Learning Transitions (0251)

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This paper is empirically-based and focuses on four types of transition, and one approach to facilitating these transitions: improving the processes of formative assessment and feedback during Masters-level study in HE institutions. The four transitions are:

1. ***Pure to Applied Discipline*** This transition refers to students who, having taken a first degree in a non-applied subject such as physics or philosophy, then undertake a higher degree with an applied orientation. Movement is from a disciplinary base with an agreed set of methodologies and approaches to a new practice-orientated setting.
2. ***International Context to UK National Context*** This refers to the gap between an international student's expectations about learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and UK HE approaches to learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.
3. ***Work Intensification*** This transition involves the addition of part-time study responsibilities to full-time work. Students may encounter a number of problems in making this transition, including those related to time, energy, and commitment.
4. ***From Traditionally Under-Represented Backgrounds to Academic Setting*** This transition refers particularly to current policy issues relating to widening participation (WP) agendas.

Students undergoing these single or multiple transitions are now common in UK Higher Education Institutions. Empirical data were collected to investigate the experiences of the four groups of students (n=50) over a period of time (one year) and those of a group of tutors (n=15), teaching on the various programmes. This was achieved by extensive interviewing (both individual and group, by telephone and face-to-face), by asking the students to keep a diary during the year of study, and by collecting documentary material in relation to these learning processes.

As students negotiate these transitions (in singular or multiple ways), they are likely to find differences within their programmes of study that refer to the ways in which different sets of relationships are enacted at different levels and at different sites. However, this is not to deny that there will be common aspects across these various programmes. So, for example, the learning experience for the student is likely to be hierarchical, with students accepting that they have less experience than their tutors. There will also be aspects of commonality in the 'rites' of initiation and acculturalisation into student life.

However, and this is where differentiation occurs, disciplines which emphasise 'correct' views of knowledge and fixed and agreed procedures for developing that knowledge are also likely to have a particular view about the relationship that should be established between tutor and student, and about how the student should be positioned. In contrast, in those disciplines which are characterised by a plethora of languages or approaches, and which do not have an agreed view of knowledge or of knowledge development procedures, the tutor/student relationship is likely to be understood in a different way. There are other factors which influence difference; for example, the history of the department/tutor, the location of the university, and so on.

Furthermore, students conceive of the experience of study in different ways. The first of these is that the student learns the rules about how they should behave and adapts temporarily. This may be about what constitutes an appropriate form of writing and talking (presentation), or what constitutes appropriate forms of knowledge in the discipline and how to make sense of them, or even what constitutes appropriate practices in the discipline and

how to operate within them. But they do not integrate them into their repertoires of action and belief. In other words, they dissemble, because for a limited period only, that is, until they get their qualification, they want to be accepted into the discipline. Ultimately Masters-level status is a badge of esteem rather than a signifier of identity in the discipline. These are students who become acutely aware of the 'interaction rites' and ways of enacting them in order to maximize opportunities for success.

The second way is that the student tries to take on this academic identity but for a variety of reasons they cannot or do not enter into the practices of the discipline; that is, they do not fully understand the rules of the new practice; the rules of the new practice are opaque; the rules are disputed and their understanding of them is mediated through a particular person, perhaps their tutor (who may be a maverick); or the pull of the rules in their professional setting is so compelling that they ignore the new rules. The third way is that they are able to access these new rules and instantiate them fully and successfully.

Yet, learning is complex and potentially rich and rewarding, and one in which the student is presented with a mass of information, ideas, schema, opinions from a number of different sources (i.e. books, articles, lectures, seminars, emails, eseminars, personal communications and so on). What the student does is shape this mass of information, and this shaping can take a number of different forms: partial shaping, complete shaping, discarding with no replacement, confusion, on-going, going backwards and forwards and so on. Shaping takes place against a background; aspects of which may or may not be implicit and where some but not all of them can be surfaced for deliberation. For individuals having to mediate between their various multiple identities, learning is irredeemably social, embedded, and selective.

The rationale for this project is to develop understandings of important transitions that groups of students go through during their Masters-level study and their relationship to formative processes of assessment and feedback, use this information to construct policies and resource deployments to facilitate more effective transitions, and then test these out in real-life settings.