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Higher education learning for all, or just for those 'in the know'? Socio-cultural knowing and success for Australian students from low socioeconomic status

Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment
Topic: Learning

Abstract

As the Australian higher education population further diversifies as a result of federal policy shifts, new thinking and approaches are needed to ensure the success of all students who are afforded access to higher education. Drawing on a recently completed national Australian study, a new conception that positions the success of university students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) as a joint venture toward bridging socio-cultural incongruity is outlined. The findings from 89 interviews with successful LSES students and 26 staff experienced in teaching and supporting LSES students are discussed. The findings show that what these staff and students believe has helped LSES student learning centres on student agency, socio-cultural knowing and student support. The implications for Australian higher education are considered.

1000 word paper

As the Australian higher education population further diversifies as a result of federal policy shifts, new thinking and approaches are needed to ensure the success of all students who are afforded access to higher education. Recent government targets and other policy arrangements will bring students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) into Australian higher education in greater number and proportion than ever before. This paper reports on a recently completed national study that examined effective teaching and support of LSES students in Australia.

The study developed a distinctive conceptual framework that avoids adopting either a deficit conception of students from LSES backgrounds or a deficit conception of the institutions in which they study. Rather than being the primary responsibility of solely the student or the institution to change to ensure student success, the research team conceptualise the adjustments necessary as a 'joint venture' toward 'bridging socio-cultural incongruity'.

The notion of socio-cultural incongruence is adopted as a way of thinking about the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and the high socio-economic institutions in which they study.

The first deficit conception is that students are 'the problem'. The suggestion that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students can presuppose a level playing field in relation to socio-cultural and background characteristics. As Devlin (2011) notes, it can be seductive to think that if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try hard enough, or persevere enough, or believe enough in their own ability, they can engineer their success at university on their own. However, Devlin (2011) also suggests the tacit expectations inherent in university practices are within a socio-cultural subset that is

peculiar to the upper socio-economic levels. Unless these implicit expectations are made explicit, they may operate to exclude students from LSES backgrounds who are not familiar with the norms and discourses of these other groups.

The second deficit conception is that institutions are 'the problem'. This frame problematises the institutions responsible for the success and progress of students from LSES backgrounds. Some who hold this frame suggest that rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, institutional cultures be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Zepke and Leach, 2005). Others suggest that there are situational and dispositional barriers created by institutional inflexibility (Billingham, 2009) and that "…the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating inequalities" should be taken into account (Tett, 2004, p. 252). In an Australian study of the first year experience, James, Krause and Jenkins (2010) suggest that universities should make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith and McKay, forthcoming).

However, as Devlin (2010) and Devlin *et al.* (forthcoming) argue, to genuinely contribute to the success and achievement of non-traditional students, universities need to do much more than to better spell out their expectations for student involvement in learning.

The new, socio-cultural conception is that incongruence must be bridged. A conceptual framework of 'socio-cultural incongruence' is proposed to describe the circumstances in which students from LSES backgrounds attempt to engage with the particular socio-cultural discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. Murphy's (2009) UK study of factors affecting the progress, achievement and outcomes of new students to a particular degree program found a number of characteristics specific to the institution and to individual students that promote progression and achievement. These factors enable the incongruence between students and institutions to be 'bridged'. Hence – 'bridging socio-cultural incongruity'.

Method
Data for the national research study on which this paper is based was collected from four major sources:

- A review of peer reviewed and other significant literature on in the broad area of the experience of students from LSES backgrounds in higher education;

- Interviews with 89 students who were from LSES backgrounds and in the first generation of their family to attend university and who had successfully completed at least one year of university study;

- Interviews with 26 staff known for their expertise in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES backgrounds at university; and

- An environmental scan of effective practice in programs, policy and initiatives in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES backgrounds across Australia.

Findings

The study found that the socio-cultural incongruity that exists between students from LSES backgrounds and the institutions in which they study can be bridged through the provision of an empathic institutional context that:

- Values and respects all students;
- Encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum;
- Incorporates inclusive learning environments and strategies;
- Empowers students by making the implicit, explicit; and
- Focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

These characteristics were derived through the project's literature analysis and are supported by the evidence from interviews with 89 successful LSES students and 26 experienced staff conducted though the study. Synthesis and analysis of the data revealed four key themes to which institutions and staff need to attend to ensure the effective teaching and support of LSES students. The study found that the empathic institutional context:

- employs inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies;
- enables student agency;
- facilitates life and learning support; and
- is cognisant of students' financial challenges.

Further analysis of the data revealed specific advice for teachers of LSES students related to enabling student agency, socio-cultural knowing and student support.

In relation to enabling student agency, the study found that effective teachers of LSES students embrace and integrate LSES and other student diversity and enable contributions of LSES student knowledge to benefit the learning of all students. These teachers also offer LSES students flexibility, choice in assessment and variety in teaching and learning strategies, whilst upholding academic standards.

In relation to socio-cultural knowing, effective university teachers speak and write in plain language to ensure students understand the concepts being taught, the expectations of them and what is required to be a successful student.

Finally, in terms of student support, effective teachers take a scaffolded approach to teaching to ensure students build on what they bring to higher education and are taught the particular discourses necessary to succeed. Finally, these teachers also ensure that in addition to being available to guide student learning, they are approachable to students unfamiliar with university study.

Conclusion

It is critical to understand and learn from 'what works' in ensuring the success of LSES students in Australian higher education. Such understanding is particularly important in a context where resources are shrinking and there is a "growing list of change forces in the environment that are challenging universities with ferocious intensity" (Fullan and Scott, 2009, p.1).

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