

Promoting Engagement and Learning in First Year University Studies: The Role of Personalisation

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Abstract

Student engagement in higher education can be conceptualised as involving three components: students' social needs and circumstances, the cognitive characteristics of academic studies, and the prevailing institutional ethos or philosophy that specifies the relationships that students have with learning and knowledge. This paper reports on an investigation into student engagement in a first-year human development course at the University of Waikato at Tauranga, New Zealand where the teaching staff has a commitment to relating learning to individual experiences. Information from an end-of-course survey indicates that a philosophy of personalisation promotes learning engagement. Students reported that they were required to think a lot or a great deal, that they put time into the course assessments, and that they valued the human development course itself.

INTRODUCTION

When students first enter higher education they are leaving somewhere that is familiar to begin formal learning again in a new and different place. A secondary challenge is that the unfamiliar courses of instruction that they encounter will vary in the extent, and the ways, that they encourage student engagement with learning. What might be seen to take place then is a meeting of uninitiated students and first-year courses which over a semester reveal contrasting degrees of receptivity for these learners. Further, the accessibility of a course is very probably influenced by two reasonably discrete sets of components: the inherent and perceived nature of the subject matter that is being presented, and the implicit or explicit philosophy of learning, teaching, and education that guides what is offered.

Swail, Redd and Perna's (2003) triangular model of student persistence and achievement is relevant to this conceptualisation, and especially when we examine engagement in learning from a student's perspective. The model is composed of social factors, cognitive factors and institutional factors. For the student, social factors include his or her educational legacy, attitude toward learning, maturity and social coping skills, family and peer influence, and social lifestyle. Relevant cognitive factors are student aptitude, content knowledge, time management skills and technological ability. The third group of factors refers to teaching delivery and academic support, and other practices that "in either an intended or unintended way impact student persistence and achievement" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 77). The conclusion is therefore that each student – and each student's learning experience - is a highly individual, and personal, amalgam of all these factors.

The case study of student engagement that follows offers a brief overview of the literature on relevant student and subject matter factors before outlining a philosophy of teaching that promotes the personalisation of learning. In essence, personalisation is a commitment to delivering teaching and learning that is responsive to the students' individual and unique circumstances. The case study that is described concerns the first year human development

course on the Tauranga Campus of the University of Waikato, New Zealand. The purpose of the research was to probe a number of dimensions of student engagement, and sought to evaluate the students' responses to delivery and assessment options which had been devised to incorporate as personalised an approach as curriculum and institutional constraints would allow. The positive results are reported here in the hope that the theoretical and practical ideas about how to personalise a course may enable other teachers to see possible applications within their own contexts, and to consider this approach as a means of further developing their own teaching and learning practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student needs and circumstances

The transition to higher education can involve many areas of adjustment for students. For instance, it is quite natural for new students to be unfamiliar with terminology and processes, to be concerned about different teaching styles and intimidated by workload, to be worried about letting themselves and family down, and to be unsure of how to relate to peers, lecturers and tutors (Fraser & Hendren, 2003). These are common first year experiences, and the challenges that are felt around individual responsibility, engagement and enculturation call for an empathetic response that negates the fear of a traditional, large, impersonal, and passive learning environment (Kuh, 2008).

The evolution to open entry to university, as well, means that as teachers, we now have unprecedented numbers of non-traditional students: mature students, students from ethnic and cultural minorities, 'second-chance learners' who did not achieve well in their secondary schooling, international students and students with disabilities (including learning difficulties), all of whom have the potential to challenge an institution's statistics for successful completions.

In 2002, the Ministry of Education commissioned a best evidence synthesis of 146 research studies which looked at key influences on student achievement (Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Zepke, 2005). The findings are summarised as thirteen "propositions for practice" (p. x). As Middleton's (2005) analysis notes, ten of these are to do with assisting students to adapt to the institution, and three are about the institution adapting to the students. Significantly, many of these propositions directly refer to acknowledging diversity within the student body rather than seeking savings through "massification" (Harris, 2005), where profit-making efficiencies are pursued through generic and impersonal programme provision. One way in which universities can effect this desired assimilation, which is itself a precursor to student engagement and success (Kuh, 2008), is through course design and delivery which deliberately fosters a sense of personalisation.

Personalising learning - the principle and the practice

According to the British philosopher R. S. Peters (1959), it is in our practices that we reveal the "moral brass tacks" of our educational intentions. Articulating the teaching and learning

aims of university undergraduate courses is not difficult. Indeed, the literature contains a multitude of studies which continue to redefine the central tenets of optimal tertiary educational provision in such terms as independence, individualism and self-fulfilment (e.g., Merriam & Brockett, 2007). The goal, therefore, is an educated person who is capable of independent thought; and in much of the literature, the personalisation of the teaching process is seen as a key means to that end (David & Clegg, 2008; Keefe, 2007; Knox & Wyper, 2008).

Personalisation, according to Knox and Wyper (2008) is about “ensuring that public services are offered in ways that are responsive to individuals and have been tailored to their specific needs and interests” (p. 7). Knox and Wyper continue that personalised learning aims to provide an integrated model to meet the widely differing needs of students, and that it is pervasive and multi-faceted, including learning, teaching and assessment pedagogies. The concept, they say, is socially constructivist in nature, seeing the learner in a holistic way, within a context of community, and fostering a relationship of collaboration whereby learners help shape services and the organisation. Personalisation is promoted as a way to counter the effects of large class sizes, acknowledge individual learning styles, and to engage and empower learners (Knox & Wyper, 2008). A useful summary of the concept comes from David and Clegg (2008):

Personalization and the personal have now become ubiquitous in the pedagogical discourses of higher education. As higher education has expanded in the context of globalization and itself become global, it has both elided and incorporated questions of diversity, difference, inequality and power (p. 1).

One concern often voiced by those who question the practicability of a pedagogy of personalisation is the undeniable observation that undergraduate programmes are constrained by a host of curricular, logistical and institutional parameters (Fraser & Hendren, 2003). While teachers may try to change the ‘feel’ of the learning experience, we are constantly inhibited by a need to retain a consistent, institutional ‘look’. Critics would therefore ask how realistically attempts to provide a personalised learning culture, to connect with students and to promote learning, can occur within the three standard components of lectures, tutorials, and assignments. One response is that such in-class approaches sit alongside and are complemented by the provision of academic support to students by learning advisors, particularly through the one-to-one work they do to make learning more meaningful and motivational for students (Manalo, Marshall & Fraser, 2010).

In any discipline, lectures have the potential to give students frameworks for assimilating material, and they provide staff with opportunities to demystify tougher topics, defuse anxiety, deal with content in customised or imaginative ways, and enhance student motivation. Tomey and Henchy (2008) say that immediate engagement, relationships, and feedback can all be achieved through the traditional lecture/tutorial format, once students understand that they have to work at rendering an explicit and personal understanding from the implicit structure. The authors of this paper suggest that, through reflecting and

developing “personal redescrptions”, students can respond to the teacher in a discursive loop – provided such a culture is enacted. Personalisation, by both staff and students, can therefore be pursued and can flourish within the appearance and trappings of a traditional university delivery.

Tutorial topics can reinforce student engagement through personalisation by including issues of the moment, as well as matters of more perennial interest. Ideally, any and every topic should potentially be up for discussion, allowing students to make meaning and clarify prior knowledge and past experiences in the light of their new learning. It is important that tutorials should be welcoming and hospitable occasions so that students will do ‘the hard things’, as Palmer (1994) advocated, like saying what they think and believe, challenging other people’s thoughts and beliefs, and admitting to themselves and others that their present conceptualisations could have flaws. A learning environment must also be conducive to participation and wellbeing by responding with enthusiasm to every opinion, whether it is expressed as a ‘throw away’ observation, or stated with more apparent sincerity (Tomey & Henchy, 2008).

Through revelation and discussion the subjective is made objective, and the lessons of life are distilled from a morass of events, reactions, and emotional responses. Initially, at least, this can be a threatening undertaking for students, and the tutor has to be constantly alert that the appropriate balance between comfort and challenge that Brookfield (1990) called for, is observed. On occasions the tutor must intervene and end a certain line of discussion, and sometimes this is because it is sensed that a student is becoming uncomfortable or the classroom dynamics do not feel right. Personalisation in the tutorial setting thus involves the tutor’s social adeptness and ability to be guided by his or her own instincts in managing the classroom environment. This is pivotal to maintaining a setting that can enable students to bring their personal experiences and views to be tested, refined and sometimes even transformed.

How assessment contributes, or not, to learning is a general concern in higher education (for instance, see Carless, Joughin, & Mok, 2006), and university course designers have tried, and continue to develop various assessment approaches. Being problematic need not mean being unprofitable, however: assignments offer tutors an excellent opportunity to link course content to the course objective of personalisation. What are best, say David and Clegg (2008), are the essay/report/research proposals which require students to select a topic and present their own ideas against a summary of literature. The topics that students select for the research proposal are likely to reflect personal interests; and the exercise clarifies, codifies, and intensifies these interest areas. A personalised teaching philosophy therefore means that students are encouraged to approach assessments in subjects such as human development, by looking for connections and parallels with their own life stories.

THE CASE STUDY

A personal rationale

About six years ago, the first author radically altered his approach to lecturing; the cause was a student complaint. The student said that she found human development disappointing because the lecturer simply passed on academic content when he could have told the class what he had learned from his various career engagements as a police officer, probation officer, primary school teacher, secondary school teacher, guidance counsellor, and psychologist. In sum, the student said: “You have done all the things that we hope to do, but you keep it all to yourself.”

As this student recognised, it is the link to experience that can bring the personhood of the lecturer and the students into the classroom, and realise what Palmer (1994) refers to as the ‘mutual irradiation’ of autobiography and an academic discipline. We have the intellectual interests that we do because of the experiences that we have had, and if we are prepared to be open about our engagements we can provide an enriched learning experience for others. Further, as Palmer makes clear, this is not an egotistical indulgence, because the *motive* that drives the self-disclosures is different, and here personal experience is not offered as a confirmation or conclusion, but as another option, or as an additional perspective. The lectures in human development at Tauranga are now ‘seasoned’ by the lecturer’s experiences, (they have increasingly become forums for the discussion of student experiences as well), and this is clearly appreciated by students:

His ability to draw on interesting stories from the past and relate them to aspects of our learning really helped me to have a firmer understanding.

Subject demands – the case of human development

The diversity amongst beginning human development students is probably greater than in other disciplines because this subject is often suggested to students as a ‘starter’ or ‘gateway’ course. It is a requirement for teaching, early childhood education, social work, nursing qualifications and an assortment of other health science degrees as well. Therefore, despite comparatively large class sizes, these papers are not necessarily being voluntarily selected.

According to New Zealand textbook writers Claiborne and Drewery (2010), human development is concerned with the changes in people’s lives that allow them to continue to adapt to their circumstances. It is a challenging subject for many people because much of the material is densely theoretical and it resists simplification. The specific topics covered as described in the course outline are: theories of development; beginning of life; infancy; early childhood; language development; cognitive development; middle/late childhood; adolescence; problem behaviours; gender; taking up adult identity; middle adulthood; stress; late adulthood; death; and enhancing wellbeing.

Student issues and a challenging discipline notwithstanding, human development has, potentially, an incomparable advantage over other university subjects: it is about all of our lives from conception to death. Every student who studies human development is a ‘storehouse’ of relevant information – provided that this is recognised by tutorial staff. Ideally, the study of human development should be “motivated and impregnated with a sense of reality by being intermingled with the realities of everyday life” (Dewey, 1994, p. 14); it is precisely this opportunity to see that the lessons of personal experience are identified, analysed, cast into larger frameworks, and made comprehensible to others which makes human development such an appropriate vehicle to model the approaches to, and benefits of personalisation.

The ensuing engagement with the course material is nicely illustrated by one mature student in Tauranga who recounted the experience of her first human development class in the following terms:

I was very nervous and I wasn't sure that I would stay. My problem was that I got caught in the middle of a row in the front and I couldn't get out without it being really obvious. I felt trapped, but when the lecture got underway I found that I got swept away by all this interesting stuff. Suddenly, I said to myself "yes!", and there has only been one other time in my life that I have been so sure of myself, and that was when I told my ex-husband to leave!

Evaluation methodology

A 20-item voluntary and anonymous questionnaire was designed to evaluate students’ responses to the paper’s delivery and assessment, which had attempted to implement the principles of personalisation. The questionnaire was examined and approved by the Ethics Committee, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato, and administered in the second semester of 2008. Responses were obtained from 75 participants, who were all of the students who were present on the last day of the course and who sat the final test. As indicated, human development is a core subject in several professional qualifications and hence there are distinct sub-groups of students who do this first-year paper. The participant groups are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Research Participants

	Teaching	Social Work	Early Childhood	Other	TOTAL
Male	6			4	10
Female	25	9	21	10	65

The 20 items in the survey (Table 2) required the students to select one of four possible responses, and did not specifically invite comment. Students selected a response on a

continuum from ‘high’/’all’/’very’ – to ‘low’/’none’/ ‘not at all’ – with the actual wording was adjusted according to the question. An important justification for using this methodology was the fact that human development students sit multiple choice tests throughout the course, and they are familiar with the format. The resulting analysis, drawing as it did on a quantitative interpretation of incidence, was nevertheless clearly focused on the students’ feelings and perceptions about their study experience, including the assessment component.

In 2008 the course was assessed by five multiple choice tests and two major written assignments: a research proposal and a case study, which each contribute 25 percent to the final grade. The tests are used to ensure that students have a baseline of theoretical and empirical knowledge that can inform discussions and other assignment work. The research proposal and the study includes an illustrated poster which is displayed for others to read. Both research proposal and case study are intentionally tough assignments and require a lot of scaffolding in tutorials for students to complete successfully, but they are designed to allow topic selection based on personal interest/experience (David & Clegg, 2008).

Table 2: Survey questions

How much of the textbook did you read?
How easy or hard did you find Santrock (2008)? (The text)
How useful was the study guide?
What were your feelings about the textbook?
How likely are you to keep/re-use the textbook?
Part of the text most interesting?
Part of the text least interesting?
How important is human development?
How relevant is human development to you and your family?
The amount of time spent studying for each test?
How did you feel about the format of multiple choice tests?
The amount of time spent on the research proposal?
How much learning did you gain from the research proposal?
The amount of time spent on the case study analysis?

How much learning did you gain from the case study analysis?
The workload for human development compared to other first year papers?
The level of difficulty of human development compared to other first year papers?
The requirement to think compared to other first year papers?
The level of personal distress due to personal content, compared to other first year papers?

Survey results and discussion: Indices of engagement

The best single measure of any teaching endeavour is likely to be that the students demonstrate the learning outcomes aspired to by the instructor, and promoting student thinking is a core learning outcome for this course. Interactive learning and enquiry-based projects are also core aspects of a personalised curriculum for the same reason – that when a learning experience is personally challenging, it encourages “greater engagement and the development of independent learning and high-level critical skills” (Whittaker, 2008, p. 8). Human development students in Tauranga reported that they were required to think a lot (41 percent), or a great deal (44 percent), about the course material, with just a small remainder reporting a lower level of engagement. As well, course members said that they learned a substantial amount (79 percent) about themselves and their families. Given the emphasis on personal relevance and linkages in human development, the students were also asked whether any of the subject matter caused them personal distress or upset. Most students (61 percent) reported that there was nothing in the course that distressed them, a quarter (25 percent) indicated that they were a little put out by one topic, and nine students (12 percent) were quite put out, or really upset, by one or more topics. While these few upset students can require additional time and energy from teaching staff, overall this might be seen as a good result because it suggests that we are obtaining a lot of learning without a large amount of personal cost.

With respect to the assessment tasks, almost three-quarters of the students said that they preferred doing multiple choice tests to essays, and 85 percent of the course members reported that they did up to ten hours of study for each test. Almost two-thirds of the class (62 percent) said that they learned quite a lot or a great deal from doing the research proposal. Slightly more than two-thirds of the students (67 percent) indicated that they learned quite a lot or a great deal from doing the case study. The time invested by the students in doing the research proposal and the case study assignments was fairly comparable, with about a third of the student body each doing 6-12 hours, 13-20 hours, and 21 or more hours for both assessments. It is impossible to draw any clear inference without similar results from alternative first year papers to compare to, and because there was not the facility to cross-reference the time spent to actual grades achieved. However, it could as easily be claimed

that such a spread just reinforces the diversity of the student body – both in attitude and aptitude – as discussed earlier in this paper.

Students say that human development in Tauranga is a bit more work (41 percent), or a lot more work (39 percent), than other 100-level university courses; although the perceptions of workload do vary, with primary education students seeing the course as comparatively ‘a lot more work’ than other students (48 percent of the primary students). Nonetheless, students tend to rate the course highly and the university course evaluation system shows that 70 percent were ‘always’ satisfied with the quality of the paper and a further 26 percent were ‘usually’ satisfied, which likely indicates equivalent levels of engagement with the subject matter from students in all participating disciplines. The students’ written comments about the course, as the examples below show, mostly cluster around praise for the assessment system (tests, research proposal, and case study), with some complaints about the amount of material that is covered in the 12 weeks:

I enjoyed [the tutor’s] sense of humour and quirky multi-choice questions

Good assessment structure and use of tests

The workload was pretty full on – I felt swamped by the readings

It is likely that human development probably does not suit semesterisation; and this may be as much about accepting some of the material personally or emotionally as it has to do with amount of reading that the course entails.

When students begin studying human development at Tauranga they are told that they are unlikely to fail the course (and very few do), but that they will be challenged by it. The challenge is in having to enter into conversations with themselves and others, and to think about familiar experiences in new ways. Interestingly, several things may happen when the creative act of thinking is made central in a course of instruction. One gain is that the students themselves seem to develop respect for the subject discipline that is functioning as the means to their new thinking. Our end-of-course survey asked the students how important it was for teachers and other professionals to know about human development, and 56 percent of the respondents said it was very important, with a further 40 percent of them stating that it was fairly important. Such a strong endorsement of the value of the subject is likely to compare favourably against almost any other first year course. Although students were not overtly directed by the survey to attribute this sense of importance to the personalised teaching and assessment philosophy, it is possible to suggest at least some correlation until such time as future research might probe the causal relationship further.

A further and final consequence of embracing a philosophy of personalisation is that some of the dichotomous thinking that can distort educational discourse (exposition/discovery, deep/surface, intrinsic/extrinsic, theory/applied, teacher/learner, process/content) seems to have less significance as each of us engages with, and makes sense of, experience. Kuh (2008) notes that student engagement, that is, the time and energy that students devote to

educationally purposeful activities, rests on educational processes that create five requisite components of an engaged campus. These are: academic challenge, student interactions with faculty, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive learning environment (Kuh, 2008). The authors of this paper believe that the present evaluation testifies to the way in which the human development course's lectures, tutorials and assessments have begun to establish these five components of engagement through personalised teaching and learning practices, and this is further supported by representative student comments about what they believed were strengths of the course:

Insightful examples/case studies to make what we are learning more meaningful and relevant

Engaging the whole class in discussions

The clear explanations and empowering the students to participate

Being accommodating to students' personal circumstances

Humour, it helped us get through the subjects like depression and disabilities.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this article it was proposed that student engagement entailed a 'meeting' of students with a course, and that a successful outcome for learners could be influenced by the philosophy that guides the instruction that is provided. At Tauranga, teaching staff are committed to the personalisation of learning, and the indicators that we have used suggest that student engagement is currently being promoted by continually relating learning activities to personal experience. Personalisation treats each student as an individual, and it can develop his or her engagement with a view to each one becoming an independent thinker. Admittedly, at this time, the link between personalisation and the goal of autonomous thinking abilities is more aspirational than certain, and it would be a separate empirical matter to show this outcome. However, this evaluation of student engagement in one first year course does recommend the personalisation of learning as a meaningful and useful way to enhance teaching and learning practice within a university setting.

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