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## ENHANCING HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSITIONS THROUGH NEGOTIATED ENGAGEMENTS OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES: LESSONS FROM A PRE-UNDERGRADUATE PREPARATORY PROGRAM LANGUAGE EDUCATION COURSE

Julie Willans, R. E. Harreveld & P. A. Danaher

*McInnis (2001) has identified three key challenges for universities in maximising student engagement with the undergraduate experience: curriculum, learning community, and infrastructure and support. This paper demonstrates how the curriculum challenge is being addressed in the Language and Learning course in the STEPS pre-undergraduate preparatory program at Central Queensland University. The paper pays particular attention to the language education curriculum – with its focus on learning styles, brain-based learning, critical awareness and skill development – as it equips students to engage with ‘university speak’, critical self-reflection and negotiation of individual and institutional expectations of university.*

Although some might wish to deny it, universities have changed fundamentally and permanently over the past few decades. In part these changes have been ‘driven’ by broader economic, political, sociocultural and technological forces, including the increasing blurring of boundaries separating educational sectors and settings and new ideologies about access to, and funding of, a university education. At the same time, these changes have reflected universities having to confront multiple and sometimes conflicting views about what and for whom that university education is in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One site where these broader forces and debates about ‘the audience and purpose’ of universities are played out is ‘the first year experience’. This is where changing demographics of schoolleavers *vis-à-vis* mature age students, and so-called ‘middle class’ *vis-à-vis* ‘working class’ students, are evident. It is also where concerns about student attrition, and various strategies to boost student retention, are expressed and implemented. Thus ‘the first year experience’ might be considered a ‘litmus test’ of the extent to which students and universities negotiate their engagements with one another, and of the effects and the efficacy of those negotiations.

This paper takes up this proposition of the first year experience as a litmus test of negotiated engagements and explores it in relation to a particular form and substance of the first year experience. That particular form and substance is the Language and Learning course within the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) pre-undergraduate program at Central Queensland University (CQU). We interrogate selected elements of the course according to their effectiveness in fostering the STEPS students’ ongoing engagements with the university and hence in enhancing their transitions into undergraduate studies.

The paper consists of three sections. First, we delineate the contextual framework by means of McInnis’s (2001) perceptive analysis of change indicators and influences in relation to Australian undergraduate experiences. Second, we portray the conceptual framework that we deploy to analyse that contextual landscape by referring to selected elements of adults’

transformational learning. Third, we combine the contextual and conceptual frameworks as a vehicle for examining the curriculum framework of the Language and Learning course at CQU.

### **THE CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK: UNIVERSITY 'FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCES' AND STUDENT (DIS-)ENGAGEMENT**

McInnis (2001) has presented a generally persuasive account of changing patterns of demographics, employment and motivation among Australian undergraduates. These changes include a significant rise in students engaged in part-time work, students spending less time on campus than previously and students being less likely than before to socialise with fellow students. As a result of these changes, McInnis argues, “many young people ... have a quite different perspective on their futures and the place of the university experience in the scheme of things” (p. 7). That “place” is likely to be less central than previously and to be composed of other elements as well, such as family and friendship relationships, paid work of various kinds and varying duration, and a pervasive view that life is not amenable to prediction or overplanning. As a consequence of these factors, McInnis contends that we should eschew “the assumption that the value of student identity that comes from engagement with the university experience is a self-evident good” (p. 8) for contemporary students.

In responding to these changes, McInnis (2001) argues the need for “[n]egotiated engagement of the undergraduate experience” (p. 8). In particular, he elaborates some suggestions for strategies whereby universities might re-engage the attention and affections of students in terms of three key factors that he considers to be:

...central to any strategic response to the patterns of student engagement – the role of the universities in the design and management of the undergraduate curriculum, the need for renewed efforts to create a sense of learning community, and issues of infrastructure and support for the total student experience. (p. 9)

We have space only to take up the first of these factors: “the role of the universities in the design and management of the undergraduate curriculum”. It is therefore fortunate that McInnis (2001) asserts: “Defining the curriculum as an organising device is probably the key to universities shaping the future of the effective undergraduate experience” (p. 9). Moreover, “The curriculum is the glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together and enables the knowledge to be used effectively by the student” (p. 11). Certainly we concur that a curriculum that is negotiated, focused on linking theoretical with experiential knowledge and responsive to student concerns while also articulating staff members’ experiences and knowledge is more likely to ‘strike a chord’ with many if not all students.

According to McInnis (2001), “there has been surprisingly little conceptual or empirical work on the curriculum, and if universities are to take the initiative on curriculum they need to do so from a reflective rather than reactive mindset” (p. 10). This point is instructive: McInnis is strongly in favour of universities demonstrating leadership and making assertive claims for what they can provide, rather than apologetically and automatically conforming to perceived ‘consumer demand’. In particular, McInnis asserts that “universities need to reassert and maintain the importance of coherence and integrity in curriculum design”, because “[c]oherence advances learning and promotes independence and autonomy for the learner” (p. 10) – such outcomes presumably being among the positive attributes claimed for university studies.

Significantly, McInnis (2001) does not downplay the potential obstacles to this achievement of curriculum coherence for undergraduate students. Specifically:

This may mean, however, making some hard decisions about the point at which student choice and flexibility in delivery of the curriculum becomes self-defeating, and asserting on the basis of clear indicators that the cohesiveness of the content and the process adds value that only universities as generators of knowledge can add. It also means that universities and individual academics need to get from students a clear commitment to taking responsibility in the process, even if this has to be formalised as part of the course requirements and assessment process. (p. 10)

Thus “student choice and flexibility in delivery” are less important than curriculum coherence, while students’ taking responsibility for their learning is a crucial component of their negotiated engagements with university life. We agree, and the third part of this paper elaborates how at least some of these themes are played out in the STEPS program at CQU.

This necessarily selective account of McInnis’s (2001) analysis of the changing patterns of undergraduate student engagements with Australian university life, and of his suggested strategies for re-engaging them in ‘the university experience’, has identified challenges as well as opportunities that constitute the contextual framework informing this paper. Our examination of the STEPS program below focuses on how the Language and Learning course interacts with those challenges and opportunities in relation to the course’s curriculum framework. First, however, we turn to adults’ transformational learning as the key element of the conceptual framework that informs and underpins that examination.

## **THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ADULTS’ TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING**

Underpinning the Language and Learning course in the STEPS program is a commitment to learning that is ‘transformational’. This notion of transformational learning is described by Wlodkowski (1999, pp. 213-214) as a “socioculturally constructive process” that focuses on the cognitive processes of learning in which both teachers and students work towards a “critical orientation” to knowing the world/s in which they live, learn and (maybe) earn. In this section, we outline the salient arguments of Mezirow (1991, 1995) and Freire (1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987), as two proponents of what has become known as a transformational approach to adults’ learning. The implications emerging from the employment of this approach in the operationalisation of formal learning programs are then explored. This section then concludes with the key concepts of transformational learning that have been deployed in the development of the language education curriculum of this pre-undergraduate preparatory program.

Transformational learning takes as a fundamental premise that, in a cognitive sense, individuals can use changes in their life experiences consciously and critically to question the life-shaping forces that are mobilised in active responses to change. Central to this view is the belief that, for learning to bring about ‘transformation’, it must involve dialogic encounters between learners and teachers. Through such dialogue, life’s experiences are shared and critically examined as a means of engaging adults in the learning process and also challenging them to want to learn and as a result of this learning to bring about effective social change/s, for themselves and/or others.

Mezirow (1995) acknowledges that not all learning is transformative because sometimes people achieve learning by just adding to existing knowledge schemas. He concurs with Habermas’ (1987) position that there are three domains of learning: (i) practical or instrumental learning; (ii) interpretative or communicative learning; and (iii) critical or

emancipatory learning. While the learning in every domain is equally complex, each is used by learners for the particular knowledges it activates.

Through practical or instrumental learning, people gain the knowledge and skills to “help them deal with practical matters; use existing structures and systems such as governmental and legal processes to bring about change; and oppose the physical, practical and more obvious forms of social control” (Newman, 2000, pp. 272-273). Interpretative learning focuses on the interactions between people as they engage in communicative acts mediated by language and other socially constructed meaning symbols. The emancipatory or critical aspect of transformational learning as propounded by Paulo Freire (1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987) combines personal empowerment and social transformation as inseparable processes in which adults learn to ‘read the word/s’ so as to ‘read the world’. In other words, as Newman (2000, p. 273) concluded, through critical or emancipatory learning, people gain a “meta-awareness” of themselves through which they can also come to understand others.

Mezirow (1995) argued that significant learning in all three domains brings about a perspective transformation which is arrived at through a six-phase transformational learning process. Initially, a disorienting dilemma occurs in a person’s life, which is followed by a period of self-examination in which there is a critical assessment of hitherto unquestioned assumptions. Around this time, there is a recognition that other people have gone through similar situations which caused them dilemmas. Options for possible responses are then explored which result in the formulation of a plan of action. Central to this learning process is a dialogic engagement with others and it is through this that people come to know and understand not only themselves but also other people, as well as the social structures, systems and institutions that exert a social control over their lives.

Using this theoretical framework to scaffold a program for adults’ learning is not without its problems. In fact, a number of issues has arisen as the tenets of transformational learning have been deployed in formal education settings. Merriam and Caffarella (1999, pp. 318-399) have identified four main problems with the theories and concepts of transformational learning: context, rationality, social action and the educator’s role. First, they argue that learning is specific to the contexts in which it is enacted. This means that demographic variables of gender, race, culture, age and so on are worked out through historical, social, economic and cultural contexts. Thus a transformative approach to learning would be contextually sensitive and actively responsive to the contexts in which the learning will occur.

Second, this notion of transformational learning and its underpinning theories assumes that people will always operate from a basis of rational or logical thinking processes. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) reason that this is a problem because ‘rationality’ does not take into account other ways of thinking and logic embedded in collective knowledges and other cultural ways of thinking. Third, the place of ‘social action’ continues to remain controversial in transformational learning theories because it remains focused on the individual as the main initiator of social action. Furthermore, it assumes that we all want social action and that change is always for the better. In their fourth criticism of a transformative perspective for adults’ learning, Merriam and Caffarella turn to the ethical dilemmas of educators who engage this approach to learning (see also Brookfield, 1996). They call upon educators to acknowledge and articulate their own cultural capital while at the same time acknowledging and valuing their students’ cultural capital and ways of knowing and learning.

Aware of the pitfalls and risks, we articulate the potentials for transformational learning in a language education curriculum for a pre-undergraduate preparatory program through three key concepts: experience, critical reflection and individual development. The deliberate use of learners’ life experiences is central to this curriculum. In Habermasian terms, the articulation and recognition of the central role that experience plays in the cognitive

processes of learning links the lifeworlds of the learners with the system's institutions (such as a university) with which they have chosen to engage (Habermas, 1987).

Critical reflection as a concept means certain pedagogical actions in practice. It means that activities are designed so that learners are asked to “analyse, infer, synthesise, apply, evaluate, compare, contrast, verify, substantiate, explain and hypothesise” (Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 214). The notion of ‘individual development’ is a strategic concept in the context of a university preparatory program. It is individuals who receive a university award. Cognitive development of the individual is central to achievement of learning outcomes within the university context. That is not to say that learning experiences in which individuals participate are solitary experiences. On the contrary, the sociocultural aspects of learning are deliberately mobilised in the development of individuals’ learning.

As the language education curriculum within this preparatory program is explained in the following section, the deployment of these three key concepts will become evident. The immersion of learners in the physical, social and cultural life of the university is central to the curriculum. Using critical reflection, learners are engaged in critical analysis and active construction of experiences in context with the explicit purpose of ‘breaking the code’ of university life and learning (Brookfield, 1996). For these learners, the preparatory program is one of life’s transitions, albeit a transition that has the potential to change their lives both personally and professionally. In this section we have examined the inherent risks for both teachers and learners that come with a commitment to this transformational approach to adults’ learning. On balance, though, we have concluded that if this first year of transition is built into the university experience, and not bolted on as an afterthought, it can become part of a lifelong learning continuum linking STEPS students’ prior learning with the university’s formal education pathways and credentialing systems.

## **THE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK: LANGUAGE AND LEARNING**

Language and Learning comprises one of four courses of study within the preparatory program at Central Queensland University and is a writing course in the STEPS program, which aims to equip mature age learners with the necessary skills to facilitate their success within university education. The Language and Learning curriculum is innovative and organic, and its contemporary pedagogical approach is based on the premise that, with self-motivation, commitment and support, students can be independent, self-directed, successful learners within the tertiary environment. Recognition and appreciation of the many and varied experiences, learning styles, academic backgrounds and worldviews that students bring with them are vital to this program. In its challenge to question dominant paradigms, the Language and Learning curriculum represents aspects of education socially and critically, and as such is a model for transformation. It is perhaps best described as a journey, during which students learn about themselves as learners and explore some of the past experiences that have both hindered and assisted their learning. Upon recognition of these, many journey on to become successful and confident university students.

The Language and Learning course explores the role of literacy practices in the constructions of one’s knowledge. It is designed to support students in gaining the literacy practices necessary to understand where personal values, attitudes and beliefs stem from; the influences these attitudes and beliefs have on an individual’s worldview; and how worldviews can change and impact on what Ellyard (1998) refers to as the “circles of concern” – at the individual level, the societal level and the global level. This focus permeates the Language and Learning course and embraces the paradigm of learning that comes from the new world of science, one which sees all things as interconnected. The notion that an impact in one area inevitably has an impact in another is an essential element of

interrelatedness and interdependence of all aspects of life, and largely underpins the philosophy behind the Language and Learning course.

In the early stages of the course, students are facilitated in discovering their dominant personal learning styles, temperaments and personalities and presented with the characteristic ways their particular temperament best responds to and learns through. The rationale behind this is twofold: lecturers can better understand and cater for the learning styles of individual students; and upon identifying their own personal learning style or styles students can utilise a variety of learning strategies to enhance and assist with their learning within a university education. This also tends to encourage an understanding of the variety of learning styles and the fact that we all learn in different ways. Supported by staff, this creates an environment of acceptance of learning styles other than our own, and develops a greater understanding and tolerance of different worldviews.

The program is rigorous and challenges students through its focus on whole brain learning, informed largely by Caine, Caine and Cromwell's (1996)-- "Twelve Principles of Brain Based Learning", which these authors liken to "an open quest, bound primarily by the limitations we choose to place on ourselves and the dictates of the human brain itself" (p. 17). The students are strongly encouraged to utilise whole brain thinking, and initially some find many of the activities quite challenging and alien to any past learning they have experienced. However, continued use of strategies such as mind mapping and clustering assists the students in organising their ideas and drawing from the creative as well as the logical mind. Furthermore, this approach enhances confidence and self-esteem, as students become more proficient users of such strategies, strategies that prove to be invaluable for students when they embark on a university education. These tools can be most useful in assisting in the creation and compilation of academic essays, in critical literacy and report writing, and in other associated university course tasks. The rationale behind whole brain learning is constantly presented to the students and the relevance of and reasons for undergoing such skill development are constantly emphasised.

Throughout the Language and Learning course, students are actively engaged in the construction of text-context relationships, and come to understand the importance of audience and purpose to remind them that language changes according to its use in different contexts. Aspects of Language and Learning include the use of mode, roles and relationships, field or subject matter and generic structures. The academic essay is the genre that receives particular attention. Top-level structure is frequently utilised, helping students effectively to organise and present new information in a hierarchy of importance or relevance. Students are also encouraged to use frameworks that make learning visible, such as graphic organisers, **de Bono's** (1990) six thinking hats, mind mapping, clustering and interconnected systems to help frame their thinking in a way to plan and organise information, thus assisting in the developmental stages of their writing. Such skills become transportable as students embark upon their university education, and assist in the transition to formal requirements of academic writing.

The Language and Learning course actively emphasises lifelong learning, with a focus on critical analysis and parallel thinking, in order to prepare students for a very changeable future. Strong emphasis is placed on **how** to learn as well as **what** to learn. The course critically examines current societal trends and current issues, and in doing so exposes the students to new ways of thinking. This challenges them to examine a wide range of possible scenarios for the future of our world. It also calls for them to be creative and innovative and celebrates the acquisition of such qualities. Prior knowledge and experiences of students are valued and considered and work is sequenced to ensure students experience success and enjoyment. The notion that learning is a lifelong process, a journey that may never end, is

made transparent to the students, and the importance of their past learning experiences beyond the classroom is valued.

Underpinning the preparatory program is the notion of a personal journey or a quest that the students undertake, at the end of which a transformed person emerges. Obviously degrees of transformation vary. The work of Joseph Campbell on archetypes and hero myths (cited in Simpson & Coombes, 2001) is used as a metaphor for the journey students take whilst passing through the STEPS program. This transformation many of the students make usually manifests itself in the remarkable experience of a changed or broadened worldview. Thus, Language and Learning is not only a course to assist students in acquiring literary skills for ‘university speak’, but also one in which much is learnt about developing a greater understanding of self. The students’ understandings of critical awareness and modes of thought and expression that characterise the Australian university culture and its disciplinary subcultures also represent areas that are explicitly developed. All of these illustrate particular kinds of negotiated engagements between the students’ learning experiences and university life.

Self-esteem and confidence in their abilities as learners are enhanced throughout the course as students become confident with writing and expressing themselves. In working with peers and staff, students come to accept the help of ‘critical friends’ and respond to supportive environments in which their work can be analysed and improved upon. As confidence grows, students come to realise that they are capable of many of the challenges of a university education. Through their personal writing they discover how to write from within, and through journals, diaries, recollections, memoirs, autobiographies and poetry discover who they are and what they want to do with their lives. As the students travel from the concrete, private and spontaneous world from which they have come, they journey on to the more abstract and theoretical writing, an inevitable trademark of a university education. A crucial element of that journey is staff members and students working together to expand students’ worldviews and experiences as an entrée into university culture.

Facilitating this process at all stages of the journey is the Language and Learning course focus on the development of writing skills. These include grammar, spelling conventions, appropriate use of language, sentence and paragraph construction and other important basics of written and verbal communication. Students are given constant and constructive feedback on written work, are constantly exposed to modelling of good writing and are given many opportunities to write and express their feelings. The latter writing opportunities are facilitated through the use of visualisations, fast-writes, reflections, creative responses and ‘talking’ to their diaries and daily journals. Echoing the thoughts of James Moffet (1981), these activities allow for a “teaching methodology...to be based on ...continuity of thought into speech and speech into writing” (p. 142).

## CONCLUSION

The STEPS Language and Learning course has been developing over ten years and its organic nature allows it to be responsive to change and open to new ways of thinking. **In the words of Jenny Simpson (personal communication)**, one of the driving forces behind the course, “Every year we breathe new life into it”. Such life is informed by latest research and findings and strives to provide the very best for its students. In acknowledging the clientele for whom it is intended, staff adhere to the tenets of adult learning and recognise, cater for and appreciate the variety of experiences, ages, backgrounds, learning styles and temperaments of all learners.

This paper has identified the contextual, conceptual and curriculum frameworks underpinning the development and delivery of this course which is at the core of the STEPS

pre-undergraduate preparatory program. We have found that, through its negotiated engagements of learning experiences, this course enhances students' transition into the first year of higher education learning in a university. Indeed it could be argued that this course and the whole STEPS program really are the first year university experience for these students. Just as the STEPS students are on an unknown journey, so too are today's universities as they travel in uncharted waters, confronting multiple and conflicting views about what and for whom university education is in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## AUTHOR DETAILS

Julie Willans is the co-ordinator of the STEPS program in the Division of Teaching and Learning at the Rockhampton campus of Central Queensland University. She is also a lecturer in the Language and Learning course of STEPS and her doctoral research interests include transformative adult education and adults' experience of change.



At the time of writing, R. E. Harreveld was Senior Lecturer in Professional and Vocational Education in the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at the Rockhampton campus of Central Queensland University. She is currently Research Fellow (Learning and Evaluation) in the Division of Teaching and Learning Services at the same campus and institution.

P. A. Danaher is Associate Professor and Head of the Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development Centre in the Division of Teaching and Learning Services at the Rockhampton campus of Central Queensland University.