Understanding the Link between Student Values and Transition

Sharn Donnison and Debra Edwards
THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING

First published in 2010 in Champaign, Illinois, USA by Common Ground Publishing LLC

© 2010 (individual papers), the author(s)
© 2010 (selection and editorial matter) Common Ground

Authors are responsible for the accuracy of citations, quotations, diagrams, tables and maps.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair use for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act (Australia), no part of this work may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact <cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com>.

ISSN: 1447-9494
Publisher Site: http://www.Learning-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING is peer-reviewed, supported by rigorous processes of criterion-referenced article ranking and qualitative commentary, ensuring that only intellectual work of the greatest substance and highest significance is published.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
http://www.commongroundpublishing.com/software/
Understanding the Link between Student Values and Transition

Sharn Donnison, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia
Debra Edwards, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia

Abstract: International and national research highlights that engagement is critical for successful transition into higher education. The research on student engagement identifies the following areas as critical for engagement: academic challenge; active learning; student and staff interactions; enriching educational experiences; supportive learning environment; and work integrated learning (ACER, 2009). Current conceptual transition models tend to focus on addressing these areas of engagement as a means of integrating students into academic discourses. This often means aligning student discourses with established academic values. This paper focuses on what first year Australian teacher education students value about their learning and teaching in their transitional year. We argue that there is a fundamental difference between what the academy values, and what is valued by students. The current transition focus has been about how students perceive their courses and teaching; there has been limited examination of how Australian undergraduate tertiary students' values of teaching and learning link to engagement and transition. This paper seeks to broaden the current conversations around transition and engagement and to identify an area for further research.

Keywords: Transition, First Year Higher Education, Pre-service Teacher Education, Values

Introduction

Engaging and Retaining first year students is a current concern within Australian and international institutions of higher education (Australian Council of Educational Research [ACER], 2009; Krause & Coates, 2008). This is particularly so in the Australian context where recent changes to the higher education sector have impacted on issues to do with first year student transition. These changes, such as an increased discourse of quality and accountability in higher education, government funding tied to student numbers, and government and societal pressure to widen access to non-traditional tertiary students (Blackmore, 2009; Bradley, Nugent, Noonan, & Scales, 2008; Marginson, 2006) has, and will continue to, impact on first year pedagogy and transition measures. Transition strategies have focused (and largely continue to focus) on engaging students academically, institutionally, and socially as a means of integrating them into appropriate tertiary discourses (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006). This paper is concerned with examining what first year, teacher education students value in learning and teaching, and what this might mean in terms of their engagement and transition. For this paper we draw on data from two separate cohorts of first year students studying at two Australian universities. One is a large metropolitan campus of a Queensland university and the other a regional campus of a large Victorian university.
Background to the Study

Theoretically, this paper is situated within the body of literature pertaining to the first year in higher education, specifically the body of literature examining issues of engagement with academic learning and transition. The experience of first year students in relationship to the scholarship of learning and teaching has been an ongoing focus within the transition literature for the last six decades. With this year marking fifty-five years since the initial survey of first year students in Australian universities (see for example Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; McInnis, 2001) it is timely to consider past findings and new ways forward.

The review of literature suggested that engagement and transition have become increasingly topical over the past decade, due to several reasons as noted above: institutional concerns with the social and economic costs of student disengagement particularly during and after the first year; increased Federal Government pressure in Australia to widen tertiary participation; and increased internal and external discourses of accountability and quality in higher education (Blackmore, 2009). Despite almost 60 years of research and knowledge about engagement and transition in the first year, it is interesting to note that there is still no definitive model or models of best practice for the first year in higher education. This is despite calls for a more focused and co-ordinated approach to first year student engagement (Kift, 2008). Although this paper uses grounded theory processes, it was useful to review previous research into student engagement and the first year student experience. Both to consider why transition and engagement remains an ongoing area of concern and also to discover how our findings matched previous trends.

The literature indicated the critical importance of student engagement with learning for successful transition into first year and persistence with academic learning in future years. This emphasis has remained remarkably consistent over the years (see for example Kift, 2004; Kuh 2002; Moss, Pittaway, & McCarthy, 2006; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Current transition discourses place high importance on student engagement. According to Tinto (1993) engaged students have an enhanced first year student experience, have improved grades, and persist to graduation. Schulman (2002) further states that engaged students will also participate in lifelong learning. Traditionally, concern with student engagement has resulted in increased systemic and personal support for students (see for example Duff, Quinn, Johnson, & Lock, 2007; McInnis & James, 2004; White & Carr, 2005). McInnis and James (2004) noted that predominantly this support is focused towards reducing the perceived dissonance between a student’s existing academic practices upon entering the university and university academic practices. There has been less focus in both the Australian and international literature, reviewed for this study, on considering exactly what first year undergraduate students value in regard to learning, teaching and associated academic practices and how that might impact on their engagement.

Our original study was aimed at investigating first year students’ teaching and learning needs and their engagement strategies, however, during the data analysis process, which used grounded theory processes, we started to realise that the teacher education students in our studies were also reporting on how they valued particular aspects of learning and teaching within their first semester program. This led us to reconsider the literature regarding the first year experience and to re-examine the literature on engagement through the lens of student values. A subsequent review of the literature identified a small body of research into undergraduate student values across all year levels in relation to learning and teaching, for
example: Cortazzi and Jin (1996); Crawford and Bradshaw (1968); McInnis, James, and McNaught (1995); Tam, Heng, and Jiang, (2009); Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, and Minor (2001) however there is little specific to first year transition. The dearth of research into what first year students value in learning and teaching indicates a gap in the first year transition literature. This paper seeks to start to address this gap.

The Study
The study used grounded theory processes, an emergent methodology, where themes emerge from the data rather than being directed by specific research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As mentioned above, the original study intended to investigate the learning and teaching needs and engagement strategies of first year teacher education students. Twenty-four first year students, currently enrolled in a four year teacher education program of study at two different Australian universities, were involved in this study. Four focus groups were conducted in a metropolitan campus of a Queensland university at the end of first semester in 2007. Ten females and four males were involved in the two hour focus groups. The age of the participants ranged from 18 – 43 years. In 2009, four focus groups of ten students (nine females and one male) were conducted at the end of semester one at a regional Victorian campus. In this instance, the age of the participants ranged from 18 – 35 years. All participants were Australian citizens. Conducting focus groups over two different settings enabled us to compare data across two contexts and to begin to form generalisations about what students in a teacher education program of study value in their learning and teaching.

The focus groups were semi structured in that discussion points were initially presented to the group by a research assistant. These discussion points asked the student to reflect upon the first year teaching, their learning in their first year, their assessment completion strategies, and their engagement practices. Students were also at liberty to discuss any aspect of the first year. Each two hour focus group was electronically recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then analysed using simple grounded theory processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where data were compared against each other to identify categories and sub-categories. The categories of the practicum, learning and teaching and teaching staff were identified.

Findings
Teacher education programs are commonly designed to include university lectures, tutorial teaching, and regular structured periods of time where the students work alongside a practising teacher in a classroom setting. These practicum experiences are carefully designed to complement and reinforce university teaching and to provide students with a structured and safe entry into the profession. At the time of this study the students in both tertiary settings had had one practicum experience of one week’s duration and their role in the practicum had been limited to classroom observation, and on a rare occasion, teaching a lesson provided by their supervising teacher to individuals or small groups of students. It is not surprising given the important place practicum plays in the student’s current and future lives that they would particularly value learning, teaching, and experiences that pertain to their future career.
The Practicum

The students believe that the experience of practicum is the most important aspect of their degree because of its relevance to their future profession and its importance in determining whether they choose to undertake teaching. The following three excerpts also note that exams and subjects are not as valuable as the student’s professional experience:

The most important part of each semester were the pracs . . . I don’t really care about the exams . . . but the pracs, that is what we are going to be doing after we finish the course, so that’s what we’re actually learning to do. That’s why I don’t understand why we don’t have more of them but to me that’s the most important part. We’re learning to actually be teachers and we’re getting the experience to be teachers.

I think your first lot of prac . . . and that is a real decider of whether or not you actually want to be a teacher. I find a lot of the subjects we do, like obviously they are helpful but a lot of people say don’t worry about how you feel about your subjects . . . but as long as you are enjoying prac and you feel confident in that, you’ll be fine . . .

We should definitely have a few weeks [of practicum] at a time and I know that’s what 2nd and 3rd and 4th year are all about. We should have it now in the first year then we’ll actually learn a lot more because we’re not actually learning all that much in tutorials and not learning as much in the lectures as we do with the experience because the experience is where it’s all coming from.

While it is evident that practicum is valued because of its significance to their future careers, they also have strongly held opinions about what constitutes effective and relevant learning and teaching in their university based studies. Learning and teaching that is clearly related to their immediate needs such as practicum and passing assignments is highly regarded.

Learning and Teaching

While one student appears to value the socially constructive nature of learning, she is a lone voice in this cohort:

A lot of the courses I have found have been very prescribed and what we are being taught is very prescribed and there is only the [state] Education way of doing it and is where education is currently and this is what we will do. And I may be very naive and thought that university was more about a breeding ground for new ideas, thinking and maybe that’s only PhD people and postgrad. But I really thought that we should be feeding off each other and learning from our tutors and lecturers and then doing something with that knowledge rather than going yes, we will just repeat it back to you.

The remaining students do not see the value of learning that is not immediately and obviously applicable to classroom practice. Theory is particularly disdained.
I find it is a tug of war with [Physical Education] because you have Mark with the practical and then our theory. Honestly, I can’t see as a future educator how I can use the theory and all the textbooks that we are given.

I am trying to get some information across to you, this is how I would do it to a classroom group of year 6 or 7 and we would get more from that than theories of blah blah blah up on a PowerPoint presentation. Doesn’t mean anything. It is meaningless.

However, while these two comments plainly divorce theory from practice the following comment recognises the relationship and notes the value of the practicum for helping the student understand their tertiary based learning.

[my prac] gave me more insight into like the theory that I’d been learning. Like coming back to uni, something might be mentioned and I’d think oh yeah I saw that example in the classroom. I saw the teacher using that with the students; I saw him doing that with his planning. So it was really nice to be able to relate what we were learning back to the experience we had on prac.

While students are lukewarm about theoretical knowledge, they are quite adamant that they prefer subject content that has utility for their practicum. They want solutions, ideas, skills, and resources that will help them be successful in their practicums. Interestingly, the first excerpt is about having a toolkit of instant solutions rather than having a theoretical repertoire that enables her to work through problems.

You want solutions to problems. . . If you are out on a three week prac you don’t want to have to spend a month trying to work out how to fix a problem. You need to be able to get to those problems. Get to the solutions or start to identify the problems before they get that extreme that you can’t.

Stuff that you can take away and put in a folder or something so for your next prac you have got a visual to think of even for English or something that you would have the visual. I suppose that is my learning style, to have something you can pull out and refer back to quick and easy.

These previous two comments suggest a survival mentality amongst some students. This is also evident in the following quotes where the students want relevant and practical knowledge that that will assist them “now… not for when we graduate”.

[Knowledge that is] relevant for now. Not for when we graduate. It’s for on our next prac. How are we going to be able to take this and use this . . . The more practical sort of subjects are exactly like that…So in Maths you got told you teach Maths in this sequence and this is how you teach it . . . so I actually walked in [to prac] thinking I could honestly give it a go and then you have got other subjects where you walk out thinking so how can I convert that, to use that with a child.
You can’t see the relevance of [some subjects]. Or you do not see it. You don’t see the relation while out on prac. They give you the ideal of what should happen but it may not be what is actually happening. And, I think that they have to be relevant.

I have really found a real struggle with Math in particular how that we are learning a style of Math that is not actually being used out there. Learning X style of Maths but they are operating and have been operating on Signpost and Go Maths and whatever. To have some experience with those so that when we go out there and we are told right tomorrow you are doing a Math lesson and I want you to do fractions that we are actually using the language that the children are using.

This third quote indicates that the student would prefer to know about existing classroom teaching approaches rather than new approaches that may be more effective. Finally, the students value teaching and learning that enables them to successfully complete university based assessments. The better lectures and classes are perceived to be those that focus on assessment.

*I think tutes should be more focused on the assessments and how to do them rather than just. A lot of them seem to be wasting time.*

*[The tutorials for the subject] were all about the assignments and how to write it and what was expected and where to find the information and what they wanted written and how to write it and how it all fits together . . . that is the first tute I’ve ever been to where I felt like it was worthwhile.*

*All the lectures that D presented prior to starting [the assessment] were really, really helpful because it outlined exactly everything that we needed to do. Examples of resources that we could use.*

The message that students value teaching and learning that supports them in their practicums and assists them to complete assessment appears to be clear. They also value university teaching that is informed by current classroom practice and experience.

**Teaching Staff**

The students considered the most valuable lecturers were those who have current industry links, base their teaching on real life experiences, and are able to model effective classroom teaching.

*[The best lecturers] are still involved with that hands on experience whether that is teaching or curriculum director at a school or still out in the schools at some stage supervising teachers or meeting with teachers to try and get an idea of what’s still happening because I mean even five years removed could be enormous depending on what issue you are talking about.*
Good traits for lecturers? Providing real life experiences as former teachers. Like I was telling you before, a middle-years teacher’s last semester . . . he was great. He told me things that when I went on prac happened. He told real life experiences.

[The best lecturers] actually bring their teaching experiences or their ideas alive so that you can see yourself implementing some of the stuff that we are learning. You can feel it.

The findings from our study indicate that students value the professional experience of lecturers, industry placement, and information that assisted them with successful completion of assessment tasks over what they perceived to be unrelated academic theory. That students value this form of knowing is recognised and understood within the teacher education literature (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, what that means in relation to students’ engagement and transition is absent from the current discourse of first year higher education transition. We discuss this in the following.

Discussion

As noted earlier, research into first year transition has been an ongoing concern for almost six decades and yet given the extent of the literature there appears to be no definitive model of best practice for student engagement. Our initial aim of the study was to investigate engagement and successful transition practices of first year teacher education students. In the analysis of the focus group data it became evident that the students linked engagement with values. In an effort to understand this further and move the conversation about transition forward, we draw upon the work of Billet (2009). While Billet’s (2009) interest is in the area of work integrated learning in higher education he offers potential insights into how we might begin to rethink first year transition. Billet reminds us that higher education deals in three types of knowledge:

- domain-specific conceptual knowledge - “knowing that” (Ryle, 1949): i.e. concepts, facts, propositions - surface to deep . . .
- domain-specific procedural knowledge - “knowing how” (Ryle, 1949): i.e. specific to strategic procedures . . . and
- dispositional knowledge - “knowing for” (i.e. values, attitudes) related to both canonical knowledge and instances of practice . . . including criticality. . . (Billet, 2009, p. 832).

Billet (2009, p. 833) notes that the above three forms of knowledge are “richly interconnected and interdependent” and further notes that this interdependence is realised in practice. It appears from the findings of our study, that the students are privileging procedural knowledge, or knowing how, and failing to recognise or acknowledge the importance of the other two forms of knowledge to their learning. At this stage of their development as tertiary students and future teaching professionals it may be unrealistic to assume that they would begin to see, much less value, the interconnectedness of these forms of knowledge, especially given that they have only completed one limited practicum experience.

Traditionally, higher education has valued all three forms of knowledge although, arguably, tending to privilege conceptual and dispositional knowledge above procedural. This is par-
particularly so in vocational programs of study where establishing and transmitting conceptual and critical knowledge is considered the domain of the academy while procedural knowledge is realised in the workplace. Our intention in this paper is not to delve into how to inculcate first year students into all three forms of knowledge, or whether it is feasible, reasonable, or timely to do so. Rather, the findings of this study alert us to consider how differences in the way knowledge is valued might impact on how students engage in their first year studies.

The transition literature is explicated in terms of institutional, academic, and psychosocial engagement and current theoretical approaches to first year transition advocate for either an integration approach or an adaptation approach to engaging students (Zepke & Leach, 2005). An integration approach assumes that the student assimilates into existing institutional and academic discourses while an adaptation approach focuses on valuing the student’s cultural capital and adapting institutional and academic practices to suit student diversity. Conversations around integration or adaptation inevitably lead to tired discussions about student retention (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009), discussions that have been underway for 60 years. We support Palmer, et al. (2009) in advocating for a richer conversation around transition, one that incorporates the place and value of forms of knowledge and student learning. This conversation might start with an examination of what we in the academy value in terms of first year knowledge, why we value it, and what are the implications for student engagement and learning. To illustrate, the students in this study have identified an historical tension in teacher education between practice and theory (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, rather than lament our first year student’s apparent ambivalence towards deeper conceptual learning, a more productive conversation might focus on how our structures, pedagogy, and practices might privilege particular forms of knowledge over others and how these might contribute to such comments as “theories of blah blah blah up on a PowerPoint presentation. Doesn’t mean anything. It is meaningless”. For example, we might consider the types of subjects that are timetabled in first semester and whether they reinforce learning for teaching or learning for intellectual growth and development. We might also consider how the placement of practicum in the first weeks of their academic career sends messages to the students about what we in the academy value in terms of learning or teaching. Possible conversations and directions forward are discussed in the next section.

**Future Directions**

We propose that conversations about student engagement need to remain in the forefront of scholarly discussions regarding the first year in higher education. However, we also argue that wider conversations than those currently underway in the public domain are required. For instance, conversations considering how the values professed by the academy differ from those held by first year students about knowledge, learning, and teaching, and how that difference impacts on first year transition. In line with this, we need to examine what we value and how that is disseminated to our first year students. This might mean examining how institutional discourses about learning and teaching are presented to students through course structure, course content, and related practices.

Further conversations are also necessary as to the type and content of learning required by students in the first year. Learning and teaching that enables students to develop critical understanding and dispositional knowledge, rather than focusing on what students think they
want in an effort to retain them within the institution. To hold such conversations a reflective examination of our own practice is required.

**Conclusion**

This study has shown that the teacher education students in our studies are not evidencing a lack of engagement, rather they report high engagement with practicum and assessment related learning. This has highlighted to us that the important question is not whether first year students are engaged in learning, but rather what particular types of knowledge engage them and why, and what this means for their transition into higher education. Following this, conversations about how the types of knowledge first year students value align with traditional academic discourses about the place and value of particular forms of knowledge in first year transition pedagogy, are required.

**References**


About the Authors

Dr. Sharn Donnison

Dr. Sharn Donnison works in the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University, Australia. Her areas of research are principally focused on First Year in Higher Education, pre-service teachers and teacher education. Currently, she is investigating the teaching and learning needs of first year teacher education students and their preparedness for tertiary education. Her previous work has focused on various aspect of the Gen Y pre-service teacher such as their cultural models and discourses about technologies, lifelong learning, and the future. She has also researched in the area of alternative forms of education particularly practices and pedagogies of home-schooling parents.
Debra Edwards

Debra Edwards is a lecturer in English and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, La Trobe University, Australia. She has previously taught in primary, special education, alternative settings, and Reading Recovery. Her current research focuses on analysis of language and literacy policy using a Critical Discourse Analysis lens and the first year in Higher Education.
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS JOURNALS

www.Arts-Journal.com
www.Climate-Journal.com
www.ConstructedEnvironment.com
www.Design-Journal.com
www.Diversity-Journal.com
www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com
www.Humanities-Journal.com
www.OnTheImage.com
www.Learning-Journal.com
www.ReligionInSociety.com
www.Science-Society.com
www.SpacesAndFlows.com
www.SportAndSociety.com
www.Sustainability-Journal.com
www.Technology-Journal.com
www.ULJournal.com
www.Universities-Journal.com

FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com