

From ‘Harry Potter’ to ‘Bachelor Boy’ and beyond: Bridging the gap between expectations and reality for first year students

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is two-fold: to present data from a research project which explores the expectations/reality mismatches of first year students who were first in the family to attend university and to outline two different approaches that address the needs of beginning students. Undoubtedly, most new students arriving at university experience varying degrees of ‘culture shock’ when their expectations fail to match the reality they encounter. However, for students from equity backgrounds and those who are the first in family, this mismatch can be immense. Many of the expectations presumed both prior to arrival at university and during the initial stages of study may remain hidden or unexplained. There is now widespread recognition of the need to provide improved preparation and support for students entering the tertiary sector. A key implication for each university must be to establish a ‘community of practice’ that serves to initiate new students into its institutional culture.

Introduction

The ways in which individual students define university will clearly impact on their behaviour within this setting; often the expectations that students arrive with do not reflect the reality that is encountered. The research highlighted in this paper explores the meanings that students attach to the university setting. Whilst university staff may have notions about what university is all about, it is important to remember that it is individual students who make sense of this experience according to their own meaning systems and realities. Exploring how students themselves articulate their experiences within this environment provides alternative perspectives on this area.

This paper has a dual focus. First, it describes a qualitative study that focuses on female students who can be loosely termed ‘non-traditional’ in the sense that they are the first in their family to attend university (O’Shea, 2008). Interviews were conducted with seventeen participants throughout the first year of study to explore the social and academic processes involved in transition, the types of hurdles faced by individuals, strategies implemented both individually and institutionally to overcome these difficulties and possible reasons for levels of academic performance. The focus in this discussion is on the ways that students described their expectations both before their arrival in university and also in the initial weeks of study. The students’ narratives reveal a tangible ‘gap’ between how they perceived university study and what they actually encountered. This disjuncture did not resolve itself quickly instead, as the meetings with the students continued, it became clear that their transition to the university was characterised by a series of adjustments between what the students thought was needed and what

the institution expected. The findings from these interviews point to the need to provide more authentic and responsive supports that address the actual gaps in students' knowledge.

The second part of this paper draws on Vygotskian theories of social constructivism to outline approaches to preparing these students for the realities of the university environment and to supporting the development of expertise that will ensure a positive experience in first year and beyond. From a socio-cultural perspective, we learn about the culture of our communities through the interactions we have with those around us. Typically, these interactions involve co-operative dialogues between the individual and more knowledgeable members of the community (Vygotsky, 1978). The provision of a range of opportunities that encourage new students to engage in co-operative dialogues with their peers, more experienced students as well as academic and administrative staff is important. The application of this theoretical framework is outlined by drawing on two examples of support strategies operating at different universities.

The research project – First in family students

The title of this paper is derived from conversations that were held with seventeen, first year female students in the first year of their university studies. Through their stories, the participants identified themselves as the first in their family to come to university. This classification was defined in terms of no immediate family members having ever attended university, including siblings, parents and children. The objective of this study was not to presuppose students' experiences but rather provide the space for them to recount their own stories. During a series of four interviews, students presented their personal reality of creating and sustaining meaning in a world characterised by obstacles, interruptions and constant renegotiations.

The conversations revealed how students arrived at the university with some very defined ideas about what this experience was going to be like and also revealed the diversity of sources these ideas were derived from. Lacking accessible sources of information about university, the participants described how information about university and institutional expectations were derived from obscure and usually ill-informed sources. For example, Catherine, one of the older students, explained how her expectations of university were based upon the 'Harry Potter' movies. Instead, what she discovered was that '*... everything is on the computer and I wasn't expecting it to be so IT based. It's like doing a correspondence course at times...*'. Catherine was not the only student to disclose this type of mismatch. The interviews highlighted how all the students experienced disjuncture between perceptions held prior to commencing university and how confusion dogged them as they moved through the academic year. These misconceptions included ideas about the nature of relationships with peers as well as professional and academic staff within the institution and also academic expectations.

Methodologically, the study is informed by a grounded theory approach and narrative theory. One of the many strengths of grounded theory is that it adopts an open and reflective perspective on the research process; the researcher engages with the data in an open-minded manner seeking to act on and react to the material rather than attempting to fit material into predefined theoretical frameworks. Examining narrative form avoids the study of events in isolation and instead facilitates analysis of actions as they relate temporally and spatially to other life spheres. Also, the way people story the world is indicative of choices made around an array of categories, which reflect a focus on 'certain properties' and the 'downplaying' of others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980,

p163). Such a perspective highlights how there is no one absolute truth but rather truth is an individual construction reflected in how people narrate events and situations in their lives. By interviewing students whilst they were engaging with this university experience, the study was able to highlight some of the divergences between expectations and reality as well as how these impacted on the first year experience of the participants.

Background and Context

The study was conducted on a small, satellite campus; the main campus of the university being located approximately eighty kilometres distant. This region is defined as being economically and socially disadvantaged; with higher than state average levels of unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits and low-income earners (ABS, 2001-2003). The region has much lower university attendance rates compared with state and national figures and a much lower proportion of residents who have completed a university degree or completed the final year of high school (ABS 2001-2003)

The establishment of a university campus in this area undoubtedly provided an opportunity for individuals to consider university attendance, where this might not have been possible before. The university does not keep information on the family status of students but based on the demographics of the region and anecdotal evidence, a large proportion of the student body can be assumed to be the first in their family to attend university. Undoubtedly, this lack of tradition in, or experience with, attending university further defines this cohort. Fundamental barriers to access and participation within the tertiary environment have been noted in a number of studies that focus on non-traditional student groups (Grant, 1997; Reay, 2003; Read et al, 2003). Such barriers include the perception that university attendance constitutes atypical behaviour within a student's community, with some students even describing negative reactions from teachers (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). In Edward's (1990) study on female returners with children, the students experienced disjuncture both inside the institution and also in their community.

Rendon (1992) suggests that students who are the first in the family to attend university may arrive at the institution with 'a feeling of alienation' (p.56). Such emotions can be exacerbated when students are required to move from '...an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices and assumptions' (p.56). Given the nature of family and personal circumstances, the difficulties associated with acculturating to this academic world may lead to 'guilt, pain and confusion' as students attempt '...to live simultaneously in both worlds, while being accepted in neither' (Couvillion-Landry, 2002-2003, p.3). The following sections serve to highlight some of the misapprehensions held by these students both prior to arrival and also as they moved through the initial stages of the year.

The initial days

The first set of interviews occurred in the initial weeks of semester and students were encouraged to reflect upon their expectations of university prior to arrival. While previous educational endeavours provided the most common yardstick by which students defined expectations, two of the students referred to popular culture as being the source of their ideas. Gregory (2007) argues that the 'educational narratives' that exist in film and television serve to 'distort' expectations around education (p.8). Such distortion is implied in these students' interviews. As mentioned

previously, Catherine thought university would be ‘a bit more *Harry Potterish*’ and Katie also seems to be caught up in this traditional version of university life:

...my expectations were to come in sit in a lovely lecture hall, get told lots of information, go home, study and do some tests at the end. But it is extremely different lots of self-directed learning ...we only do one lecture in the lecture hall so umm it's so different to what I thought it was going to be.

One of the younger students, Annie, had based her expectations on what Gregory (2007) describes as a ‘vastly popular education narrative of the 1990’s’ (p.12), the American television serial *Beverly Hills 90210*. Hence, Annie’s expectations were to come along to an orientation day where she would meet staff and students, be provided with clear directions around enrolment and also receive a book list. As a result of this assumption, Annie failed to enrol online as she thought you just ‘came to the uni...[and] everything you had to do they’d tell you in the first days’. Instead, her initial euphoria about being accepted was soon depleted resulting in her initial weeks being ‘heaps stressful cos...like the course is wrong and my professional experience.’

A number of students also referred to university in terms of ‘the bachelor boy’ syndrome, which reflected a focus on drinking alcohol and ‘partying’. For both the younger and older students in this study, these alcohol fuelled activities were not something they were interested in participating in; yet examples of this type of lifestyle typified the activities offered on campus:

I'd imagine uni from when I was at school to you know be a big party and kids go out and drink and you know all sorts of stuff and... they had a thing organised for the night club the other week ... but as an older person like you know I'm married, I've got kids, I have a life already... (Candy)

Similarly, Annie describes how she decided not to attend another university largely due to the focus on drinking explaining how ‘...it was so fixed on having parties and that was all they could say:[was]... we get drunk here we have parties here...’. Despite her youth, Annie is not interested in these activities yet so many universities continue to frame orientation in these terms.

Arriving at university

As these students had no parental or family tradition of attending university, there was also a profound lack of legitimate sources of information about the university experience. Hence, students revealed that information about university was often acquired from obscure or ill-informed sources. Mary relied on her friends’ brothers and sisters for information about university, describing how she eavesdropped on conversations: ‘...my friends have had older sisters and brothers and the stuff that they have said I use to pick up...’

This student is already an ‘outsider’ relying on information that she can acquire along the way. This situation sometimes translated into a sense of serendipity around activities such as enrolment and course advice. Jane makes reference to how some things just occurred through a measure of happenstance: ‘...I ran into somebody else through daycare who said ‘You gotta go online at 9am and then enrol’...That was just another thing I didn’t know’. This sentiment was echoed by other students: ‘I found that out by mistake when I rang the admin office for something else...’ (Sheila). The nature of their arrival at university was both ad hoc and uncertain; undoubtedly this served to further exclude them, engendering a sense of intrusion or otherness.

When analysing the interview data, it was evident that each of the students expressed a complete lack of understanding and knowledge about fundamental university practices. Such sentiments were initially vocalized in relation to the enrolment system, which students found to be very difficult to navigate. Jane, a mature aged Education student, remarks how *'it is hard work getting in'* and elaborates by describing how enrolment was *'... not really clear right at the beginning'*. This confusion is echoed by Catherine, who reveals how when completing her enrolment, she *'...nearly quit twice [laughs] and it is so confusing and so overwhelming'*. However, it was not only the mature aged students who seemed bewildered by these types of expectations, both of the school-leaver participants also expressed similar sentiments. For example, Mary, who had just come straight from school, described how she had tried to enrol *'about 6 times on my own'* and how *'...I just didn't understand what I was doing at all'*.

Encountering such difficulty in the initial stages of university experience caused some participants to question their abilities and suitability for university. Linda, a single mother who gained entry to an Early Childhood degree via an enabling program, talked about vacillating between feeling *'...I think I can do this...'* but continues by saying *'...and then there are other times where I am thinking: I can't do this I don't know what I am thinking doing this...'*. Other authors have highlighted the lack of confidence and low self-esteem felt by many women returning to study (Thompson, 1983; Willen, 1988; Coulter, 1989). Hipp (1997) suggests that many women need to 'find their own voice' and be consciously made aware of their ability to think intelligibly and contribute to the world of academia, in order to *'... start reclaiming and integrating their own knowledge and meshing it with what others are saying and writing'* (p.45).

The facilitation of such feelings of confidence does not seem to be accommodated by many of the isolating aspects of the university environment. For this group of students, their arrival at university was characterised by both isolation and confusion. Such sentiments were not caused by any one particular experience or environmental aspect but were repeatedly apparent when students discussed the institutional practices that they had encountered.

Moving through the year

The commencement of lectures heralded the onset of a number of other problems; many of the mothers cited timetabling (often resulting from a lack of knowledge about enrolment) and financial restrictions as having a negative impact on their study. Repeatedly, students narrated how initial excitement and euphoria about being accepted to university dissipated when confronted with the actual institutional environment. Overall, there seemed to be an assumption of knowledge on the part of the institution, a situation that clearly needs to be addressed. As Jane describes: *'...I think it comes down to just everyone assuming that you know what to do but nobody really speaking up and saying well I don't know what to do...'*. This lack of understanding was further compounded by the lack of direction afforded by the academic staff in relation to academic expectations and practices. The lack of 'face time' with lecturers was something that all the participants remarked on, many had anticipated having time to discuss academic concerns with their teachers and instead found that *'... there was no-one really to ask or to talk about what you were feeling or what you were experiencing ...'* (Mary).

First year students are generally expected to adapt to the university environment in a timely and fluid fashion and some academics may not seem to fully appreciate the very radical nature of this adjustment. This attitude was echoed by some of the participants who made reference to the reluctance of lecturers to ‘spoon-feed’ them, which often resulted in ambiguity over expectations and requirements. Catherine explained how she was more inclined to discuss assignments with her friends as she had once ‘*asked a question about something*’ and was abruptly told to ‘*Just read it, you know you should be able to figure this out*’. Catherine continues by arguing that this ‘*...doesn’t work very well when you are an adult and you are telling her “well I can’t figure this out”...*’. Equally, Linda was not enjoying the lectures as she felt that there was not ‘*enough guidance from the lecturers*’. Rendon (1994) highlights how both academic and interpersonal validation within the university framework remains vital for students regardless of their age or stage, arguing that this is particularly the case for non-traditional students. The importance of this sense of involvement is also borne out by Elliott (2002-2003) who found that students desire validation and acceptance by academics and also need to feel valued by the institution. Johnson (2001) argues that it is vital that universities foster a ‘*sense of community*’ amongst participants. However, the fostering of any such community is difficult when students have little face-to-face time not only with academic staff but also with other students.

Framework for bridging the gap

The data derived from these interviews would probably not surprise most university staff and the written word does not do justice to the emotional and academic implications for the women involved in this study. What these students require is not only timely dissemination of vital information but also that this information is provided in an accessible format and through channels that the students themselves can relate to. There is a need to normalise what is being experienced as well as provide strategies, techniques and resources that will assist as individuals move through the university environment.

Vygotsky (1978) argues that knowledge is constructed within a socially situated environment; effective learning is assisted by the inclusion of authentic contexts as well as inter-personal relationships between learners or novices and those deemed as experienced. As novices, beginning students face a number of problems in regard to access and participation in university life. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that newcomers require ‘access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation’ (p. 101). Membership in communities of practice is regarded as an important issue from a practical standpoint. An integrated approach planned for their first year in higher education is more likely to provide beginning students with the opportunities they need to establish themselves as members in these communities of practice. Within a university context, the need to offer formalised opportunities for more experienced students to act as guides for new students is one way to approach this gap between students expectations and the realities of university. Many institutions now offer peer-mentoring programs but often these are limited to providing geographical guidance to students or basic referral to other services. However, there are great benefits for both new and existing students when programs exist that provide exposure to authentic settings and also on-going contact with more experienced members of the community. The following sections highlight two different but complementary approaches to providing this exposure for new students. Both approaches draw upon resources readily available within the institution as a means to better orient new students to the university landscape.

Uni-Start: Transition to Study

The Uni-Start program offers a systematic and individualized approach to socialising new students into the university culture; the program serves to immerse new students in this environment, providing situated learning to assist participants in their transition to university (O'Shea, 2009). This program is a peer-led transition activity that recruits student mentors and provides training in group facilitation, course delivery and design. The student mentors are responsible for deciding on the content of the two-day program and also delivering the program. These student facilitators meet throughout the summer university break, plan the content of workshops and provide regular updates to staff coordinating the program. The strength of a transition program that has been designed by student peers is that it enables discussion of university culture and expectations from a student's perspective thereby reflecting the skills and information that these more experienced students lacked upon arrival rather than what was assumed to be lacking. This is particularly important when it is considered that the students in the research articulated a fundamental lack of understanding about university practices and protocols.

Locating students in a setting that enables them to engage in meaningful dialogue with community members such as the student facilitators and relevant staff, provides vital and legitimate sources of information. The learning is co-constructed with both the new students and the more experienced students engaging in dialogue and collective problem solving. The participants are provided the opportunity to practice skills required in the new learning environment, for example, preparing and delivering an oral presentation, engaging in group work and peer assessment. This learning environment included authentic materials and activities and was framed by collaboration and validation of the knowledge and skills that the participants brought with them to the university setting. The Uni-Start program provides the opportunity for situated learning, providing access to authentic and situated learning environments that are safe and structured.

This program was initially offered at one location in 2006 / 2007 before being adopted by the Faculty of Business and Law and then rolled out across the three domestic campuses of the University in 2010. Each year, the Uni-Start program is evaluated by both the student participants and the student facilitators, the data generated is then used to develop and refine the program for the following year. Evaluations are overwhelmingly positive with respondents perceiving attendance as 'very beneficial' to their first year experience. The facilitator's written reflections also highlighted how involvement in the program provides both marketable skills and the opportunity to 'give back' to the university community. One facilitator wrote how involvement had '*...allowed me to really express to a handful of students the enthusiasm I have for the Campus and for studying...*' Another explaining that it '*...had been a wonderful journey...*' and '*...enabled me to see just how capable I really am...*'.

Essentially, the mentor facilitators establish a 'safe' place where new students can practise new skills and articulate new roles with little risk. The facilitators are in a duo-fold role, being both the 'experts' who provide authentic, experiential learning opportunities and also the 'friend' who initiates personal relationships and negotiates social learning. The authenticity of the activities further grounds the knowledge acquired by the participants.

Dive-In: A guide for beginning students

Dive In resulted from a pilot project that developed a resource for supporting and enhancing the learning experiences of first year students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong (Lysaght, 2007; Lysaght & Walton, 2006). It was developed as a CD-Rom in response to specific feedback from students within the Faculty who experienced difficulty in accessing important items of information and in understanding ‘institutional’ terms that bore no resemblance to their everyday language. Again, this lack of understanding echoes the experiences of participants in the research study described earlier. The project involved both students and staff who collaborated in the design and development of the resource. The resource was originally distributed in CD format and in 2009 was installed on USB flash drives distributed during the Faculty’s orientation program. Students in the initial and successive cohorts have provided positive feedback with regard to the information included in *Dive in* and they have continued to shape successive iterations.

At the initial stage of development, undergraduate students as well as administrative and academic staff within the Faculty were canvassed for their ideas about the information needed by commencing students. This process led to the identification of generic as well as faculty-specific information that was relevant to the CD. Two experienced students were employed to write and collate much of the material that was developed under the guidance of the Sub Dean. A student reference group who volunteered to provide feedback as items were developed for the CD also provided valuable contributions. These students, who were in their second and third years of study, volunteered to support the employed students by filtering and assessing the material that was being produced, providing critical feedback and recommendations.

A positive evaluation of the pilot project by first year students in 2005 resulted in a grant from the Educational Strategic Development Fund (ESDF) to develop a university-wide resource. Students and staff across three faculties, Creative Arts, Education and Science, collaborated to create a second version of *Dive In* that was relevant for their own faculties. A template that could be adapted to meet the needs of students in other faculties was produced. Again, students in each faculty were employed to identify, write and collate material, whilst a reference group provided support and feedback. Successive iterations of *Dive In* have been produced each year and students have been employed to follow suggestions for change based on feedback from other students and staff. An important aspect of *Dive In* is that it is delivered in ‘student speak’ or a student voice to avoid possible barriers caused by the more formal language of the institution. By drawing on the knowledge of more experienced students and through their contributions to the resource, the language of the institution is translated into terms that have meaning for the new students. The presentation of information in this way provides opportunities for new students to master or appropriate information that can enhance the likelihood of their success.

A resource that is user-friendly and that promotes feelings of competence and self-reliance supports the development of students as independent learners. The inclusion of faculty-specific information that is integral to the course they have chosen encourages new students to develop a student identity aligned with their individual patterns of study. In general terms, these aspects of *Dive In* provide opportunities for the individual to gain access to the culture of the university.

Conclusion

What the research in this article points to is the need for new students to be effectively coached in the organisational culture of the university in a timely and efficient way. Research within the higher education sector clearly indicates that a positive first year experience which encourages the engagement of students in the processes and procedures of university life is a critical factor in determining academic application and success (Krause, McInnes & Welles, 2002). Experiences in the first weeks and months of study shape the academic development of students (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) and it is clear that social transition also plays an important role in the process of academic transition (Kantanis, 2000). The ability of students to identify with the culture of the university at an early stage, as well as with the particular field of study in which they are engaged, are significant factors in terms of improving levels of academic achievement and, ultimately, attrition rates (Lawrence, 2000; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000).

Given the government's imperative for universities to broaden their access for students, particularly those from equity backgrounds, it is time to re-think the models that have guided both recruitment and support. Rather than encountering an obstacle course involving application, enrolment, orientation and engagement with study, we must temper these experiences in ways that have relevance for aspiring and beginning students, encouraging them to develop the knowledge and skills required for the fulfilment of their aspirations.

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