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Tutoring strategies to engage first-year students in the transition to university learning: The students' perspective

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ABSTRACT

Transition to university learning is often difficult and complex for Australia's diverse student population, therefore it is important for academics to implement strategies that enhance student engagement. This paper examines how students perceive the usefulness of tutoring strategies adopted in the first six weeks of study, specifically how these strategies assist in engaging students in their learning. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore the feedback from a group of first-year students in a Property Programme on their learning experience in an Australian university. Three main themes were highlighted in the findings: student-centred teaching style, feedback, and assessments. Of these, the student-centred teaching style was identified as the most significant factor in engaging students' learning and, hence, in assisting students with their transition. This suggests that tutors need to be student-centred and caring of students in engaging in their study, particularly during the transition period.

Key words: Tutoring strategies, first-year students, transition, student engagement, student-centred learning

INTRODUCTION

With the changes in government funding arrangements, the high attrition rate of students has become a pressing issue for universities in Australia. An average attrition rate of more than 18% nationally presents a clear challenge in retaining first-year students to engage in a new learning environment (The Australian 2009, p. 3). Student transition into university culture is often complex and difficult (Kember 2001; Krause 2001; Lawrence 2005), and first-year experience has been identified as a critical factor contributing to students' learning success (McInnis 2001).

The traditional teacher-centred teaching approach is no longer suitable (Biggs & Tang 2007); and student engagement has been given high priority in the first year during the transition to help students to adapt to university learning (Krause 2005). However, the question remains: how do we engage these students during the transition?

In addition to support services offered by central units, a national study conducted by Krause et al. (2005) on Australian universities suggests that academic staff play a significant role in assisting first-year students engage with their study. This is confirmed by a cross-disciplinary study conducted in an Australian university on students who have completed their first twelve months of study which found quality teaching is an important factor in improving first-year retention (Zimitat 2006). In other words, support from the beginning is critical for student success.

Tutors influence students' academic performance (James & Baldwin 1997); and they are also instrumental in the success of the first-year transition (Rhoden & Dowling 2006). Given that tutors are the front-line for student contact, they are central to student engagement and transition (Rhoden & Dowling 2006). As the first few weeks are critical to students' learning experience, it is vital for tutors to adopt effective tutoring strategies to engage them. This is

beneficial for students' studies, but also helps them adapt to the university learning environment.

Most studies revolve around problems and strategies for managing transition; however, very little research has been carried out specifically addressing the role of tutoring in first-year transition. Thus, this paper intends to address two research questions: (i) what aspects of student-centred teaching approaches were identified by students as most useful? and, (ii) how do students perceive these strategies in assisting them in transitioning to university learning?

Findings from this qualitative research highlighted three main themes: student-centred teaching style, feedback, and assessments. Of these, the student-centred teaching style has been identified as most significant in engaging students' learning and hence assisting them in their transition. This research suggests that tutors should be student-centred, responsive to students' needs, and caring of students in engaging in their study.

This paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, a review of past literature on university transition, student-centred learning, student engagement, and tutoring and tutors' roles is undertaken. Then, it will be followed by the methodology, discussions on the results, and finally a conclusion based on the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition to University Learning Environment

Student attrition has become the focus of education research in Australia over the past decade as a result of an increasingly competitive higher education sector. Many Australian studies illustrate the trends in first year experience, for instance: the increasing diversity of the student population; greater non-study commitment, such as part-time jobs; and the impact of technologies on learning (for example, Krause et al. 2005; McInnis, James & Hartley 2000).

In addition, there is a significant body of research on factors contributing to student attrition and strategies to increase retention rates (Bean 1983; Krause 2005; Thomas & Yorke 2003; Tinto 1997; Zimitat 2006). Undoubtedly, the first year of university study is of utmost importance as nearly 30% of first-year students in Australia indicate intentions of leaving study in their first year (Krause et al. 2005). In order to assist students in this transition period, students' needs and expectations must be first understood; then only we can adopt useful strategies to induct students into the expectations of university learning (Laing, Robinson & Johnston 2005).

The first year of university studies is a period of transition, either from high school, from a working environment, or other social background. Many first-year students are either not familiar with, or have been ill-informed about what to expect from a university education (Nelson et al. 2006). Sometimes, student expectations can be unrealistic and may cause students to have difficulties in adjusting to the university environment (Krallman & Holcomb 1997). Students are most at risk in the first year, in terms of social and academic failure (McInnis 2001); hence, universities have to be responsive to their needs and try to assist them to adapt to the different set of learning expectations. As suggested by Skene, Hogan and Brown (2006), first-year transition is a series of adjustments; not only on the part of the students, but academics also have to be more responsive to accommodating their needs.

Students' expectations of teaching and learning are partly influenced by their previous education and life experience (Ozga & Sukhnandan 1998). As well, their level of pre-university preparation is crucial in affecting their adaption to university learning styles (Lowe & Cook 2003). Students should not be blamed for their poor understanding of university expectations; instead, universities ought to be student-centred and supportive, and encourage social and academic integration (Tinto 2008) from the beginning for their later academic success.

Poor academic performance (Sharma & Burgess 1994) and students' dissatisfaction with their academic experience (Price, Harte & Cole 1991) were among reasons of student withdrawals. Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992) suggest that student motivation is significant for academic success; thus, quality teaching is one of the approaches to motivate students to improving first-year retention (Zimitat 2006). Therefore, it is critical for us to manage their learning experience well from day one for their later success in university (McInnis 2001). To achieve that, it is appropriate to provide the necessary scaffolding to first-year students to adjust to a more independent style of university learning (Nelson et al. 2006). Hence, this research will further investigate the effectiveness of engaging first-year students by using student-centred learning approaches.

Student-Centred Learning

Student-centred learning is a 'a broad teaching approach that includes substituting active learning for lectures, holding students responsible for their learning, and using self-paced and/or cooperative (team based) learning' (Felder & Brent 1996, p. 43). As opposed to teacher-directed learning, the student-centred learning approach has been given preference in teaching to engage students for better learning outcomes (Lea, Stephenson & Troy 2003). A student-centred approach is important to develop graduate qualities (Biggs & Tang 2007; Felder & Brent 1996; Lea, Stephenson & Troy 2003). A longitudinal study conducted by Lonka and Ahola (1995) within the Department of Psychology at University of Helsinki found students who were exposed to student-centred learning perform better than those with teacher-directed learning.

In contrast to the traditional teacher-directed approach where the teachers are in control of the academic content and learning process, the student-centred learning approach emphasises student responsibility and activity, rather than what the teachers are doing. In summary,

characteristics of student-centred learning include emphasis on students' goals for learning; formulation of activities to encourage deep learning; promotion of discussions between students; assessment based on real-world setting; more choices about where, when and how students study; and teachers as guides, mentors and facilitators of learning (McKeachie, cited in Landrum 1999).

Biggs (1999, p.61) suggests that student-centred learning focuses on students' learning to bringing about conceptual change in their understanding of the world; it is what students do that is important. Thus, one of the strategies is to include group work to promote group learning activities to increase students' interactions and engagement (Skene, Hogan & Brown 2006). Ultimately, it is what the students' do that is important in constructing their knowledge (Biggs & Tang 2007).

Student Engagement

In Australia, from 1994-2000, 30% of students responded negatively on teaching quality in the national first-year experience survey; this is equivalent to the number of students who were considering withdrawing from universities (McInnis & James 1995). These students perceived academics as unapproachable, inaccessible, and not interested in their work. They also thought they provided poor feedback. However, a study conducted in 2004 shows that students were more positive about teaching quality in the last decade with improved staff commitment and accessibility (Krause et al. 2005). These findings highlight the importance of quality teaching in higher education. Thus, it is crucial for academics to understand students' conception of learning in order to develop effective teaching strategies to engage them (Biggs & Tang 2007; Ramsden 2003). In other words, academics ought to be sensitive to students' perceptions on good teaching, on their needs and what academics should do in constructing an environment conducive for their learning.

Student engagement is a central issue in higher education to improve learning quality and market competitiveness (Krause 2005). Kift (2004) argues that students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to succeed in their learning. However, the challenge remains how to engage first-year students in university learning environment. Student engagement is defined as the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcome (Hu & Kuh 2002, p. 555). Therefore, the institutions and the staff need to provide the right environment to promote engagement (Davis & Murrel 1993; Krause & Coates 2008; Ramsden 2003) particularly during the transition to university learning.

Curriculum design and interactive classroom activities are instrumental for students' academic and social engagement (Tinto 1997). It is said that students' active engagement in classroom activities is a key factor in generating motivation and persistence in study (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan 2000). Biggs (2003, p.1) claims that 'constructive alignment is an approach that we should use to design a curriculum that optimises the conditions for quality learning'. He further argues that students are the ones who construct meaning through relevant learning activities; what is important is what the student does. On the other hand, the 'alignment' means what the teacher does is to provide a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes (Biggs 2003, p.1).

From the student's point of view, the assessment is the curriculum (Ramsden 2003); it is thus a powerful tool to engage students in their learning (Taylor 2006). Hence, we have to ensure that assessment tasks are aligned to the intended learning outcomes. A good assessment encourages student to adopt deep learning processes. As Rust (2002, p. 150) says, one of the most important influences on students' learning approaches are the assessment strategies used; students are more likely to use deep learning if they can see the relevance and

importance of what they are required to do. Therefore, assessment should be early and formative (Thomas & Yorke 2003) in order to engage first-year students in their study.

In addition to assessment strategies, tutorials have become an important teaching method (Steinert 2004) in providing the right environment to enhance student engagement. As tutorials encourage active interactions between tutors and students, it is proposed tutorials are an ideal platform to implement student-centred teaching to engage first-year students academically.

Tutoring and Tutor's Roles

Since quality teaching is important to improving first-year retention (Zimitat 2006), support from the beginning is critical to their success. Research shows that there are improvements in students' academic skills, thinking skills and problem-solving ability related to tutoring activities (Gordon et al. 2004). Hence, tutorials play an important role to improve the quality of university teaching (Lorenzo & Juste 2008).

Tutorials are less formal classes than lectures and provide opportunities for students and tutors to discuss key topics, concepts and ideas in an interactive way. In other words, tutorials provide more opportunities for students to have face-to-face interaction with the tutors. Tutors not only influence students' academic performance (James & Baldwin 1997), they are also instrumental in first-year transition (Rhoden & Dowling 2006) that helps to reduce attrition (Potolsky, Cohen & Saylor 2003). As the first few weeks are critical to students' learning experience, it is vital for tutors to employ effective tutoring strategies that enhance student engagement.

It is suggested that students will be able to engage themselves better if they can benefit from small group learning (Kantanis 2000). In this case, as tutors are the front-line for student contact, they are the ones who are most likely to engage in a face-to-face discussion, either in groups or individually. For many new students, tutors *are* the university; therefore, tutors are

central to engage students with the university classroom experience (James & Baldwin 1997; Rhoden & Dowling 2006), particularly during the transition period.

Research by Rhoden and Dowling (2006) on first-year students finds that students rate the role of tutors very highly, and regard them as one of the most important relationships in their academic experience Simply put, the role of the tutor is not only fundamental to students' academic engagement (Kift 2002), it is also integral to students' transition to university learning culture as a whole (Rhoden & Dowling 2006).

Students expect a more comprehensive role of tutors that is able to engage them in their study, as well as helpful in their transition to university learning. For instance, role of tutor can be considered to be a guide, supporter, teacher specialist, teacher coach, helping teacher, support teacher, and encourager (Lauland 1998). Not surprisingly, tutor attributes have been identified as important characteristics of effective tutoring; this includes his/her personality, the ability to promote group interaction as well as problem-solving (Steinert 2004, p. 286). In other words, a teacher's self and personality are significant in reaching all students (Yam & Burger 2009).

In short, it is evident from the literature that tutoring is instrumental in supporting and enhancing students' academic experience; therefore it is important to ensure quality tutoring in improving retention rates. As suggested by Zimitat (2006), the more positively students perceive teaching quality, the more likely they are to continue with the study. Thus, this paper aims to explore the perception of first-year students in a Property Programme about the usefulness of tutoring strategies in engaging them in their study during their transition to university learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To encourage effective learning, collecting students' feedback is an effective means of giving students a voice in course delivery (Sander et al. 2000). This was an exploratory

qualitative study to understand how students responded to the tutoring strategies adopted in their first six weeks of study in a first year Property course. An open-ended questionnaire was used to ask students to comment on tutoring strategies. The questionnaire was designed to answer the two research questions: (i) what aspects of student-centred teaching approaches were identified by students as most useful? and (ii) how do students perceive these strategies in assisting them in transitioning to university learning?

The participants in this research consisted of a group of 38 undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year introductory Property course in an Australian university. Various tutoring approaches were adopted to engage students in their learning. For instance, icebreakers were used in the first lesson to make them talk and get to know each other. This aimed to help students feel more relaxed and comfortable with their peers and the tutor.

Students were informed clearly on the assessment requirements on the first day of tutorials in order to minimise the gap between the tutor's expectations and students' understanding of the assessment criteria. As well, the benefits of tutorials were explained to students, for example, how tutorials can provide opportunities for discussions, problem-solving, and in becoming skilled at learning how to apply knowledge to solve real-world problems.

Students were required to work in groups to accomplish weekly exercises to help develop effective peer relationships and provide opportunities to discuss their assignments together. In addition, more help and support were extended to students who were 'weak and shy' in discussion. Also, students were encouraged to see the tutor in person or by email should they have any problems.

To improve student learning, in addition to weekly tests, tutor provided weekly problem-based exercises for students to work through in groups to apply theory in solving real-world problems. For example, students were taught how to measure building areas, and then conduct actual field-work in groups with the tutor's presence. Group work was emphasized

as it helped to promote interactions and friendship among students. As feedback is crucial for student learning, formative feedback (both regular and immediate) was given so that students understood their mistakes and knew how to improve them. Furthermore, group discussions were synthesized and summarized in every tutorial to reinforce student understanding.

The questionnaire was administered in-class to maximise response rates in Week 6. As this was the first time these first-year students were involved in a university survey, they were reminded the responses should be centred on teaching aspect only. The introductory information and questionnaire design were planned to frame the students' mind on the right focus, and the terminologies used in the questionnaire had also been used in the tutorials to ensure the students understood the questions.

In accordance with the university evaluation guidelines, the respondents were advised on the research objectives and the use of data for external publications (University of South Australia 2008). All participation was voluntary, and responses remain confidential and anonymous. No formal ethics approval was required for this exercise.

As the university record did not identify students in first year of study, questionnaires were applied to all. Of 38 students in the class, 28 students responded; 15 self-identified as first year in university; and the other 13 self-identified as in later years. Since this research was designed for first-year transition students, only the 15 responses from first-year students were analysed. Therefore, the response rate stood at 40%, which was considered as sufficient for this exploratory study. Of the 15 respondents, there were 10 males and five females, including two international students. There were 10 students aged younger than 20 years-old, three students aged 20-25, and two other students older than 39. All international students were aged 20-25.

The qualitative data were analysed using the constant comparison method (Boeije 2002; Boyatzis 1998; Braun & Clarke 2006). This enabled the researcher to analyse the

differences of perceptions between different groups of students, for example, between males and females. As this study was only limited to a small group of Property students, the result should be taken with prudence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were three main themes observed from the responses on the first research question about the usefulness of student-centred teaching approaches: student-centred teaching style, feedback, and assessments. As indicated by the literature, student-centred teaching style is about emphasising students learning, creating activities and environment that encourage students to adopt deep learning approaches to achieve the desired learning objective.

Words frequently used by students indicating student-centred teaching style include: approachable, motivating, encouraging, helpful, interested in my study, interested in the subject, made the subject interesting, good explanation, and organised tutes. *'Asking questions during and after tutorials are made simple. Tutor answers questions in the best way possible. Therefore confusions are made clear on the spot.'* Thus it is suggested that a teacher's personal attributes were crucial in engaging students. These attributes had enabled students to ask questions whenever they had doubts, and this had made them feel comfortable and interested in the course. This is in line with Sander et al's (2000) findings that teaching skills and approachability are important qualities of a good teacher.

An academic's ability to motivate students is a crucial factor in engaging students in their study: *'She always makes sure that we understand everything and this makes us more confident about doing the practical aspect'* and *'These had helped me get motivated as I get confidence in knowing that if I encounter a problem help is accessible and feedback will be sufficient.'* Also, students feel obliged to study well so as not to disappoint the tutor. One

student said, *'You could feel as if you are letting her down after all the help she has given you.'*

It is evident from the above comments that support from the tutor is not only imperative to students' academic engagement it is also critical in helping to improve the quality of teaching as well. This is in line with Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo's (1993) findings that interactions between teacher and students are important in retaining enrolled students; uncaring and indifferent attitudes will only encourage student withdrawals. Also, it is important to ensure that the teaching activities are engaging, such as through the use of group activities and field-work to stimulate students' interest: *'This subject has had a different approach than others and it seems to be much more interesting and fun. I look forward to this class all week.'*

The second theme identified was feedback, as this was found to be significant in engaging students academically. Students viewed helpful and constructive feedback as important for their study. One student commented that regular feedback was helpful so he/she knew what went wrong and how to improve on it; this is imperative as good feedback gives them opportunity to rectify their mistakes before any damage is done (Goldfinch & Hughes 2007). It was worth noting that most students who worked part-time found feedback to be important in assisting them to cope with their learning. Perhaps this was because useful feedback helps by guiding students how to rectify their mistake efficiently and effectively, particularly during face-to-face discussions with the tutor.

The third theme identified was assessment, as this is important in engaging students in their learning. Results showed that younger students (< 20 year-old) viewed the weekly test positively as they found it useful in forcing them to study regularly. This is in line with Ramsden's (2003) proposition that from the student's point of view, the assessment *is* the curriculum; they focus on what will be assessed, not what is in the curriculum or even what

has been covered in the class (Biggs 2003, p. 3). It may be argued from the findings that, because older students tend to be more self-regulated, they could manage their study better than younger students.

In addition, the group exercises and assessments were also well received by younger students (< 20 year-old) as they were able to make more friends and discuss their studies together. As high school leavers, this group needs more peer support in negotiating with their new life compared with the older students. This has the additional benefit of increasing retention, as the more students interact with their peers in educationally purposeful way, the more likely they are to be engaged academically (Gellin 2003; Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling 1996). Most of these students did not work in any paid employment enabling them to have more time to engage in their learning. Also, these students found that group exercises made the subject more interesting.

It was interesting to note that all female students found the best aspect of teaching to be the tutor who was motivating, approachable, and helpful. It could be surmised, this is because female students tend to need more emotional support than male students, particularly during the challenging transition period. Although only two international students responded, both of them valued a tutor who was approachable, helpful, and motivating. As these students were away from their overseas families, they may have required extra motivation and assistance in adjusting to their life in a different country and culture.

For the second research question, 'how do the students perceive these tutoring strategies in assisting them in transitioning to university learning?', many students found the tutors' student-centred tutoring style had given them confidence: *'The tutor is approachable and helpful that makes us feel confident'*. In addition, this tutoring style helped to make their transition easier and not so stressful: *'Approachable tutor makes the transition easier.'*

As the students became confident with their university studies, these strategies assisted students to cope with challenges in transition. *'Encouragement to go through tough tasks makes it helpful to continue this university journey.'* This was predominantly relevant for those students under 20 years-old. As pointed out by Cook and Leckey (1999), these students would have developed a certain learning style in high schools and these skills are likely to be at odds with the independent learning style encouraged by university study. Hence, this sudden change of learning culture requires them to make significant adjustments to adapt to the university learning environment in which they needed more support to cushion the impact.

As expected, both international students responded that the approachable tutor had helped to make the transition easier. Being away from their families, we would anticipate this group to be much in need of emotional support compared to domestic students.

In short, to help students to cope with difficulties during the transition, tutors need to be student-centred, and responsive to students' needs to help them become engaged in their learning. It is essential to support these first-year students from the beginning by using effective tutoring strategies to improve first-year retention. This is important, as in addition to influencing students' academic performance (James & Baldwin 1997), tutoring is also instrumental in helping students to cope with challenges in the first-year transition (Rhoden & Dowling 2006).

When students were asked about what they would like the tutor to do to aid their transition, many students said they wanted to have a tutor who is approachable, friendly, and interested in their learning. In line with earlier discussion, most students younger than 20 years-old wanted to have an approachable tutor who gave them confidence and support in adapting to the new challenging learning environment. Conversely, older students, who may be more mature in handling their emotions, required less support of this kind from the tutor.

In spite of this, we may infer that a teacher's personal attributes and teaching style are crucial in influencing students' transition experience. Therefore, using a student-centred approach is not only important for students' learning, but it is also helpful for their transition.

Compared with younger students, many older students (> 20 year-old) found practical exercises and helpful feedback to be useful in engaging them in their transition. This could be because there were many problem-based learning activities in the tutorials that these students were so engaged in applying theories to real-world problems (Biggs 1999, Biggs & Tang 2007). In addition, to make learning effective, formative feedback (both immediate and regular feedback) was given to enhance student understanding.

Forty per cent of the respondents were 'very satisfied' with their tutoring experience, while another 60% were 'satisfied'; these results suggest that the tutoring strategies were useful for the students.

CONCLUSION

Transition into university learning is often challenging for first-year students; therefore, universities need to provide the right conditions and support to assist students to adjust to this new environment. This paper was designed to examine how students perceive the usefulness of tutoring strategies adopted in their first six weeks of study, and how these strategies assist in engaging them in their learning during the transition.

In summary, the research findings demonstrate that there were three main themes highlighted by students: student-centred teaching style, feedback, and assessments. Firstly, student-centred teaching style has been identified as most important in engaging students' learning and, hence, assisting them in their transition. This student-centred teaching style focused on the tutor's personal attributes as well as inclusive tutoring skills that reach all students. This was particularly evident with the empathetic attitude and behaviour of the tutor

with attributes, such as being approachable, helpful, and taking an interest in students' study and well-being. As these students were negotiating with numerous challenges during their transition, this teaching style was helpful in providing them with confidence and support in their learning.

The second theme, feedback, was found to be effective in reinforcing student understanding of the subject. This is in line with the findings of MacMillan & McLean (2005) that helpful and constructive feedback was important to enhance learning.

Thirdly, assessment was found to be important in engaging student learning. Interestingly, group activities and assessments were viewed positively by younger students (< 20 year-old) as they found it an effective way to make friends and study together. These younger students also viewed weekly assessments positively as these had forced them to study regularly. In addition, problem-based learning assessment was also found to be effective in engaging students as it enabled them to apply theories in solving practical problems.

Inevitably, tutors assume critical roles in helping first-year students to engage with their study as students have longer contact hours and one-to-one relationships with tutors. It is thus important for the tutors to adopt effective tutoring strategies not only to engage students in their study, but also to help them adapt to the new challenging university environment. To achieve that, tutors need to be student-centred, caring and responsive to students' needs.

Although this research was only limited to a group of Property programme students, these strategies could be beneficial to other disciplines as they are generic strategies. We found this type of student evaluation as useful to explore first-year students' perceptions on their learning experience; thus it should be part of an ongoing exercise to explore strategies to enhance student engagement. Nevertheless, as suggested by Kantanis (2000), whatever strategies that are proposed, this study found that by university educators being caring and

attentive to the students' needs, they are important in providing assurance and encouragement in their transition.

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