Supporting first year students’ engagement – building resilience

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Abstract

Typical of the current Australian higher education environment, human services students at Charles Sturt University come into their first year of study through different transitioning pathways and bases of enrolment. Some can be particularly vulnerable to disappointment and confusion when things are not always as they first appear. There are issues around making ‘un-knowing’ choices of subjects that require gradated levels of sophisticated thinking and action. How can students build resilient engagement, when they are trying to cope with contrasting expectations and outcomes?

A first-year enrolment pattern could include the combination of studying a first-level communication subject alongside a second-level cross-cultural counselling one. In this paper we share some insights of delivering these subjects; some of the tensions that seem obvious, as well as the not-so-obvious juxtaposed strengths that sit at the heart of social work – building ‘resilience’ from first-year ‘vulnerability’, in order to foster an ongoing sense of belonging.

Introduction and literature review

In human services, as part of their introduction to working within a social justice and human rights framework, students are advised very early that “they cannot practice unknowingly” (Mlcek, 2013), and yet as university lecturers we often accept students ‘knowingly’ into a program of study where they might be enrolled in both a first-level communication subject, and a second/third-level cultural competence subject at the same time. By the six-month mark of their first year, social work students are also well on the way to understanding and embracing the idea of engagement through praxis, through intentional practice. Knowing and intent pose different kinds of pedagogical struggles for lecturers because they manifest as...
quite different forms of practice that can often sit at opposite ends of the learning and teaching spectrum.

When students know what is expected of them at university, this knowing does not always easily transfer to intentional engagement that requires the actual mastering of the role of being a student. Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 426) refer to the ‘implicit expectations’ and ‘tacit understandings’ that are integrated throughout the university study experience. Additionally, Devlin (2011, p. 3) suggests that, “Success at tertiary level depends on understanding these unspoken requirements and being able to perform in ways that meet them”. Furthermore, “…the student who better understood the need to respond to the tacit expectations of university staff members would perform better” (ibid). It is not acceptable that first-year students begin to master the art of being a successful student through ‘trial and error’, but be taken to a point of resilience through access and equity of information, that is practised with the intentional participation of student, lecturer and institution all together.

The links between vulnerability and resilience

Learning and teaching literature abounds with the ideas of the ‘struggle’ of first-year students at university; depending on their circumstances, they could be, for example, particularly “vulnerable to the disappointment and confusion created by early assessment failure” (Potter, 2009). At these times, feelings of being inadequate in some way; not being ‘smart enough for university’ can become overwhelming and in entrenched cases of vulnerability, can lead students to abandon their studies altogether. Resilience comes from intentional engagement in a particular situation; the idea of engagement without the intent is arguably both a contested and contestable concept. Baron and Corbin (2012) for example, have dedicated a whole paper to querying whether the idea of student engagement is both rhetoric and reality. Their reasoning about the “ubiquitous nature” of student engagement at university comes from the rhetoric that student engagement is somehow an indicator of an institute’s success, alongside the growing reality of academic staff perception of a “trend towards disengagement amongst the student cohort” (Baron, & Corbin, 2012, p. 759). However, there is no doubt that their ideas about an “active participation” are aligned to “student resilience” (Baron, & Corbin, ibid) which is supported by others, especially where this resilience has resonance in promoting lifelong learning (Markwell, 2007; Salamonson, Yenna, & Everett, 2009).

Resilience is the harnessing of emotions and feelings through the taking of risks and challenges. Both Lawrence (2005) and Devlin (2011) suggest that students be given a chance to take risks and participate in opportunities that will give them both the immediate ammunition to deal with new university study situations, as well as the beginnings of sustained capacity to be part of a new learning community with all its different socio-cultural and discursive expectations, rules and incongruities. There are at least two relevant notions of building resilience that feed appropriately into this paper; the active agency of the student, and the facilitation of student success through a kind of joined-up responsibility that is more than just partnership-speak. That is, we often hear about the need for ‘student responsibilities’ in higher education courses, particularly around the acquisition of phenomena like academic cultural capital, and literacy and language skills, but what about lecturer responsibilities?
One such responsibility would be to acknowledge the changing make-up of students today, and the different creative ways that can be designed to encourage their participation. Students today are not “passive recipients of the middle and upper-class culture and discourse of university” (Devlin, 2011, p. 7), and are more inclined to be seen as less ‘vulnerable’ while trying to establish their university identity. However, lecturers can play a big part in this learning transformation for students; in fact research by Luckett and Luckett (2009, p. 476) indicates that facilitating the development of agency, in student identity development, is of critical importance in higher education. The ‘finding out journey’ particularly in the first year of study, is at least a two-way responsibility between student and lecturer in order to limit vulnerability whilst building resilience.

The effect of heterogeneous enrolment on student resilience

The changing nature of student enrolments into higher education means that individual lives could, apart from study in a university degree, involve: bringing up children; working full-time even, and possibly caring for elderly parents or relatives. Depending on circumstances, students could well find themselves also dealing with the negative effects of poverty impacting their university experience. Devereux et al (2004, p. 10) highlight the lack of internet access and essential resources such as textbooks as being two of the main deterrents for students that could last for the whole time that they are undertaking their degree program.

That is, situations do not necessarily get better; continual social barriers, such as income and lack of disposable cash, as well as tertiary literacy development and therefore success in individual subjects, only become entrenched. Students will often try to reduce the negative impacts of the above through the courses they take, and even the enrolment patterns they choose within those courses. However, when students enrol in first-year patterns that seem to not only focus on higher level subjects than those from traditionally first-year levels, but also ‘mix’ those levels within their program, adequate literacy development becomes problematic (Mlcek, & Ogden, 2013).

Methodology

A case study approach was used to observe curriculum design and delivery, in two CSU human services subjects: HCS102-Communication and human services, and WEL218-Developing cross-cultural competencies. Their inclusion in a possible suite of first year subjects provided a useful initial context for the complex nature, not only of enrolment, but of the strategies required to build student resilience.

In presenting the findings from the case studies, qualitative observation was the lens through which an analysis was made about the applicability of the above subjects to engage first-year students in building resilience for future studies. The Introduction and literature review highlights a useful analytical framework that includes the following units of analysis: resilience developing from vulnerability [emotions and feelings], and resilience developing from intentional engagement.
Findings and analysis

In providing a course architectural context for the two case studies; HCS102 and WEL218, the following heterogeneous enrolment examples indicate that some students are studying a first-year program across at least two different university levels. Furthermore, the higher-than-first-level subjects contain content which also indicates levels of skills and engagement that require ‘higher order’ thinking and application:

- HCS102 [communication & human Services], HCS204 [research methods], PSY113 [child & adolescent development], WEL218 [developing cross-cultural competencies]; HCS321 [child welfare practice], HCS406 [human rights]; PSY113, PSY216 [psychology of ageing]; HCS102, HCS204 [research methods]; HCS310 [mental health practice], HCS405 [4th-year theory and practice]; SOC102 [social inequality], SOC217 [fame & social control]; SPE211 [foundations in social policy], SWK423 [ethics & social work practices]; HCS102, HCS310, SPE211; HCS406, HCS111 [introduction to social welfare], WEL218, SOC101 [introductory sociology].

Students who enrol in the following suite of subjects may attract these considerations:

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<tr>
<th>First Year Enrolment combinations</th>
<th>Difficulties</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
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<td>HCS102, HCS111, PSY111, SOC101, HCS103, PSY113, SOC102, PSY216.</td>
<td>Depending on the student, there could be a serious mismatch of development between discipline subjects. If not monitored closely, a student could end up ‘passing’ just two from eight first-year subjects.</td>
<td>Everything a student needs to continue through their program will be taught in the first subject. There is no need to give students room to, build skills, add to skills, practice skills, or contextualise skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCS102, HCS204, PSY113, WEL218.</td>
<td>Lecturers are not prepared for the multiple literacies required to complete this potentially ‘difficult’ combination.</td>
<td>Wherever there is WEL218, many students from different cultures believe this will be ‘easy’ (Mlcek, &amp; Ogden, 2013).</td>
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Issues become challenging when students must also complete subjects from other ‘service’ disciplines and those experiences can be more unique, isolated, or ‘removed’ even, from their program. So, the heterogeneity of student enrolment becomes an interesting assessment by lecturers themselves; transition is about movement from one place to another and also about moving through situations, but where success is not always guaranteed across undertaking three different level subjects, then, how does the interruption to movement within a course,
impact student resilience? The reality is that students often have to ‘take two bites of the cherry’; to re-do subjects, especially when service subjects are involved.

In getting through the first year of study, the resilience of social work students originates from quite a unique place, compared to students in many other university courses. That is, they need to acquire multiple literacies across multiple disciplines, which requires the introduction and enculturation into the different language and texts of those multiple social sciences and humanities disciplines. In these cases, resilience means being ‘buoyant’; of keeping afloat, and at CSU first-year social work educators are there to maintain an even balance of academic and pastoral care for our first-year students. To reiterate previous ideas, we are all trying to emulate ways of conceptualising student success (Devlin, 2011) through collaborative efforts that depend on the joint acknowledgement of responsibility on the part of all the main players in first-year education; the students, lecturers, and the institution.

Applying First Year Principles to promote resilience in CSU subjects

The relevance of integrating first-year principles in order to enhance the first-year experience is worth recounting here; these six principles have been part of CSU’s ‘enhancing the student experience’ initiative since 2010: transition; diversity; subject delivery; curriculum design; assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Kift, 2009). This kind of initiative is informed by three overarching pedagogies: transition pedagogy; social inclusion pedagogy, and Andragogy – the science of helping adults to learn. The interesting thing about Andragogy is that it is a term that was arguably first-introduced by a social worker in the early 1900s – Eduard Lindeman (Brookfield, 1987). But for our students and lecturers, the adoption of first-year principles has more of a resonance with the concept and practice of social inclusion. It is that ‘inclusive quality’ of the first-year experience, regardless of the subjects taken, which helps to build resilience.

In CSU’s social work degree, an interesting first-year subject enrolment pattern discussed in the following case studies includes the combination of studying a first-level human services communication subject alongside a second-level cross-cultural competencies counselling subject. Can different academic level subjects work well together? As authors, lecturers and practitioners, we have online cohorts in these subjects of 400 plus students each first session of the year. The teaching task is almost overwhelming at times; do our learning and teaching strategies, especially around ideas of thinking, being and doing, as well as the adoption of first-year principles, successfully accommodate sometimes seemingly quite different strands of learning? The following case studies about our observations of practice address a very important part of higher education, that is, the capacity to engage in reflection on academic practices (Kahn, Qualter, & Young, 2012).

Case Study 1: HCS102 – Communication and human services

The first-year principles that best inform the delivery of this subject are transition and curriculum. Despite the multiple entry pathways that students can take to enrol in their degree program, there is very rarely any credit given for this first subject that figures as a core
component of every structure of social work or social welfare courses at CSU; it is seen as the anchor for everything that comes afterwards. Even students, who come with other communication degrees or components of previous degrees that relate to communication, would never have completed such a subject. It is intentionally designed around the seamless tri-cyclical model of thinking, being, doing which is integrated with the levels of interpersonal, interpersonal, trans-systems and extra-dimensional competence adult communication management layers taken from Kaye (2010). In addressing transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009), students follow a developmental path of learning that is more about process than content.

The students complete three assessment items that are heavily supported with quite specific instructions and guidelines. The first (in Weeks 3/4 of a 14-week session) is an ‘early-low stakes’/high feedback online, open-book task that runs over 4 days. The second is a ‘high-stakes’/medium feedback virtual presentation to a WIKI site, and the third is a ‘medium stakes’/low-medium feedback critical reflection essay. Students are constantly challenged, via online Forum discussions and Announcements, to adhere to strict process and protocols about communication and task execution, in the same way they would be expected to, in the profession. The emphasis throughout is on critiquing values and working within an ethos of scholarship, as well as integrity; who are you? where do you come from? what is your community? what are your values? Nearly all students [close to 600 across two sessions in 2012] comment on the useful extent and level to which this first subject challenges ideas about learning and communication which they had never considered beforehand. The use of the online Forum in this case study has a dual role in exercising both disclosure and exposure of information, feelings and vulnerabilities in a public forum. Students model their levels of participation on the style and tone of communication from their subject coordinator.

First indications in observing the relevance of HCS102 to help develop resilience from student vulnerability [emotions and feelings], suggest that the deliberate application of challenging questions and activities, has a positive effect in also building resilience through intentional, developmental engagement.

Case Study 2: WEL218 – Developing cross-cultural competencies

Diversity is one of the main first-year principles that figure in the participation and delivery of this subject. The ‘basis of enrolment’ data for 2012 [m=318] indicated a probable smorgasbord of academic skills, cultural capital, capabilities to engage actively, and also ready capacity for resilience, including: 78.40% [n=69] First Generation social work distance mode students, and 68% [n=138] First Generation social welfare distance mode students; 27.3% [n=24] Low socio-economic status (LSES) social work students from the same cohort, and 28% [n=57] LSES social welfare students.

Students are introduced to key concepts relating to service provision and delivery in the context of competencies required for social work and human services when working with a range of culturally diverse communities throughout Australia. The relationship between cultural diversity and policy development as well as its implementation is analysed in the context of a complex social welfare field of working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The first module deals with what is often called anti-discriminatory practices and looks at the more structural issues of racism, discrimination and policies. The second

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Deals with individual practice issues focusing more on how to work with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Assessments include report and essay-writing media and their aims are to incorporate theory and practice through critical analysis and reflection.

Where the subject asks for active engagement in a set of ‘generic’ skills, these include graduate attributes which involve ideas of aptitude/applying oneself and committing to lifelong learning, developing an ethos of scholarship, collaborating in groups and teams, engaging with information literacy, developing a high level of oral and written skills [through the online Forum and assessments], developing cultural understanding, practising ethical standards, and exploring critical analysis, creativity and reflection. Through engagement on the Forum, students respond to potentially confronting topics such as dealing with racism, policy development that relates to providing access and equity to vulnerable peoples, and the movement and migration of displaced persons in Australia and throughout the world.

Students are expected to acquire all the above attributes; the practice of developing competence in cultural understanding, as well as pragmatic and critical thinking skills right from the start of their professional student life; these attributes are the ones most needed as a professional worker. A main skill achievement, personal reflection, is to provide efficacy to reduce personal prejudice, and to become aware of its growth in racial and cultural appreciation (Bowman, 2010). Tasks allow students to look at others’ perspectives, and see for themselves why it is important to address their own identities in context. Students struggle at-times, with confronting content and application of information. For example, they are asked to apply the use of a racial-cultural identity model to themselves, as well as to evaluate where they would sit within a worldviews analysis (Sue, & Sue, 2008). Student feedback captures the same sentiment; they all go ‘searching’ for their worldview, as well as their racial and cultural identities.

Participation in WEL218 suggests that students’ initial vulnerability in finding a voice to engage on more sophisticated and informed levels about some fairly weighty topics, is slowly replaced by resilience that comes from praxis wisdom; from cultural knowing; from critical reflection about self, other individuals and communities.

Discussion

The above case studies emphasise transition and diversity, but they highlight much more. Implicit in transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) is the imperative that first-year lecturers and institutions need to work towards creating a positive experience for first-year students. Gurin et al. (2002) found that students benefited the most when there was structural diversity present as well as a “pedagogy that facilitates learning in a diverse environment” and “extensive and meaningful informal interracial interaction” (p. 359). Several further studies point to the importance of provisions of sustained and coordinated efforts across the first year experience in order to maximize the benefits of diversity in student development and learning (Gottfredson, et al., 2008). This is important in human services and social work; high levels

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of intercultural competency are required to participate effectively in our communities and workplaces. In this case, transition appears to work across levels of diverse accommodation.

However, the idea of ‘buoyancy’; of keeping afloat, is a new addition to transition pedagogy because it highlights not only the presence of emotion and feelings through vulnerability in not being fully aware of what is going on, but also the responsibility of intentional engagement. One of the strategies students use to stay afloat, is through purposeful engagement on the Forums. Despite a level of anonymity afforded to those who participate online, these interactions are not easy for many who are struggling to find a voice in their first-year at university. The strategy adopted by the lecturers in these cases is to provide intense, side-by-side modeling and monitoring of practice, that may in some situations, require ongoing vigilance that is typical of the shared responsibility required for first year.

In building the resilience of our first-year students, the terms used in this paper have referred to: inclusiveness; access and equity; social inclusion; agency; facilitation; heterogeneity; knowing and intent, and joined-up responsibility. Joined-up responsibility is an important strategy that has been revealed in the building of resilience in first-year students undertaking enrolment combinations of subjects such as those highlighted in this paper, HCS102 and WEL218. The term is aptly taken from discourse identified in National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER] literacy research projects (see Wickert, & McGuirk, 2005), in which one of the outcomes identified, is that literacy educators have learned to avoid treating literacy needs in isolation, but rather through cross-sectoral and joined-up approaches to situations and solutions. Joined-up responsibilities require more than the accepted dichotomy of the student-lecturer partnership that is shown in the HCS102 and WEL218 case studies around subject learning and teaching, but rather a kind of relationship that is sustainable for the growth of the student beyond the first year and right across their whole course. Furthermore, through a reappraisal of ‘attachment’ (Ainsworth, & Bowlby, 1991), there is a strong intuitive legitimacy in saying that students’ experience of resilience-building in undertaking HCS102 and WEL218, with a large part of their emphasis on access and equity, trust, and affirmation, provides fertile grounds for the growth of positive feelings and a sense of belonging.

**Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore answers about how first-year students could build resilient engagement, when they are trying to cope with contrasting expectations and outcomes of potentially complex subject enrolment patterns; where complexity comes from different levels of required sophistication in thinking and outcomes. The combination of a first-level communication subject, with a second-level counselling one, has the potential hall-marks of rendering students to being vulnerable through possible levels of disclosure and critical self-reflection, and so the application of joined-up responsibility is not taken lightly, in helping to build resilience.
There is little doubt that structure and agency play a large part in the positive acquisition of resilience, as well as a sense of belonging, but so too does attachment and sentimentality. On a pragmatic and immediate level, the above sustainable relationships mentioned can be, and are, fostered through the delivery of subjects like HCS102 and WEL218 in the first year of study. In every university in the land there are subjects like these, with different level combinations as these, and dedicated first-year lecturers willing to facilitate the building of resilience no matter the challenge; this is an idea that is not exclusive to CSU’s social work and social welfare programmes.

Resilient students exhibit flexibility, adaptability, buoyancy in their engagement with first-year university study, and are optimistic. Their situation is helped if there is an element of sentiment and attachment to what they are doing, in order to develop a healthy sense of belonging. They appear to be more capable of withstanding what many others might perceive as being ‘stressful’. Resilience refers to the capacity of an individual or community to cope with stress, overcome adversity or adapt positively to change. The ability to ‘bounce back’ from negative experiences may reflect innate qualities of individuals or be the result of learning and experience. Regardless of the origin of resilience, there is evidence to suggest that it can be developed and enhanced to promote greater wellbeing and a sense of belonging. In teaching subjects together like HCS102 and WEL218, resilience is not regarded as a quality that is either present or absent in a person or group but rather a process which is influenced through a developmental approach to teaching and learning, and therefore may vary across circumstances and time.

References


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