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“Thrown in at the deep end and it’s sink or swim for us”: Students Talking About Transition To University

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Increasing numbers of students are entering UK universities, creating an expanding body of work concerned with the transition from one educational institution to another (O’Donnell & Tobbett 2007, Reay 2002). Such research has provided an understanding of the experiences of the students and the problems they face, however there has been little systematic research which generates a theoretical framework of transition. This project draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) in the form of situated cognition and on Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) model of learning. The framework challenges traditional transmission models of learning and posits instead a distributed model, where all aspects of the environment and the individual interact in complex and non-predictable ways to form inclusionary or exclusionary trajectories for individual students. In understanding and addressing transition issues, attention needs to be given not only to the present educational setting but also to previous experiences. Because behaviour and participation are predicated on the complex interaction of person, task and environment everything that an individual brings to the context influences participation. Over the last 20 years in the UK there has been a significant move towards criterion-referenced and competence based assessment in post compulsory education and training. This has included the modularization of the “A” Level and Access in the context of Curriculum 2000 and a greater transparency of intended learning outcomes and the criteria by which they are judged. Students, as part of their assignments, activities, and assessment, have had to work more and more in small groups. This can also re-enable and modular exams to reflect and improve grades. This shift in practice has benefited learners as evidenced by the increase in numbers of learners retained in formal education and the range and number of awards they receive (Torrance 2007) it has also led to an overwhelming culture of tutor support which has increased arguably workloads for teachers. Similar levels of support, coaching and practice have also been observed in Access courses (Torrance 2007)

When students first come to university they enter a new learning culture. Whilst their student councillors confirm the right to partake, the ineptitude of the valued practices in the new environment locates them on the edge of the new community. Lave (1997) described this as legitimate peripheral participation. Over time, and with experience, students may adopt and perform the practices of the new community, which are typically quite different to their previous learning experiences. To make the task more difficult these new practices are often not explicitly stated. In most instances the one time students participate in a number of other CoPs such as their family, friendship groups and work. The extent to which these communities overlap is also a significant factor in determining participation (Lave 1997) Learning therefore becomes a process directed according to different criteria. The approach challenges the intra individual, transmission model of learning where teachers talk and students learn. Instead, learning is positioned in wider social and historical practices in order to interface meaning which underpins given communities activities. Whilst all students are legitimate peripheral participants by definition, this does mean that there is inevitable progression to full participation. A significant number of students may be excluded from participation as a result of inflexible practice or lack or clarity in accessing the meanings which determine practice. One purpose of the project is to address this lack of clarity and to understand the nature of inflexible practice as a determinant of successful transition.

The overall aim of this research is to
To explore the everyday activities in which pre-university students engage
To explore the everyday activities in which 1st year undergraduate students engage
To accompany 1st year undergraduate students in their transition, documenting the explicit practices that mediate their participation
To understand the implicit practices enabling and disabling full participation which exist in the University Department
To explore the wider social and political imperatives which shape valued and not valued practices within Higher Education
To generate a theoretical framework on transition to help understand the experiences of students
To offer ideas and actions for Higher Education to address identified transition issues and so provide meaningful support

References

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