very passionate about maintaining their social group. In 2009, even though we advised the students that Pods were a transition arrangement for first semester only we still expected an adverse reaction to discontinuation of the Pods. As it was, the response to the statement "*Pods are only necessary for first semester*" was fairly ambivalent, with a response rate of 2.88, slightly below "neither agree nor disagree". It seems that the first year students had mixed feelings about maintaining Pods in second semester and the open response feedback provided some interesting information about their experiences.

Open response feedback

Students were at liberty to comment on the Pods through the open response questions on the administered survey. 58 of 153 (38%) responses related to the Pods and of these comments only four specifically expressed dissatisfaction with the Pod arrangement. The remaining 54 comments were positive about the Pods. The following themes are evident in the data: duration and organisation; Pods and social engagement; Pods and academic engagement; and Pods and institutional engagement.

Duration and organisation

The majority of written feedback indicated that Pods should have continued throughout the year. Of the 25 statements that mentioned Pod duration, 21 or 84% preferred two semesters.

Leave the Pod system in place for the whole 1st year. It is hard enough changing lecturers for 2nd semester but not knowing anyone in a group based semester?

. . . perhaps if Pods existed for first years all year and then Year 2 changed things around. But at least this gives students a chance to get on their feet comfortably.

This last comment alludes to the relationship between Pods and institutional engagement. This is discussed further in this section. One student thought that Pods were so effective that they should be in place for subsequent years, "*Pods were the best...bring them back for all years!*" while others thought that while Pods should be year long, students should be allocated to a different Pod at the end of Semester 1.

Have Pods all year but have a different Pod in 2nd semester to the first so we still get to meet more people.

A few students preferred the one semester Pod arrangement. The following comment shows some of the ambivalence noted in the quantitative data.

Having the Pods were really good 1st semester and would have been good to have them in the 2nd semester, but at the same time it was good being able to pick your own tutes and meet more people.

Pods and social engagement

The students noted that Pods were a valuable context for facilitating friendships and forging social networks. This is evident in the following two comments. The second comment hints at the anxiety students experience about forming new friendships in their first year.

Supporting transition into higher education through social affordances: The Pod experience. Refereed paper

The use of a Pod was a great idea in first semester as I came to uni with only a few social connections. Being in the Pod forced me to meet new people who I still keep in contact with despite having different classes now.

I liked being in a Pod for the year because you get to know who is in your course. You get to know them better and being in the same class all year is beneficial so you don't have to get to know a whole new class again.

For some students, the social networking aspect of the Pod was so important that they attempted to reform their Pod in Semester 2, "*The Pod system was great! We tried to stick together in second semester*". Students also recognised that Pods were beneficial to their academic learning.

Pods and academic engagement

The following comments demonstrate that the students think that Pods are invaluable for their academic success. It is evident in the first comment that Pods helped students achieve learning objectives. These two comments also highlight the nexus between social learning and academic learning.

I think Pods should be used for the full first year due to how I felt they assisted me in my learning as I had members of a Pod that I knew to lean on and organise group assessment.

. . . if we had been kept in our Pods, we could have leaned on each other for support more.

Finally, many comments highlighted the important role Pods played in helping students transition through the first semester.

Pods and institutional engagement

In the following, transition into the discourses of the university is expressed as settling in, getting on one's feet, and managing and learning university routines. The use of the word "comfortably" is interesting in the first two comments.

I believe the Pod structure . . . helped me to create friendships and to settle in comfortably into uni life and study.

[Pods]. . . give students a chance to get on their feet comfortably.

Having our Pods already organised in first semester made it a lot easier to manage. . . it was hard to forget where you had to be or who you were with.

Being in a Pod helped me . . . learn the routine/lay-out of uni with a few familiar faces.

It is evident that the Pods enable social affordances, assists students academically and helps them adapt "comfortably" to institutional discourses. The data indicates that the students also recognise that their learning is facilitated and supported through their social groups. While the quantitative data indicates that the students are ambivalent about having a two semester Pod arrangement, the open response data shows that some students feel strongly that Pods are needed for both semesters. We accept that the Pod is a popular construct, however we consider that a one semester Pod arrangement is most

likely to help students adapt to second year and is therefore beneficial for the students' progress in the long term.

Discussion

Successful first year transition has become synonymous with engagement. Duff et al. (2007, p. 3) argue that successful transition is about students experiencing quality engagement at three concomitant and inseparable levels: engagement with peers, academic studies, and the institution. Two years of data have confirmed that Pods are a successful structural intervention. They provide a supportive context and culture that assists students to form meaningful and productive social networks that facilitates their academic learning. That is, the Pods affords the context where social learning bridges academic learning. This is evident in the data where students report that Pods have enabled their study and learning networks in that they use the social affordances to understand the demands of their academic work and to complete their assignments. The qualitative data also informs us that the students value Pods as a stepping stone into institutional discourses. The Pods provided a predictable and low risk environment where the students could “comfortably” settle into and begin to negotiate the university system.

The literature says that the first weeks and, indeed, year of a students' academic life is critical for their persistence to graduation (Tinto, 1993). The psychosocial, academic, and institutional demands on the student, especially non-traditional students, are significant. These demands are such that the first year student not only has to negotiate and form new friendships, understand the academic requirements of their course, become literate with often novel technologies, but also understand and enact the various institutional discourses that are required for success. These are for example, being able to orient themselves around the university, knowing how to behave and learn in lectures and seminars, knowing who or where to go to for administrative and academic assistance, knowing how to choose and enrol into subjects, and how to plan, access and read their timetables. That is, they need to act and speak the language of the institution.

In 2008, the students were in many respects cocooned in terms of having to negotiate some of these institutional discourses. Their subjects were preselected, their enrolment and year long timetables were planned and arranged for them, their study/ life balance predetermined, and their friends, effectively, preselected. Our original intention was, not only that the Pods would facilitate academic learning through social interaction, but that they would provide a model of how students might structure their future timetables based on realistic decisions about workloads, contact hours and study/life balance. Our experience working with first year students has shown us that they often choose timetables based on maximising ‘free time’, cramming classes into as few days as possible which ultimately increase their stress levels. However, it became evident towards the middle of 2008 that our Pod timetable modelling had not been sufficient to prepare them for enrolment into their second year of study. The timing of the online enrolment compounded the problem. Student feedback highlighted that transition from first year to second year had been a significant issue for them. In fact, they demonstrated typical “new student” anxieties around making new friendships, choosing and enrolling into subjects, and planning and organising their timetable.

Measures taken in 2009 were in response to this feedback and included a process of scaffolding the students for their transition to second year. This involved advising them early

in first semester that they would be responsible for their own enrolment and timetables in second semester, explaining how their current timetable modelled a balanced study/life timetable, and demonstrating how to electronically enrol into second semester subjects. Their second year of the program is complicated in that students need to choose pathways and electives, so demonstrating enrolment for second semester where subjects are still predetermined facilitated students' understanding of the process. The results from 2009 suggest that these scaffolding measures were effective in supporting students into their second semester and hopefully their second year of the program. While they still supported the idea of the Pods, their quantitative ambivalent response to the Pods might suggest that they had adjusted to the traditional tutorial enrolment and allocation system.

Two years of data on the Pods has confirmed that the Pod structure provides a low risk, predictable, reassuring, and networking environment that compels a social support network which in turn facilitates the students' academic and institutional engagement. Our data also suggest that Pods should be a first semester arrangement only as such an arrangement is of most benefit to the student's progression into second year. It is also crucial that systematic and explicit scaffolding is undertaken during that first semester to prepare the students to be independent and autonomous learners who are enabled to understand and enact university discourses.

Future directions

The Pod structure will continue in 2010 as a first semester transition strategy. However, this year we will explicitly engage students in discussions on *why* social learning is important and how the Pod structure facilitates this. Further, we will use the Pod environment to help students develop more formal teamwork and negotiation skills that will be applicable to new contexts. This is especially important given the institution's and potential employers' emphasis on team work as a graduate attribute. Finally, we will work harder to explain to our students why it is important that Pod scaffolding is dismantled as they move into their second year. As education students and future teachers it is important that they can reflect, not only on their teaching, but also on their own learning processes. It is also important that they can examine the structures put in place to support their learning in order to learn more about teaching and how learners learn.

References

- Boyd, J., & Lintern, S. (2006). *From LOST to engaging in uni life: How a pilot student mentoring program is assisting first year students*. Paper presented at the 2006 Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Gold Coast, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/2006/program.html
- Bryson, J., Pajo, K., Ward, R., & Mallon, M. (2006). Learning at work: Organisational affordances and individual engagement. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 18(5), 279-97.
- Colvin, C., & Jaffar, F. (2007). *Enhancing the international student experience: The importance of international student groups and peer support at Edith Cowan University*. Paper presented at the 10th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education, Conference, Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/papers07/final_papers/pdfs/2c.pdf

- Duff, A., Quinn, D., Johnston, H., & Lock, P. (2007). *A clue, a quest, and a blog: Experimenting with engagement in orientation*. Paper presented at the 10th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/papers07/fullprogram2.html
- Gibson, J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gray, D. (2006). *Doing research in the real world (3rd ed.)*. London, UK: Sage.
- Harvey, L., Drew, S., & Smith, M. (2006). *The first-year experience: A review of literature for the Higher Education Academy*. York: The Higher Education Academy.
- Huntley, H., & Donovan, J. (2009). Developing academic persistence in first year tertiary students: A case study. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation Innovation and Development*, 6(1), 1–14.
- Kaufmann, L. & Clement, F. (2007). How culture comes to mind: From social affordances to Cultural analogies. *Intellectica*, 2(46), 1-30.
- Krause, K. L. (2005). *The changing face of the first year: Challenges for policy and practice in research-led universities*. Keynote paper presented at the University of Queensland First Year in Higher Education Workshop, Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.uq.edu.au/teaching-learning/docs/FYEUQKeynote2005.doc>
- Krause, K. L. (2007). Social involvement and commuter students: The first-year student voice. *Journal of the First Year Experience and Students in Transition*, 19(1), 27-45.
- Krause, K. L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities; Findings from a decade of national studies*. The University of Melbourne: Centre for Studies in Higher Education (CHSE).
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from <http://cpr.iub.edu/uploads/Kuh%20Kinzie%20Buckley%20Commissioned%20Report%20for%20the%20National%20Symposium%20on%20Postsecondary%20Student%20Success.pdf>
- Masters, J. & Donnison, S. (2010). First year transition in teacher education: The Pod experience. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(2), 87-98.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2003). *Promoting student retention through classroom practice*. Paper presented at Enhancing Student Retention: Using International Policy and Practice International Conference, Amsterdam, Nederland. Retrieved from [www.staffs.ac.uk/access-studies/docs/Amster-paperVT\(2\)L.doc](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/access-studies/docs/Amster-paperVT(2)L.doc)
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). “It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people”: The role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707-722.
- Wilson, S. (2005-2006). Improving retention and success: A case study approach for practical results. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 7(3-4), 245-261.
- Wintre, M. G., & Bowers, C. D. (2007). Predictors of persistence to graduation: Extending a model and data on the transition to university model. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 39(3), 220-324.