Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Richard Davies

Thu 12 Dec 2019

17:30 - 18:00

Troubling transitions: creative and critical approaches to understanding students' transitions into and through higher education.

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: Student transitions are a key part of policy and practice internationally. However researchers have begun to acknowledge that much of the research and practice within this area may be underpinned by unquestioned assumptions of what 'transition' as a concept might mean. Often these assumptions involve deficit models where students are 'supported' to fit into pre-established institutional goals, and discourses surrounding transition often depict homogenous, linear, journeys that students are expected to undertake, that involve discrete stages that must be 'smoothed', 'bridged' and made 'successful'. Drawing on story completion interviews with students, and concept map-mediated interviews with staff, at two UK institutions, I explore how we might experiment with new ways of thinking and doing transition and how we might further understand the individuality of students' experiences.

References:

Gale, T., and S. Parker. 2014. "Navigating Change: A Typology of Student Transition in Higher Education". *Studies in Higher Education 39* (5): 734-753.

Paper:

Introduction

Transition has been explored within the literature for many years and today has become a hugely significant area of policy, research and practice. However, recently theorists have begun to critique how transition has been previously understood and subsequently enacted in policy and practice (e.g. Gale and Parker 2014; Taylor and Harris-Evans 2018). Indeed it can be argued that much of the

thinking which informs policy, research and practice in the field can be considered as falling within a normative paradigm of transition. Within this paradigm, students are often depicted as following homogeneous and linear pathways that include the navigation of critical stages (induction; 'welcome' week; the 'first year experience') and this paradigm can be seen to be informed by an agenda where institutional concerns of success and retention are prioritised. As a result, such conceptions of transition have fostered an intense focus on short term, practical, strategies to promote success, for example: pre-entry, induction and welcome week initiatives, described evocatively by Quinn (2010, 123) as a 'fetishization of certain time frames and activities' . This may be problematic as this narrative fails to acknowledge the complexity, fluidity and multiplicity of students' lived realities. Indeed, as Gale and Parker argue (2014, 746-7), transition related research and initiatives can be seen to be permeated by 'conceptual silences' where understandings of the very meaning of transition are not clearly articulated or subjected to critique and are instead based on taken-for-granted concepts regarding ideal student experiences. What is missing from these narratives then are the multiplicities of students' experiences: those stories that exist in the gaps and margins of a narrative, and that deviate from preconceived expectations and homogenous, linear pathways. How, then, might we begin to understand the diversity of students' lived experiences? In order to attend to this question we employ a new methodological approach to research students' experiences as we examine how we can gather students' own narratives of transition using story completion methods. We were interested to explore: what will these stories tell us about students' understandings of transition and becoming within higher education, and how will these narratives compare to the pervasive *grand-narratives* of research, policy, practice?

Method

This paper thus draws on data from a longitudinal research study that took place at two institutions. Data were collected through interviews with three groups of participants at the two institutions: first year undergraduate students, academic staff, and learning developer / librarians who work with students. Interviews included both concept map-mediated interviews for seven staff participants (Kandiko and Kinchin, 2013) and story completion methods for eleven student participants, inspired by the work of Clarke et al. (2017). Concept map-mediated interviewing is open-ended and enables staff to surface their beliefs and conceptions of students' transitions through dialogue and the co-construction of a concept map. In this study, story completion was employed as a sense making exercise. We were interested in discovering what participants thought and wrote about transitions, learning and unlearning during university. On each occasion, participants were given a story. Participants were then asked to continue the story. In story completion, the goal is not to look for the 'truth' of the respondents. Instead, we were interested to explore the 'discourses, tropes, discursive repertoires, or constructions' surrounding transition that students engaged with (Clarke et al., 7). Our approach differed from other story completion approaches in that we then included a semi-structured interview with participants to discuss their experiences of writing the story. Participants were recruited at two institutions. Students were first year students and were interviewed on two occasions: at the end of semester one, and then that the end of semester two, in order to enable data to be compared and for students to be able to reflect in their experiences. Full ethical

approval was obtained from the author's institution. Data were then analysed using a rhizomic data analysis approach (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018; Maclure, 2010), where we sought to preserve the complexity and diversity of students' experiences within the data.

Discussion

Findings highlighted that students' learning development is not a linear process, and that students' experiences were markedly diverse. Staff and students are shown to be heavily influenced by popular narratives and stereotypes of students in transition, and yet their experiences do not support these stereotypes. Within the staff data, participants' concept maps explore the disconnections, tensions, and non-human influences that underpin students' experiences within the wider systems and pedagogical landscapes of institutions. These include a wide range of factors, for example institutional buildings and study spaces, the challenges of a modular curriculum, and of a neoliberalist context. For students, while often the stories draw upon traditional discourses of transition, our interviews depicted students' transitions differently: as individual, as ongoing, and as uncomfortable, complex and messy.

Conclusions

This study prompted a consideration of the implications of this research for policy, research and practice: for actually 'doing' transition. As a result I propose a new conceptual approach for theorising and doing transition involving three interrelated concepts: transitions as troublesome; transitions as rhizomatic and transitions as becoming (Gravett forthcoming). This framework draws upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Meyer and Land (2005), and examines how we might use concepts of the 'rhizome' and 'becoming' to explore the irregularity and fluidity of students' experiences, and how we might employ concepts of troublesome knowledge and liminality to acknowledge the value of discomfort as a necessary part of learning. A new approach to conceptualising transition may be useful in enabling us to see the granularity of students' experiences, and in understanding that individuals' lived realities do not fit neatly into established linear narratives. Ultimately, I propose that these understandings can be put to work to help reorientate the way we undertake research, practice and policy development, and that this approach offers the potential to celebrate students' learning in a more rich and generative way.

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