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A Holistic Understanding Of Integrational Support From University Students' Perspective Through Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

Student integration into the academic community is a primary condition for student success and achievement. This research explores the potential enhancements of supportive activities and key peer facilitator traits to maximize social and academic integration of first year university students. Focus group interviews (n=16) were conducted with first-year students (n=93) coming directly from secondary school. Using Appreciative Inquiry, participants indicate that current informally organized support activities in a university environment during the first semester of the academic year are highly desirable (e.g. welcome activities, extra-curricular activities, co-curricular activities). The need for support in social integration in the beginning of the year and the need for support in academic integration at the end of the first semester clearly arise out of this study. When addressing some specific criteria related to the objectives, form and design, this paper suggests that peer-assisted support activities are particularly useful in increasing sustainable informal peer support and integration among students. This article aims to prompt further discussion on the potential, value and purpose of department-specific structural peer assisted support and peer learning approaches for integration of first year university students.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary perspectives on learning highlight the need of supporting students during their transition process in order to reduce academic drop out. Indeed, successful transition and student success imply student integration into the academic community (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). In the seminal work of Tinto (1975) the term 'integration' was originally defined as a primary condition for student success. It was conceptualized as a twofold concept, encompassing both a academic component (i.e. academic integration) and a social component (i.e. social integration). The academic component encompasses the level of adherence students demonstrate to the structural rules and requirements of the institution, i.e. the institutional culture (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Its refers to the perceptions individual students have about their experiences in the formal and informal academic system: interactions with staff and students inside and outside the classroom settings that enhance the intellectual development of the student (Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The social component on the other hand refers to the degree of willingness students demonstrate to share attitudes and beliefs with their peers and faculty at the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009) and encompasses the perceptions individual learners have about these interactions, as well as involvement in extra- and co-curricular activities (Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This present paper builds upon the importance of student integration and contributes to the body of theory that stresses the value of peer learning when promoting students' social and academic integration (e.g. Byl et al., 2015). Peer learning is considered not only to encourage students into their academic integration process, but also to engage them in social forms of integration as well (Loots, 2009; Byl et al., 2011; Rubin & Wright, 2014). The central research question we addressed, is the way in which peer support activities should be organised during the first semester of the academic year to optimise the social and academic integration of students.

2. Methodology

In this study we opted for a strength-based approach: Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI differs from traditional research methodology as it recognises the power of positive language and builds upon assets and strengths rather than problems or weaknesses (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996). There are four main stages within AI (Figure 1): discovery, dream, design and destiny (Barrett, 1995).
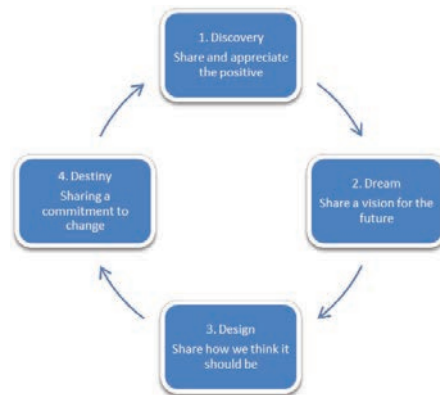

Fig. 1. Four main stages within Appreciative Inquiry.

The first stage, Discovery, involves determining the best of what is. Participants are asked to focus on experiences of best practice, positive moments, and successful processes. Dream, the second stage, calls for imagining an ideal future, how the status quo could be even better, creating a positive vision. The third stage, Design, deals with ways to make the future vision become a reality. In this study, participants were encouraged to think about strategies that assist them to realize their needs. The last stage, Destiny, refers to the implementation of actions to strive for the

ideal. In this stage the action plans would be carried out, monitored and evaluated. In this study, focus groups were held in the second semester retrospectively on how the first semester was experienced by the participants. Only the first three phases of AI were used during the interviews. In each interview both social integration as well as academic integration was discussed.

The sample consisted of first-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational science in 2012-2013. Participants were asked to participate in focus groups interviews. Recruitment was via email, and face to face in classes. Participants were informed in advance and confidentiality was guaranteed. In total, 16 separate focus group interviews were conducted with 93 first-year students. Participants were enrolled both in the department of Adult Educational Sciences (N=50) as well as the department of Psychology (N=43). Of all the participants, who had no earlier experiences at the university and had come directly from secondary school, 8 respondents had less than 6 months experiences with another institution in higher education. Baseline details of participating first-year students were obtained (Table 1). Each participant code was attributed to preserve anonymity. Focus group interviews were tape-recorded. They lasted between 120 and 200 minutes and were driven by the students' answers to the questions. Three researchers made complete verbatim transcripts. Maxqda was used to transcribe and analyze the data. This program had the advantage to make the process of axial coding more easy by order, divide and cluster codes into categories, and recognize structures or patterns. Focus group data were all conjointly analyzed. The phases were analyzed separately. Inter-rate reliability exceeded 90% and discussions took place to ensure a consensus was reached in all cases.

Table 1. Baseline details of participating first-year students

Variable	Dep. Psy	Dep. Edw	Men	Woman	Total
Group 1	0	6	4	2	6
Group 2	0	5	0	5	5
Group 3	0	3	0	3	3
Group 4	4	0	0	4	4
Group 5	6	1	0	7	7
Group 6	0	8	0	8	8
Group 7	1	7	0	7	8
Group 8	2	6	1	7	8
Group 9	5	1	1	6	6
Group 10	2	1	0	3	3
Group 11	4	0	0	4	4
Group 12	5	1	0	5	6
Group 13	2	2	1	4	5
Group 14	3	4	1	6	7
Group 15	4	1	1	4	5
Group 16	5	3	0	8	8
Total	43	50	10	83	93

3. Results

As a consequence of the principles of AI, the results are related to good examples of supportive activities with peers and to the needs and wishes of students for the improvement of support in social and academic integration. The results will be presented according to the various themes identified in this research and related to the supportive activities and timeframe in which they appear: first week after arrival, after the first week, and during the last four weeks. These needs and wishes will be presented in the form of the action design, which is the third phase of AI.

3.1. Introduction and welcome activities

65% of the participants (n=60) stated they were satisfied with the welcome activities organized by the university, faculty and/or department in the beginning of the academic year. There are two ways in which students value the power of these activities: either from a positive or negative perspective. Students with a positive starting point indicated that these activities resulted in peer companionship, expressed as a condition that makes you feel happy and enjoy student life. Students with a negative starting point on the other hand, indicated that these activities are a way to mitigate isolation and reduce personal anxiety. Activities such as student receptions, welcome ceremonies and campus tours were considered as good support for new students with regards to social integration. They referred to the features of the activity itself. "Small group size" on the one hand, provided a context that made individuals feel more comfortable to talk to other first-year students. "Large group size" on the other hand, provided a context that made individuals feel more comfortable because of the like-minded community they experience. They also referred to the characteristics of the role of the student facilitators. Most students felt that student facilitators created networking opportunities and contributed significantly to a sense of "feeling liked", "feeling included" and "feeling supported" from the beginning. 73% of the participants (n=68) however, felt that more introduction initiatives were needed to bring students of same subject of study together in an informal way on arrival.

> *"In the first semester all lectures are provided in a large-group learning context with students from varied programs. You do not know who your classmates are."* [Student 14: first-year student – large-group learning context]

3.2. Social and extra-curricular activities

Students are satisfied with the activities organized for students by students. They felt pleased about activities organised by higher year students of the same department as a way of getting to know their classmates or "potential friends". Parties organized by members of student organizations scored considerably well. Many students believed that the student organization is a great tool for a better integration and that participating in these kind of activities is important. 12 % first-year students (n=11), however, stated that they don't feel welcome at the activities organized by the faculty student organization because they don't have a membership card. Three of them reported that they don't feel the need to be a member of student organizations but believed that they would like to participate occasionally in their activities. They believed that feelings of security are important for participation and argued that because they don't have a membership, they feel rather uncomfortable and consequently would never participate. It was generally felt that more extra-curricular social activities, organized regardless of student organizations and in an atmosphere where all students are welcome, were needed.

> *"The problem is that it is only the student organisations which organized these activities and if you don't have membership, then you don't feel really invited. As a consequence, you do not feel appealed to participate in activities."* [Student 61: first-year student – large-group learning context]

3.3. Academic and co-curricular activities

Around two-thirds of the participants recognized the importance of peer support and state that peers play a great supportive role during the study. Students believed that friends are very important in their study because they *automatically provide peer support.* In this context, 24% first-year students (n=23) refer to the student organisations that provide peer support. 54% first-year students (n=50) reported their appreciation for "the examination support workshop" offered by two higher year students and 22% first-year students (n=20) reported their appreciation for the initiative of the study sessions (e.g. Struyven, Gheyssens, & Byl, 2014) organized by members of the student organizations. These activities increased their feeling of academic integration by sharing experiences and knowledge with other peers. Overall, students pointed to the importance of academic peer support initiatives, including material support (e.g. a list of examination and learning requirements for each course, examples of learning schedules). They suggested that peer support and examination samples or earlier exams would greatly benefit their academic

integration. 67% of the participants (n=62) recognized the importance of studying together with peers at campus and believed that these peer interactions helped them motivate to study. Students believed that these peer interactions are important specifically during the examination period. According to some participants it provides a safer feeling because peers that are in the same situation, understand and help each other better. On the other hand, they believed that these interactions enable them to relax and consequently to buffer stress. They argued that having a break, taking time together with a peer and go for a drink or walk, are all essential things to clear the head and de-stress.

> *"If you are not studying, than you get some critical remarks of your friends that you aren't studying. Then they tell you that the exams are coming soon and that you have to study. And I'm sure, you also do the same with other people." [Student 24:* first-year student – *large-group learning context]*

4. Conclusion

This study acknowledges existing good practices such as welcome activities, extra-curricular activities, co-curricular activities, and identifies the potential for better ways of support that facilitate integration and meet the needs of first-year students. Our results show that faculties would benefit in setting up 'meet and greet' activities with students of the same course and year, before the academic year starts. Participants further emphasise the importance of various face-to-face introductory activities during the first weeks in smaller like-minded community groups. These activities should include the necessary social and academic support as well as opportunities to informal peer support; they should ensure students getting all the necessary information about the university system and the content of the program of study; they should stimulate students to meet and greet their classmates, and share experiences with higher year students. Secondly, our results show that faculties would take advantage to stimulate first-year and higher year students to set up social activities (without participation barriers) as meet and greet activities and as teambuilding activities. Faculties would take advantage to guarantee the sustainability, openness and inclusive nature of activities. Our results finally show that the faculties would benefit in supporting students/higher year students to set up activities of examination support including material support (e.g. a list of examination and learning requirements for each course, examples of examinations, examples of learning). Faculties or departments should guarantee that there is only one representative of all tutoring activities in such a way that there is one reliable, central contact point which is accessible for all. The need for support in social integration in the beginning of the year and the need for support in academic integration at the end of the first semester clearly arise out of this study. Paying extra attention to the social integration of students and helping students to build a personal network as early as possible is crucial for their academic integration. In this respect, by combining existing academic and social support with extra integrational support in collaboration with and involvement of peers as early as possible; this research shows the necessary workload for faculty/departments in the beginning of the year. Although peers play an important role in helping students integrate in university life and in their further study-career, we found indications that this also generates a large additional value on the long term. In this sense, we demonstrated from a holistic student's perspective the merits of a faculty-led specific peer assisted support program for promoting academic as well as social integration of first year students.

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