Waiting for the Crisis

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Abstract

The transition to First Year Higher Education involves multi-directional adjustment. Ideally universities have an institution-wide program, enhancing the student learning experience through a range of curricular, teaching and learning practices. To this, often well-prepared table, come an infinitely diverse student population, suggesting a collision rather than a melding of expectations.

Traditionally the pattern of transition is viewed as linear; typically with a suite of orientation programs and support programs attending to the inequities and concerns of the cohort. It is a multi-dimensional malaise, reactive and crisis-driven. An alternate view is that transition is a cyclic process of stages, through which students pass. When these are poorly negotiated, the students languish and are unlikely to be retained. When these are well-resolved the students thrive.

This research examines the process and characteristics of thriving in the transition process to university.

Thriving

Thriving is defined as a positive response to a challenge (Carver, 1998) where gain occurs, rather than the minimisation of loss (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Thriving can be described as a response to ‘challenging circumstances’ rather than adversity; with a focus on learning and growth. It is concerned with circumstances that are sufficiently destabilising to require the individual to re-examine the self; and the means through which the individual is motivated to function at a higher level (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005).

As a personal procurement, Bergland & Kirkevold (2001) describe the concept of thriving as developing physical and psychological well-being in difficult circumstances, and where an individual “…acquires new skills and/or knowledge that may promote mastery of similar situations in the future” (p. 427). This is similar to O’Leary’s (1998) description of thriving as the “…the ability to go beyond the original level of psychosocial functioning” (p. 429). Carver (1998) draws some finer distinctions where those who are able to thrive, i.e. they (a) are desensitised (i.e. the challenge did not worry them so much); (b) have enhanced recovery potential (i.e. they learn new strategies); and (c) achieve at a higher level as a consequence of engagement with the challenge (i.e. they learned from the experience). Together these are also markers for well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2006) and, logically, thriving will include those aspects of well-being that foster personal growth, particularly the interpretation of life experiences that give personal meaning to the broader coping process (e.g. Antonovskiy, 1987; Smider, Essex, & Ryff, 1996).
An individual who thrives (a) acquires skills and knowledge that can be applied to the next stage of a challenge (Carver & Scheier, 1999; Nicholson, 1987), (b) develops confidence making future decisions based on the reflective awareness of what worked (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987), (c) strengthens social networks through the successful mustering of support to negotiate the challenge (Moos & Schaefer, 1986), and (d) masters strategies to account for the disparity between expectations and experience (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2001). Contextually, O’Leary and Ickovics (1995) describe engaging a challenge as transformative, in that it results in three possible outcomes (a) languishing, affected by the stressor and unable to make progress; (b) surviving, with a return to a baseline of strategies; or (c) thriving, where growth and learning is evident.

Thriving is consistent with personal growth, where there is an expansion of capacity for well-being enhanced by self-knowledge (Spreitzer et al., 2005), and is a move away from a vulnerability/deficit model, to one that recognises the adaptive processes of recovery. In that regard, thriving is the product of individual resources, social resources and the developmental process; managed by the individual to produced positive outcomes (O'Leary, 1998); and resulting in ‘value-added’ growth and enhanced well-being (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Park, 1998). Thriving is apparent when individuals’ “…feel progress and momentum, marked by a sense of learning (greater understanding and knowledge)” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 537).

The trajectories for thriving are more clearly understood through a ‘collective lens’ through which the individual addresses a challenge. The current research extends this understanding by identifying the particular personal characteristics and processes of thriving in a challenging transition.

**Transitions**

The transition to First Year Higher Education involves adjustment from both directions. Ideally the university have an institution-wide program, enhancing the student learning experience through a range of teaching and learning practices (Gale, 2009; Wilson, 2009). The current ALTC research involves a suite of seven Australian universities examining current practice and exploring a cyclic lens through which augmentation is possible. An extensive literature review and current practice mapping provides the context for the investigation.

We are all in transition, moving from one stage of existence to the next. We apply a frame of reference to explore, understand and negotiate the accompanying challenges. Some challenges are more confronting than others and threaten well-being, and yet some individuals thrive. They have a confident awareness; they make meaning from the challenge; they learn from the process, and apply the learning to increase understanding. Where resilience has been described as dramatic circumstances where protection occurs, not through the avoidance of risk, but by successfully engaging in it; thriving promotes the possibility of doing well because of, rather than in spite of, the challenging circumstances. All students entering their first year of university will go through a transition period.
From the literature, Ashford & Taylor (1990) describe an interactive process between the individual and the organisation where “…individuals learn, negotiate, enact, and maintain the behaviors (sic) appropriate to a given organizational environment…to achieve valued goals” (p. 4). This adaptation requires individuals to (a) make sense of the challenge and identify the demands and constraints involved, (b) decide on the required changes to best adapt, (c) act on these decisions to adapt to the transition, and (d) manage the stresses that emerge from these negotiations.

Bridges (1986) proposes that the disruption involved in a transition is a “…psychological process that extends over a long period of time and cannot be planned or managed by the same rational formulae that work with change” (p. 25). He contends that it is a three-part process involving the abandonment of the old patterns, a period of limbo, and a new beginning. This has also been described as the period between the ‘before’ and ‘after’ (Nortier, 1995), and expanded as a five-stage model involving initial equilibrium, a separation stage, a crisis stage characterised by confusion and reactive behaviour, a renewal or rebirth stage when behaviour is more proactive and, finally, a new period of equilibrium and stability. Nortier’s (1995) separation stage involves the difficulty and confusion of applying old schemas to new situations. The individual discovers that “…doing more of the same thing… gives more and more unsatisfactory results. Not seeing, or not accepting that the reality has changed, the individual no longer understands what is happening to him” (Nortier, 1995, p. 40). The crisis phase is a more precarious period, or tipping point, where the individual is committed to the new environment and there is no turning back. This awareness of the crisis is important to the motivation to search for new meaning and to begin the process of mastery of the new environment (Nortier, 1995). Transitions are associated with this kind of vulnerability and exposure to the new interactions, environments and experiences, and the problems associated with poor coping strategies (Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Messias, & Schumacher, 2000).

Schlossberg (1989) describes the importance of the individual’s perception of their transition and the resources available to the individual to cope effectively with the experience. This experience is characterised by “…a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and this requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 5). Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) also propose that “…first, the person will see whether he or she has enough resources to get through a particular transition successfully: and second, he or she will discover how to strengthen areas of weakness” (p. 60). This is comparable with the ‘thriving’ literature (e.g. Ickovics & Park, 1998; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Spreitzer et al., 2005) where successful adaptation is determined by the learning process rather than a passage of time. Adults are motivated to learn (and hence the ability to thrive) by their constant need to control, master, renew and take stock (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). From that perspective, the successful transition is a product of situational aspects including the nature of the transition (e.g. welcome, unwelcome, expected, and unexpected); aspects of self, including dispositional factors; previous experiences; openness to experience and the ability to deal with ambiguity. Logically it will also include supports including social networks, friends and family, and the nature of that support; and strategies for coping including a plan for action and the availability of resources to cope.

Selder (1989) describes transitions as a situation where there is a disruption of an existing reality that requires reconstruction, and consequently the resolution of uncertainty that “…Waiting for the Crisis

Nuts and Bolts
bridges from a reality which has been disrupted to a newly constructed or surfacing reality” (p. 437). In that context, uncertainty is important, because it acknowledges the need for order and the ‘leap of faith’ required to bridge from the old reality to the new one; and the possibility of relinquishing aspects of self that had previously been defining. In those circumstances “…the person feels as if he were a stranger; he feels cut off from his environment and his usual connectedness with other human beings… (and) may fail to grasp what is actually occurring. They distort experiences…” (Selder, 1989, p. 438). The consequent ‘sense-making’ is the individual’s attempt to return to a state of equilibrium, and provides meaning to the experience and a frame of reference to interpret and understand events in the new environment. It is the personal adjustment made towards the new role, over time.

There has been an increased need to move away from a linear model to a more holistic view of transition and the call for transition to be conceptualised as cyclical. Nicholson (1990) describes a complex, comprehensive model for the exploration of transition in four stages – preparation, encounter, adjustment and stabilisation, and to explore this experience from the organisational perspective as well as the psychosocial impact on the individual. The patterns of response contribute to a better understanding of transitions Based on this, Harris (2009) developed a new transition model that focuses on transitions ‘well resolved’ rather than problems associated with the change. Here, thriving is a process that is forward focussed, clear, ordered, and purposeful and where individuals are confident, pro-active and self-assured.

Waiting for the crisis is a consequence of the linear model. This research examines the trajectories where thriving might be enhanced; and the pathways of students through the First Year University experience through the lens of transition as a cyclic process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key questions and discussion points to punctuate the presentation.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the implications for counsellors if transition is understood as cyclical?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Can these stages of student transition be assessed and plotted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How might interventions better target students in different stages of transition?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

References


