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The potential contribution of change management literature to understand and support student transitions

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The transition to tertiary student and then to working professional are likely to be particular instances of a range of transitions university students will face in their adult life. In the context of an Australian higher education environment of increasing accountability and competitiveness and the constantly changing work environment that graduating students will face, this paper identifies models and research in organisational change management that provide a theoretical basis for examining student transition during higher education. This paper identifies implications for the provision of effective support for the identity transitions that tertiary students face, based on three main theoretical models from the field of organisational change management, and provides an example of the supports as they may apply in the transition from student to professional.

Keywords: transition, change management, student support

Introduction

To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on recreating oneself endlessly.

Henri Bergson (French philosopher)

In keeping with this conference's overarching theme "how the theory and scholarship translate into a meaningful student experience", this paper examines student transition in Higher Education (HE) through theories and models within the change management literature. This recognises that both students leaving university and employees in restructuring organisations are essentially experiencing transitions, and will need to manage their personal reactions and their professional identities. While transition is essentially a personal experience, the change management literature discusses this in a systematic way to support individuals move into a new or changed professional identity, and it is this systematic treatment of student transitions (particularly the transition out of university) which is often missing in our universities. Firstly, let us begin with a working definition of both terms – change and

transition. Although both terms are often used interchangeably, for the purposes of this paper we need to distinguish between them. The term *change* is used in a variety of contexts. Broadly speaking, 'change' is focussed on the end product - the new product or process. For example, the new email system, the new process of writing academic papers or the new cohort of students. However, change is only achieved through the individuals involved making internal psychological adjustments (*transition*). Thus transition describes the psychological process involved in an individual's sensemaking and adjustment to a change. *Change* is focussed on the visible end result, while *transition* focuses on the process of internal adjustment. Change therefore is reliant on an individual's ability to reorient themselves during a transition, and transition, in turn is brought about by a change.

We also need to acknowledge the issue of scale – some changes are more substantive than others, and some transitions require major adjustments. The change of role from member of a Faculty to a Head of School is more substantive than change of office location, for example. And the more substantive the change, the more likely that the adjustment will extend to the individual's identity, understood as *an ongoing achievement wrought out of emotional and epistemological labour in the context of actual daily work* (following the discussion of Hall (2004)). This issue of scale is central to the discussion provided here. In particular, we are focusing on how the theories and models developed within the change management literature address substantive change that involves identity transition.

There are several reasons for this focus. First, education is increasingly seen as a business sector in its own right, and much thinking from business is being brought to the challenges associated with managing universities as organisations, as exemplified in the work of Ramsden (1998), amongst others. This is exemplified within the HE sector in terms of both business operation (increasing focus on the diversification of income streams as a result of decreasing per capita funding for education by the Australian government and increased accountability for expenditure) and teaching and learning (student as a consumer of a product). As a result, universities are seeking to address the impact of change on staff, through improved change management practices in order to ensure that the desired changes are achieved in timely and cost effective ways – again see Ramsden (1988).

The second reason is associated with the first – the need to ensure that students progress seamlessly through their programs of study, and into employment. There are increasing financial rewards associated with both rates of progression and in graduate destinations, as exemplified in the operation of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. The importance of developing successful transitions into student life (commonly referred to as 'the first year experience') and out into the workforce is evidenced by their appearance at the top of the 2007 HERDSA conference list of suggested topics for discussions. The attention being given to these two transitions is a recognition that their achievement can be difficult for some students, as exemplified in the report of Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005), and that traditional curriculum design practices have focused on 'within course' and discipline-focused learning rather than the more personal and substantive learning associated with the transition into and out of a given degree program, as exemplified in the work of Biggs (1999), amongst others. Traditional practices have tended to assume a neo-Darwinist view of failure, in which high failure rates were seen as a sign of high standards and

as a means to ensure that ‘only the best’ students advanced. The move to mass participation has called into question assumptions of this type – there is little reason to fund universities to provide education ‘for the masses’, if the practices in place tend to limit success to ‘the few’.

So what can we learn from the theories and models within the change management literature? We turn to key elements of that literature, elements that are centrally focused on substantive change and identity transition, to draw upon understandings of planned organisational change in terms of the processes and psychology of transitions for two reasons. Firstly, more research has been undertaken on organisational change than on student transitions, and secondly, because our graduates are almost guaranteed of experiencing organisational change during the course of their career within change-focused organisations. In the following sections we draw on the work of three main authors: Lewin, Kotter, and Bridges, as well as several others around the emotional experience of change. All reject the assumption that optimal change is smooth, linear and rational. Rather, they represent significant change is necessarily, and therefore inevitably, disruptive, emotional and ‘fraught with unknowns’.

Change Management Literature and Student Transitions

Kurt Lewin (1952) proposed a ‘force field’ model for organisational change which comprised three phases: *unfreezing* (creating the need for change and preparing to do things differently), *changing* (making the required changes to structure, tasks, technology and processes), and *refreezing* (making the changes stick). This model highlighted the importance of both preparing for change, and a sustained follow-up to change in order to ensure that the intended change was sustained. Both issues are important in considering approaches to student transition – what preparation have students had for the changes facing them, and what modelling and reinforcement do we provide?

Kotter (1995) completed a ten-year study of more than 100 companies that attempted a substantive transformation, and identified eight steps that appeared to make a change effort successful.

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
3. Creating a vision
4. Communicating the vision
5. Empowering others to act on the vision
6. Planning for and creating short-term wins
7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
8. Institutionalizing new approaches.

Kotter’s framework for change management, although focussed on the strategic process to achieve change in the organisation rather than an intrinsic transition, can assist to understand the cognitive and emotional processes a student needs to undertake during transition.

Table 1: Kotter’s change management framework applied to student transition

Phases of Change Management: Kotter (1995)	Student transition through Kotter's phases
Strategy viewpoint of change (Mainly sequential)	Transition viewpoint of change (Not necessarily sequential)
1. Establishing a sense of urgency	Awareness of the need to change into a new role and identity – student, professional etc.
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition	Identifying supports for the transition – peers, support services, careers advice etc.
3. Creating a vision	Forming an image of the future identity.
4. Communicating the vision	Adopting and internalising the future identity (through adopting the discipline-specific language etc.)
5. Empowering others to act on the vision	Taking steps to act out the new identity in increasingly public ways.
6. Planning for and creating short-term wins	Locating examples of artefacts (e.g. assessment items, CVs) from those successful in the new identity.
7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change	Using feedback (grades, boss approval etc) to improve on outputs in the new identity.
8. Institutionalizing new approaches.	Viewing the previous identity as belonging to the past.

Each of these activities can be elaborated and/or exemplified, as follows.

Awareness of the need to change into a new role and identity – student, professional etc.

- Acknowledging a change is ahead and understanding as much as possible about the new identity is important in terms of preparing the ending of the old identity and the ground for the new one to develop.

Identifying supports for the transition – peers, support services, careers advice etc.

- The individual needs to have support during the transition period to explore similar experiences, compare notes with others undergoing the same transition and get feedback.

Forming an image of the future identity.

- The student needs to imagine themselves in the new identity to resolve the internal questions of fit, comfort and competence in this identity.

Adopting and internalising the future identity (through adopting the discipline-specific language etc.)

- The student begins the process of internalising the visible and invisible aspects of the new identity, such as language, dress, and social activities.

Taking steps to act out the new identity in increasingly public ways.

- These are the first public tests of the student's new identity around others – often accompanied with anxiety about whether they are convincing to others. The reactions of others are instrumental at this point as to how quickly a

student will move through the phase – how quickly they grow in confidence in “acting out” the new role.

Locating examples of artefacts (e.g. assessment items, CVs) from those successful in the new identity.

- Important to a successful transition is identifying and modelling on successful others. Artefacts provide an important learning scaffold in a transition as they are concrete evidence of the endpoint to the transition for which the student is aiming.

Using feedback (grades, boss approval etc) to improve on outputs in the new identity.

- Affirmation and feedback is essential to identity affirmation, but where there are clinical placements or internships and the like, students tend to face the challenge of meeting two relatively dissimilar regimes of assessment—one based on the need to meet academic standards, the other based on professional workplace standards.

Viewing the previous identity as belonging to the past.

- This is an indication that the transition is close to completion. The *change* process from student to professional might be complete when the student turns up for their first day at work, however the *transition* is not complete until the student views their student identity as belonging to a previous chapter in their life.

The Transitions Aspect of Change Management

Bridges (1991) takes a more internal psychological view of the change process, drawing on anthropological research to represent change in terms of three overlapping phases. He characterises the phases as: *endings*: what has to be left behind, the *neutral zone*: the time when we have disengaged from the past and are yet to fully engage with the future; and, *new beginnings*, where we start to grow in acceptance and confidence in the changed environment. The *neutral zone* is the “journey from one identity to another, and that takes time” (Bridges: 1991 p37). His notion that identity is involved with any transition is particularly poignant when we consider the university applicant’s identity change from high school student/ worker into university student; or from university student into professional (and multiple parallel identities that may be changing also). The distinction that Bridges makes between change and transitions underpins the earlier discussion in this paper. Of great importance to this work is his emphasis on the time that successful transitions require. This is particularly important to the consideration of timing events to support student transition.

Bridges’ model of transition in the organisational environment, which starts with the endings required to leave the old situation, also has relevance in considering student transition. Upon arrival at university, often the endings associated with the transition from university applicant to student have already been celebrated and ritualised through such formal and informal events as schoolies week, high school graduation and school farewells for school leavers, or through reduction in work hours or family/ sports commitments for mature aged students. Similar graduation rites attend the

transition from student to workplace. However, their timing at the end of the university degree is not ideal given what we know about the time taken for an individual to work through a transition. Instead, the transition from student to professional needs to begin much earlier, as early as halfway through their degree – to allow students to have completed the initial transition to student, but to allow enough time for the transition to professional to have progressed towards the *new beginnings* phase by graduation.

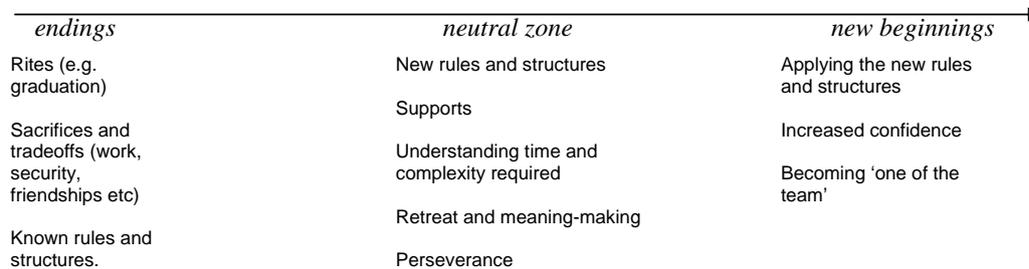


Figure 1: Bridges's organisational transition framework applied to student transition

It is interesting to note the parallels involving the phases of both the Lewin and Bridges models. There are clear parallels between the notions of *unfreezing* and *endings*. Both acknowledge the personal and emotional dimensions of change associated with a move out of an existing 'comfort zone'. There are also parallels between the *changing* and *neutral zone* phases. In both models these focus on the need to learn, while acknowledging that this learning necessarily involves engagement with uncertainty and ambiguity. The latter again acknowledge the emotional dimension of substantive change. However, the models are relative distinct in terms of the focus for the third phase: *refreezing* and *new beginnings* respectively. The former draws attention to the need to consolidate or 'lock in' change, with the metaphor implying that this consolidation is itself both static, and an outcome of the complete remaking of the old (ice). On the other hand, the metaphor of *new beginnings* brings with it the implication that 'something was added' in the *neutral phase*, and that these additions make the *new beginning* possible. It also implies that these 'beginnings' will continue be developed over the following years, rather than 'frozen' at some point.

Change, Transition and Emotion

Change management literature on organisational change is somewhat focussed on the negative emotions that threaten change efforts (see, for example, Diamond: 1993, Hischhorn and Gilmore 1989). Attempts to explain and understand resistance and negativity in those experiencing change have drawn upon psychological models of grief, such as Kübler-Ross's model, which consists of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kübler-Ross: 1973). However, some authors have argued that change can trigger an immense gamut of emotion, including positive emotions such as "hope, anticipation and faith in a better future" (Antonacopoulou: 2001). Positive emotions towards the changes have been suggested to be related to the amount of individual control during the change process. As Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers (1998) eloquently argue:

In our lives together and in our organisations we must account for the fact that everyone there requires, as a condition of their being, the freedom to author their own life. Every person, overtly or covertly, struggles to preserve this freedom to self-create. (p7)

Consequently, models for change management often emphasise the need for employee participation and involvement as a means to allow the individuals involved some scope to shape their future. In our thinking about student transitions, these authors and theories help us recognise the emotional aspect of transitioning as well as the importance of the student feeling in control over aspects of their transition.

A Framework for Student Transition: Implications for Practice

We return to the work of Kotter (1995) here because of the rather extensive set of prompts it provides in relation to the challenges associated with any identity transition. In what follows we elaborate activities that might be provided and/or promoted within the program of study in order to support the transition towards professional practice. We do so, while acknowledging:

1. the meaning-making role of transition both within the curriculum (in addition to any work placements during study) and in tandem with external supports such as orientation, career counselling. This will help ensure that individual students are able to shape their transition.
2. there is a need to start the process with enough time for the transition of identity to be well underway before graduation. The neutral zone that Bridges discusses needs to take place over an extended period of time. Starting the transition to the workplace two months prior to graduation from university is not allowing students enough time to prepare and experience the major transition that this involves.
3. that the transition to professional practice considered here applies more readily to a professional degree context where a professional identity is more readily accessible and definable. In a pure degree, many of the items considered below (alumni, position descriptions etc.) would be more challenging to ensure continuing relevance to student cohort.

Table 2: Kotter’s framework applied to transition towards professional practice

Student transition through Kotter’s phases Transition viewpoint of change (Not necessarily sequential)	Supports for Student Transition Strategic scaffolding of transition (Not necessarily sequential)
Awareness of the need to change into a new role and professional identity.	Raise awareness of the upcoming transitions through curriculum (eg, analysis of position advertisements, development of draft applications for positions), and events for targeted student groups (eg. ‘Stepping Out Conference’; employment ‘fairs’, attendance at professional conference/s) .

Identifying supports for the transition – peers, support services, careers advice etc.	Explicit building of peer networks with related e-communication, linking those networks to alumni, mentoring opportunities. Invited presentations from professional associations and/or unions/guilds.
Forming an image of the future identity.	Bring back alumni, invite mingling with industry, create opportunities for work placements, analyse position advertisements.
Adopting and internalising the future identity (through adopting the profession-specific language etc.)	Authentic learning and assessment, role playing which invites students to take on the roles of professionals and clients while still within a safe environment for experimentation. Encourage students to attend industry conferences.
Taking steps to act out the new identity in increasingly public ways.	Create opportunities for work placements, mentoring by industry-based professionals. Encourage students to attend industry conferences. Encourage graduating students to mentor beginning students Feedback from peers and industry.
Locating examples of artefacts (e.g. project designs and/or reports) from those successful in the new identity.	Providing examples of professional artefacts, industry case studies.
Using feedback to improve on outputs in the new identity (eg, feedback from clients, peers or supervisor)	Feedback from peers and industry. Work placement feedback, strategies to elicit and constructively use workplace feedback.
Acknowledging the previous identity as belonging to the past.	Drawing parallels between then and now so students are aware of their journey. Encourage graduating students to mentor beginning students

Conclusion

Aspects of change management literature are useful in understanding student transition and in identifying the supports and practices necessary to make the transitions as successful as possible. We have explored some of these in this paper, particularly Kotter's eight phases of organisational change, and Bridges's concept of transition as *endings*, *neutral zone* and *new beginnings*. These understandings from the change management literature, suggest four major implications for those involved in supporting student transition in practice:

- the importance of acknowledging the meaning-making role of transition;
- the significance of transition timelines requiring earlier preparation than currently practiced;
- using Kotter's eight-phase model to identify the types of support students may require at various stages of their transition; and,
- the central importance of transition as a within course learning agenda, requiring explicit scaffolding to support both transitions into the identity and role of tertiary student, and into the identity and role necessary to professional practice.

Current approaches to supporting students transition tend to focus on the first year experience, and to be seen too often as 'extra-curricular' options. We argue that an

explicit focus within the final two years of undergraduate courses will ensure that graduates are better placed to manage their inevitable subsequent life and within-career transitions. Surely this ought have a place as a 'graduate attribute' for all university undergraduate programs.

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