

Envisaging a Future: Enhanced Transition

Introduction

Widening access, increased participation by disabled students, and unprecedented cultural diversity force a necessary revision of the way we approach transition. The requirement is for whole-system improvements, wherein the committed engagement of teaching staff is essential. A collegiate university like Cambridge intensifies this challenge because of diffusion of localised practices.

One initiative, recently launched at one college in Cambridge, seeks to influence student transition through the work of ambassadors. PGCE students, and those on fast track courses such as the M.Ed., bearing a commission that allows them to cross and re-cross the territorial boundaries of secondary and tertiary education. As they prepare to enter schools they are invited to attend meetings of the College's teaching and learning committee to inform them of developments in terms of teaching innovation and research into issues pertaining to student learning. After their own transition, from college back to school, the ambassadors are invited to return to Cambridge periodically in order to brief the teaching and learning committee on developments in A level teaching and to update themselves changes in college practice. The whole endeavour is carried out with the consent of the school in each case. The idea is set to develop further: via the ambassadors the schools will invite teachers from the college to attend A level classes, and even give classes, in an attempt to more nearly align teaching practices at the A level-first term undergraduate checkpoint. The vision extends to plans for future annual symposia – where all the ambassadors gather in Cambridge to plan, with academic developers, student transition year on year.

It is imperative to see the student experience in a holistic 'joined-up way' from the perspective of the student [McCaffery, 2010, pp. 274-9]. To this end, pre-empting difficulties through creative forward planning is essential. One form this might take is the development of strategies that support students in pre-entry decision-making: virtual summer schools to enhance preparation for learning (including study skills), for instance,

and the formulation of processes that recognise the phenomenon of perpetual transition - built on a framework of *Learning Development* [Goss (2010)].

Plans to deliver more effective welfare services, the introduction constructive alignment, enhanced course design and pedagogical practices including better use of technology, are being introduced at Cambridge to accelerate and maintain student engagement [Johnston, 2010, pp.1-35]. And research by Trowler and Knight (2000) into the induction of newly-appointed academic staff leads on to the thought that we might one day seek to supplement *Freshers' Week* with an annual *re-Freshers' Week* for teaching Fellows (learning development walking hand-in-hand with academic development - pedagogic training, supplemented by peer support and mentoring).

What is to be Achieved?

Our aim must be to ensure that the ways in which we induct new students prevent, as far as possible, conditions and situations that might cause feelings of alienation, in order to accelerate the process of productive learning. Newcomers are reliant upon supportive orientation in coming to terms with their new environment if their entry is to be effective. [Mann, 2001, pp.12-13]. Successful acculturation occurs when the new learner feels equipped, supported, and enabled to engage in self-regulated study. Students remain in transition throughout the entirety of their undergraduate courses, and beyond, and the challenge is to find creative ways to support them accordingly.

How is it to be Achieved?

Effective transition depends upon two processes which are interdependent: *domestic* orientation, and *academic* orientation. Mann gives five conditions required to dispel [domestic] alienation that might be condensed to three: *collegiality* (reducing the polarised roles of 'them' (Freshers) and 'us' (academics, and 'experienced' students); *hospitality*; and *criticality* (a realisation that agency is borne out of the right to question

and interpret one's surroundings).¹ The process of domestication is facilitated by committed, gentle, interaction by sympathetic staff and students.

Academic orientation is a complex task because of the multivariate learning experiences folded within an annual intake of 140 new undergraduate students. In any educative context there exists qualitative variation in the way students approach their learning [Entwistle (2009), pp. 33-41]. The quality of the approach affects the quality of the learning outcome - as does the willingness of teachers to develop innovative approaches to engage with students [Gibbs (1999)].

Unprecedented diversity among school-leavers intensifies variation among Freshers, in terms of their perception of their new learning context. Furthermore, new students are influenced by prior experience of learning – which may adversely affect their undergraduate performance in the short to medium term or until they are introduced to new approaches [Prosser and Trigwell, pp.83, 99; Scott, 2000]. It is probably the case that a significant proportion of Freshers starting their academic training, when under pressure, resort to surface approaches to learning that are sometimes encouraged by A Level learning [Prosser and Trigwell, pp.86-98]. And here the insight of R. Säljö is invaluable: 'one cannot avoid observing the almost perfect way in which a surface orientation meets the criteria of alienation' [R. Säljö (1982)]. In simplistic terms, the surest way to incorporate new students may be to stimulate opportunities for deep approaches to learning at an early stage. We aspire to enhance student transition, and improve qualitative learning outcomes, through a carefully crafted programme of *academic development* among teaching staff. Only when this is achieved can *learning development* be fully effective.

Revised Principles for Student Transition

From Johnston's 'Key Characteristics of Mainstreaming' [p.46- 66] five principles have been derived that might be communicated to new students (with enthusiasm) in order to:

¹ Mann gives five conditions to dispel alienation: solidarity; hospitality; safety; the redistribution of power; criticality. [P.17] In the case of Queens' the entire undergraduate population lives in one large court of the main site, providing solidarity and safety.

encourage self-belief; stimulate emotional investment in academic study; and excite a spirit of shared ambition:

1. Learning development is the shortest way to student integration and incorporation.
2. Student engagement is enhanced by participating in evaluative processes from the start: critical conversations best determine what works domestically and academically for each student.
3. Teaching strategies adapted to locate and intercept students according to their perceptions of learning are most likely to succeed.
4. Teaching that guides learners towards a self-conscious approach to learning – that encourages them to address their motives, intentions, and the demands of the academic task – tends towards self-regulated learning [Biggs (1988), p.187].
5. Complete transparency, extended over teaching, learning, and assessment, inspires mutual trust and confidence in teachers and in learners.

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