

Privileging the student learning journey: The promotion of 'character' and its relationship to retention in higher education

Dr Karen Noble & Dr Robyn Henderson

Faculty of Education
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

First Year Infusion Program (FYI)

- Focus on transition to university (retention)
- Wanted a holistic faculty-based embedded approach
- Pilot study 2007 – What to do when you don't know what to do
- Learning Circle approach to inform pedagogy and practice

Building capacity

- Integrated support – students from across specialisations
- Situated context – undergraduate teacher preparation
- Supportive community of practice
- Prepare students for the challenging social contexts of their future work as teachers
- Infuse value of character into the transition program
- Impact on quality of interactions, relationships and friendships
- Develop portable knowledges and skills
- Commitment to complete the undergraduate student learning journey

Building capacity and relationships by ...

- Developing agency of 'at-risk' students
- Creating a supportive community of practice where first year students, academics and learning and teaching support staff explore the multiple realities of the student learning journey
- Using a collaborative approach

The learning community

- Academic and information literacies
- Subject-specific knowledges
- Social networks
- Interpersonal skills and groupness are essential features supporting academic achievement

**Why the social?
Personal tensions in the transition:
Getting over the isolation**



Creating a site for social support

- No formal structure in sessions
- No formal presentations by academic staff
- Instead dialogic conversation was co-constructed and always emerging from initial student concerns raised at the time

Connecting the social with the academic

- Critically reflective conversations
- Involvement and collaboration – students, academic staff, learning and teaching support staff and library staff
- Element of duality to provide a more integrated and infused approach to supporting students socially and academically
- Opportunities for professional development of academic staff as they work with students

The collective: share, try, reflect



Sharing and solving problems: Give to the collective

- ‘When we came to [the learning circle] and shut the door, it was like we got to shut out everything that was going on and we had time just to be and to think through solutions to each others’ problems.’

Connections across multiple contexts



Colour-coded bags



Survival skills across personal and university lives



Traffic lights – study and home



Traffic lights at home



The importance of relationships: Getting to know and trust 'real' people



Academics and students have been proactive in identifying, creating, maintaining and enhancing desired and mutually beneficial relationships that are perceived to be of value



Infusion of 'character' in developing a sense of place

- links to other educational contexts (pre-service teachers as emerging teachers)
- provide information and guidance on how to develop a positive disposition in context and how to form connections and to have a sense of place
- understand pre-service education as the beginning of induction towards becoming teacher: exploring personal and professional epistemologies
- explicit exploration of the discourses of university student and professional educator –working towards the development of a positive professional identity as committed and well-balanced
- Hargreaves (1994) notion of the boundless self where the individual is able to respond to the changing environment through a continually reflective stance

Insights

- 'Good teaching' involves engaging students in a relational learning context
- Align curriculum and pedagogy – continually shaped to enhance agency
- Sense of place (the room) creating a space for learning and reflecting
- Contributed to wider social change for participants
- Significant impact on students' discourse and practice of university life

More insights

- The stronger the interpersonal relationship between teacher and learner, the more likely that students will be
 - Self managers
 - Greater capacity for critical reflection
 - Increased levels of confidence in the learning journey
 - Sense of personal and professional fulfilment
- For further professional development resources to guide academics in enhancing relationships with students negotiate new rules:
 - understand identities and environments
 - (re)consider academic expectations and content
 - form new friendship groups
 - build a climate of trust for building connectedness

Subjective motivations forming a collective movement

- Promotes sustainable change
- Encourages pedagogical conversation
- Development of community strategies
- Perceptions of self as learners
- Construction of close friendships
- Perceived balancing of power relations

Sustainability

- Recognition of the importance of delivering these elements in a planned and systematic way that is sustainable
- Literature on values and character education (primarily in primary and secondary school) indicates that positive educational cultural change is impacted by a deep commitment by the organisation as well as the individual teacher to a vision energy and focus that emphasises the building of the character of resilient learners where a cohesive and integrated approach unites student learning and behaviour



To conclude ... Where to now?

- Just like young children and adolescents, the adult learners requires a means of understanding, interpreting and challenging unspoken norms in relation to character within their future educational contexts – Develop relevant social support networks to sustain them on their lifelong learning journey
- Engage first year students in voluntary and genuine relationships
- Further research on how to engage academic staff
- Focused efforts on student achievement and success, institutional excellence in connecting with students
- Create stimuli for pedagogical conversations – personal and professional identities, authentic partnerships and relationships – keys to the transformation of transition program building
- Measure the tangible impacts on the quality of interactions, relationships and friendships that occur for students and academic participants