

Where to Now for Research into the First Year Experience at University?

Reassembling the First Year Experience

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ABSTRACT

Academics and administrators in higher education contexts increasingly invest time, energy and money in the creation and delivery of a positive “first year experience: (FYE)” a term commonly used to refer to a suite of initiatives intended to impact positively upon student satisfaction and maximise student retention. Various forms of technology feature prominently in the resultant programs: a situation which reflects a widespread belief that ‘flexible’ and ‘online’ learning environments have a major role to play in meeting the needs of contemporary students. Over the past 20 years decision making about how to create a ‘good’ first year experience has been increasingly shaped by what is now a large body of scholarship. While this literature contains much that is valuable it can also serve to limit research conducted in this area. Drawing upon insights from the sociology of translation this paper explores the hinterland of the FYE and the ways in which it might constrain the authors’ research in this field. From this basis the authors propose a case for re-imagining and reassembling their research in this area in response to key challenges provided by actor-network theory. With reference to a small scale research project conducted at a one Australian university, they highlight the different data sets—and different realities—that a reassembled FYE research agenda requires them to attend to, and outline implications for future studies in this field.

KEYWORDS

Actor-Network Theory, Gender Issues, Information Technology, Post-Compulsory Education

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Retaining students, particularly in the first year of higher education, is a problem facing most, if not all, universities. In Australia, a significant proportion of government funding to the higher education sector directly depends upon the retention of students. In other parts of the world, where somewhat different influences and incentives are at play, there has also been an ongoing interest in how to retain university students. Recent research in Australia (Edwards & McMillan, 2015) clearly indicates the scale and complexity of the problem. They report that while 8% of students overall never return to university after the first year of study, the percentages are greater for various equity groups, for instance, nearly 15% for students from remote areas and 20% for indigenous students.

The problem of student retention has often been framed in terms of issues relating to students’ successful transition to an often unfamiliar university environment. Drawing on such logic, university wide programs to support students through this transition have been put in place in many universities

to support students through this transition. These are generally centrally administered to augment supportive practices that operate within the scope of individual courses and subjects and are generally centrally administered. Some of these programs are specifically designed for various equity, target or priority groups (such as women enrolling in “non-traditional” areas or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners) but all are broadly directed at ‘improving’ the experience of students in their first year. This focus is increasingly referred to as constructing the “First Year Experience” (FYE). The phenomenon of FYE has, in fact, been the subject of sustained research in Australia and internationally for over 20 years. The research has been encouraged by various institutional policies and practices directed at improving measures of student satisfaction, achievement, performance and, thus, retention. However, it is important to remember that in many contexts these goals are tied, at least in part, to the close relationship (acknowledged above) between student enrolment numbers, students’ assessment of the quality of their experience, and university funding levels (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001).

Whether a particular university is guided primarily by financial or equity agendas (or, indeed, a rational combination of both), over this time emphasis has increasingly been placed on identifying strategies and practices that have been “proven” to have a positive impact in each of these areas: that is to say, strategies linked to various forms of data which suggest they have, indeed, been able to help university staff engage, inspire or motivate commencing students and, as a result, keep them enrolled. Nelson (2014) notes that this voluminous literature has had a major impact upon university policy and continues to shape the ways in which academic staff are encouraged to work with first year students. This literature has produced a set of increasingly normalised, taken-for-granted policies and practices which are now familiar to many who work with first year university students. Conferences exploring FYE, Student Transition, and/or Student Retention are a key feature of the academic calendar, and checklists and advice booklets are plentiful and popular.

In the context established by FYE research and policy, and the resulting normalisation of particular versions of what counts as a ‘good’ transition to university and a ‘quality’ first year experience, we pause to pose questions that might direct future research in this area: particularly in areas which overlap with student reactions to technologically mediated practices in university contexts. In particular, we are interested in the diversity of student perspectives regarding what has sometimes been represented as the FYE and how this might be conceived of differently. Here, we provide initial notice of the argument we develop in the last section of the article which draws upon an actor-network theory (ANT) (Law & Singleton, 2014) sensibility and indicate that the assumptions underpinning FYE research and policy require more careful consideration. For example, the materiality of the FYE associated with the university, the buildings, classrooms, timetables, the digital infrastructure together with the materiality of each student tend to be bundled together as context or background and are taken as largely homogenous. We will argue that these elements are not merely context or inevitable and that their role is an important omission in much FYE research.

THE STUDY

The catalyst for this article was a pilot project conducted at an Australian university in 2013, and the resultant professional conversations that followed across 2014 and 2015. The project arose from the concerns articulated by a group of staff teaching in the first year of a Bachelor of Education Degree on one campus of a university in Australia. The program accounts for a very large proportion of the school’s total enrolment on this campus. As a result, student enrolments and potential withdrawals from this program have a major impact upon retention data collected for the school and university overall. More than this, the staff in the school have a long standing commitment to the provision of positive, engaging, student-centred learning environments and were curious about how students enrolling in 2013 would respond to various changes that had been introduced for this cohort.

In 2013, a wide range of initiatives were implemented, at both university and school level, in order to adhere to a policy commitment of increasing retention in the first year, through improving

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