

Making connections: relationships and learning identities (0017)

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Context

This is a longitudinal analysis of the processes through which students acquire a positive learning identity during their degree programmes and beyond and the role that the relationships between students, staff and peers play in this process. The data are drawn from group of 45 students who had been admitted from further education colleges as part of a broader widening access initiative at a prestigious, research-intensive university. Students were interviewed in their 1st semester, annually during their undergraduate degree programmes, and a year beyond graduation. The interviews were designed to find out from the students themselves how they had fared. In addition a sub-sample (12) were interviewed 10 years after their initial enrolment about the impact of their university experiences on later professional and personal lives. All these data are drawn on to explore students' initial connectedness with staff, peers and the university and their later reflections on these relationships during and after their university careers.

Theoretical approach

Our approach draws on three interconnected frameworks. First we draw on studies of learning identities. These suggest that many non-traditional students have inherently 'fragile' identities and their engagement with new learning environments is often uncertain (Reay et al, 2010). In this model, learning is a process of identity formation that is inherently risky and uncertain (Jackson 2003). The anxiety about not knowing what is expected becomes entangled with the learning process and this is influenced by the class and gender location of the learners (Thomas, 2002). These emotional dynamics are most pronounced amongst students without previous familial experience of higher education. In such cases the acquisition of a learning identity is complex and contradictory: it can evoke powerful feelings of displacement, anxiety and guilt, alongside hopeful anticipation, pleasure and self-esteem (Christie et al. 2008).

Secondly we draw on Hodkinson in viewing learning 'as embodied, as individual and social, as the integration of product and process' (2005, 116). From this stance we argue that, because learning is embedded in the emotional life of students, it is a relational, rather than a purely cognitive, experience and this is what gives rise to identification with peers, staff and the university.

Finally we use the insights of Lave & Wenger (1991) who argue that to learn is not only to master the techniques and tools characteristic of a practice but also to become embedded into the social structures of that practice. Thus students become legitimate participants in the university community through acquiring valued knowledge and skills and by enacting particular ways of being, thinking, believing, acting, and talking. Moreover students leaving this community are able to see themselves and the world in new ways particularly where support, encouragement and constructive feedback were offered by both staff and peers (Tett, 2014).

Results

Overall we found that students had to learn, unlearn, and relearn the practices and conventions of the learning communities they moved through. The person arriving at a university is not a blank sheet; rather learning is a process of on-going change that takes

place in interaction. Learning is therefore a dynamic process through which the practices surrounding education, and the learning identities of the students, are mutually constitutive. People bring a cluster of beliefs about the nature of knowledge, a conception of learning and a belief about how teaching should take place that are reconceptualised over their learning journeys through engaging in valued educational practices. Thus, becoming an independent learner is a dynamic process that occurs within pedagogical relationships that actively work (or not) to foster the dispositions and qualities that allow the student to engage meaningfully with the curriculum.

Positive relationships with other students were important in generating a sense of belonging, especially in the transition from the supportive environment of FE to the university where peers often provided the support students had previously had from tutors or FE support services. Friendships were particularly important when students were struggling with their work and shared external commonalities such as being a 'mature' student helped bind people together. Moreover, for students that were time-poor due to their family and work commitments, peers offer readily available support that might not be seen as so accessible from staff. At this stage too, a feeling of entitlement to participate could become transformed into a 'right' when students were part of supportive networks and felt that they were coping academically.

At the later stages of this journey students were more able to engage with staff. This was both a function of perceived staff availability and also the students' conceptualization of the extent of their reciprocal relationship and connectedness with particular individuals (Shin, 2002). This was evident in a number of ways. First students were more able to navigate the system and develop academic writing skills through connecting with staff. This was a two-way process as some students also challenged staff to provide more detailed and timely feedback and take account of the impact of negative feedback.

A second way was through staff responding to students' complicated personal lives outside of the university through recognizing that adjustments had to be made. Staff needed to be available and sympathetic otherwise students internalized these problems and saw themselves as outside of the 'normal' university community.

Finally staff and peers believing in them, particularly when they went through periods of self-doubt, enabled students to feel supported. This included having the confidence to share ideas and have them listened to respectfully. This support was especially effective in building students' self-esteem and stayed with them in their subsequent personal and professional lives.

Implications

We suggest that we can only understand how students negotiate new meanings and learning identities by looking to the emotional values that they extract from the learning process. Therefore, the implications for the support and retention of students making the transition from FE to HE are: creating the conditions where students feel connected to the institution, the staff and their peers; building self-esteem; recognizing that relationships matter.