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FIRST YEAR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: NEW TOOLS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the development of a CD-ROM as a means of supporting undergraduate students beginning their first year of study in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. The CD, entitled *Dive In: A Guide for Beginning Students*, has been developed as a tool to support the engagement of students during their transition to university life. From a Vygotskian perspective, effective learning is more likely to take place when individuals are afforded opportunities to grow into the culture that surrounds them (Vygotsky, 1978). The CD supports this objective by providing relevant information in ways that allow new students to engage with the culture of the university and the demands that this entails. One of a number of innovative features of the CD is the degree of involvement of experienced students at every level of its development. By drawing on the wisdom of continuing students as well as staff within the faculty and across the university, it has been possible to develop a comprehensive body of information to support the needs of new students. The result is a portable resource using informal language and engaging graphics that makes the information presented both relevant and readily accessible to students in transition.

Context

Research in the higher education sector indicates that early student engagement with the culture of the university is a key factor in shaping the academic and social development of new students. A positive first-year experience that supports students as they grapple with academic, administrative and social processes is more likely to encourage academic application and success at the individual level and to reduce attrition rates at an institutional level (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Krause, McInnis, & Welle, 2002; Lawrence, 2000). The role that social transition plays with regard to successful academic transition is also acknowledged as vital (Kantanis, 2000). The challenge for tertiary institutions as they take into account the issues inherent in transition is to achieve a balance between the needs of an increasingly diverse student body and the provision of equitable access to necessary information and resources.

Estimates suggest that the University of Wollongong (UOW) attracts many first generation or first-in-family students, that is, students whose families have had no direct

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experience within a university setting. Students in this situation are unable to rely on their families for detailed support and parents often report feeling at a loss to know how to advise their children and who to approach for guidance. In order to meet the needs of these students as well as others entering with varied experiences a wide range of information is provided, with particular attention given to the needs of prospective students as well as those entering their first year of undergraduate study. The information is presented through various venues and is designed to support the enculturation of new students. The UOW website, for example, provides access to a broad body of information and this is supplemented by a variety of other resources distributed to students both before and after enrolment. Individual faculties also present information that is course-specific at enrolment, orientation and throughout a student's program of study. The volume and complexity of this material can be overwhelming for the novice, however. Further alienating is the fact that the information may be couched in terms that are foreign to the uninitiated, rendering it impenetrable to those for whom it is intended. Barriers to accessing and understanding important information thus make the transition to university life more challenging than necessary.

Universities expect that students will become proficient in the skills associated with information literacy, that is, in developing expertise in locating relevant information and then translating it or contextualising it in ways that provide them with meaning (CAUL, 2001). This presents problems for new students given their inexperience in the tertiary sector, the overwhelming amount of information with which they are presented and the assumed level of familiarity with particular terms and ideas that is at odds with the experience of beginning students. To address this situation, students and staff in the Faculty of Education at UOW collaborated in the development of a CD-ROM for students beginning study in 2005. The CD, *Dive In: A Guide for Beginning Students*, was designed to provide new students with ready access to information of direct relevance for them and to couch it in terms that had meaning for them. It contained generic as well as faculty-specific information and also allowed connection to the UOW website for current information. The CD format is portable and allows access to information for those who may have a computer but do not have internet access at home, that is, those who are less fortunate in terms of the "digital divide". Students in the initial and successive cohorts have provided positive feedback with regard to the information included in *Dive In* and they have continued to shape successive iterations.

Developing "Dive In" as a Tool for New Students

Dive In was initially the focus of a pilot project aimed at developing a resource for supporting and enhancing the learning experiences of first-year students in the Faculty of Education. The project was funded by a faculty grant from the Teaching and Innovation Sub-Committee (TISC) making it possible to employ two "experienced" students, one with sound experience in editing and in the IT area as the project manager and another as an assistant. Both students had recently completed the first year of their respective degrees and were involved at every level of the production of the CD. Other students as well as staff within the faculty and across the university were canvassed to provide their ideas about the information needed by students beginning a program of study. This process led to the identification of generic as well as

faculty-specific information that was relevant to the CD. The two experienced students wrote and collated much of the material that was developed under the guidance of the principal researcher. A student reference group also provided valuable contributions. These students, in their second and third years of study, had volunteered to support the employed students by helping to filter and assess the material that was being produced, providing critical feedback and recommendations.

A positive evaluation of the pilot project resulted in a grant from the Educational Strategic Development Fund (ESDF) in the following year to develop a university-wide resource. Students and staff across three faculties, Creative Arts, Education and Science, collaborated to create a second version of Dive In that was relevant for their own faculties. They also produced a template that could be adapted to meet the needs of students in other faculties. The second version of Dive In was produced using a process similar to that used in the development of the initial CD. Students in each faculty were employed to identify, write and collate material, whilst a reference group provided support and feedback. In addition, students in the Faculty of Creative Arts designed the graphics for their faculty's version of the CD. A third iteration of Dive In has recently been produced for students entering the Faculty of Education in 2007 and, again, a student was employed to follow suggestions for change based on feedback from other students and staff.

Enculturation – Drawing on Student Wisdom

From a socio-cultural perspective, children and adults learn about the culture of their particular communities through the interactions they have with those around them. Typically, these interactions involve co-operative dialogues between the individual and more knowledgeable members of the community. Beginning students are novices within the multi-dimensional context of the university. The demands of a first year of study involve coming to terms with the content and operations of their discipline area as well as learning how to operate within the culture of the university and the sub-culture of their particular faculty. They engage in co-operative dialogues with academic and administrative staff, as well as with their peers and with more experienced students as they learn about university life. However, the complexity of the environment and the speed with which learning must occur means that other tools must also be available to support effective learning. Dive In is one of a range of tools that provides new students with information that is important to their engagement with the university setting.

Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to the problems of access and participation in this regard. They argue that newcomers require “access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (p. 101). Membership in communities of practice is regarded as an important issue. Learning itself is viewed as an activity that is situated in the social practice of the real-world context in which the individual operates. This argument supports the development of a range of experiences that will encourage access and participation by those to whom the university environment is foreign.

The involvement of experienced students was regarded as a key factor in producing a resource to support the learning experiences of new students. From a Vygotskian perspective, learning can be particularly effective when it occurs within a context where the novice engages with a more experienced peer or one who has recently mastered the task at hand as this affords opportunities for enculturation (Vygotsky, 1978). In this instance, rather than providing opportunities for dialogues, new students were presented with a CD that had been developed by others with recent and relevant experiences within the university community.

Cultural tools may be symbolic and can include numbers, maps, signs, language and so on. They may also be real, for example, computers, rulers and the internet (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2007). As symbol systems and as tangible resources, cultural tools make it possible for people in a particular society to communicate with one another on many different levels. Dive In is a tangible resource that supports the development of knowledge and that allows students to solve problems by providing information that has meaning for them within the university and the broader community. It enables them to construct understandings that are necessary for their engagement in university life.

One important aspect of Dive In is that it is delivered in “student speak” or a student voice. The more formal language of the institution is one that presents a barrier to many students as they attempt to locate information or to understand administrative processes. By drawing on the knowledge of more experienced students and through their contributions to the CD, the language of the institution is translated into terms that have meaning for the new students. The presentation of information in this way provides opportunities for new students to master or appropriate information that can enhance the likelihood of their success.

In Conclusion

Given the diverse nature of the student body, equitable access to generic information as well as specific information dictated by the nature of individual faculties is imperative for ensuring a successful experience in the first year of study and beyond (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). Dive In represents a tool that is designed to meet the needs of beginning students by drawing on the experiences of those who have negotiated the university context.

There are a number of advantages to providing students with information in a CD format. First, it is a portable resource that does not rely on internet access, an important factor for students who may have regular access only when on campus. Second, it is possible to identify information that is important to all new students and to present it in a manner that is succinct. This provides students with a snapshot of the details they need and, when internet access is available, it allows them to link to more involved documents that exist on the university website. Third, the use of informal language and engaging graphics encourages students to seek the information they require to meet their individual needs. A resource that is user-friendly and that promotes feelings of competence and self-reliance supports the development of students as

independent learners. Finally, the inclusion of faculty-specific information that is integral to the course they have chosen will encourage new students to develop a student identity aligned with their individual patterns of study. In more general terms, each of these aspects of Dive In provides opportunities for the individual to gain access to the culture of the university.

New students develop a sense of connectedness and engagement as they gain the necessary knowledge and expertise to address the challenges of university life. Experiences that support and enhance their identification and enculturation within the university and also within the particular faculty in which their major area of study is based are vital for ensuring academic, personal and social success. Increased diversity in the student population over recent years is heralded by some as a sign of wider participation, particularly for those defined as belonging to equity groups. If we are serious about providing access to higher education for this diverse range of students we must also provide appropriate resources because, as Tinto (1999) has noted, access without support will not improve opportunities for success.

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