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Hearing the student voice - examining the processes of transition, persistence and engagement for a group of first year, first in family university students

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Keywords

year, first, group, engagement, students, persistence, student, transition, processes, examining, voice, university, family, hearing

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Hearing the Student Voice – Examining the processes of transition, persistence and engagement for a group of first year, first in family university students.

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Abstract

This paper outlines a qualitative, narrative study that focuses on the student experience as it relates to a particular cohort of students namely women who are the first in the family to attend university. Seventeen students were recruited to participate in a series of four semi-structured interviews conducted throughout one academic year. These interviews investigated the processes involved in transition as well as the perceptions held about engaging in tertiary study and the hurdles encountered during the year. The research choose to accompany the students as each traveled through the university environment, exploring what it means to be a 'first-year student'. The study is informed by both constructivist grounded theory and narrative analysis in order to highlight how individuals 'move' through an environment characterised by flux and transformation.

Introduction

I just didn't understand what I was doing at all... (Mary, 18)

The quote above is derived from interviews conducted with commencing first year students at a small tertiary campus, located in an Australian region recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001-2003). 'Mary' is the first in her family to come to university and the quote refers to her initial experience of university; a transition she found to be both isolating and confusing. The campus she attends has a diverse student population; many, like Mary, have no family tradition of university attendance and in 2009 just over 50% of university's entrants were termed 'mature-age'. The low participation of certain student cohorts, particularly those from low socio-economic or 'non traditional' backgrounds, is noted within the literature on first year experience (James, 2004, Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). There are both far-reaching institutional and individual consequences when learners fail to successfully engage with the academic environment.

This paper highlights a qualitative study that focuses on female students who can be loosely termed 'non-traditional' in the sense that they are the first in their family to attend university. Four separate interviews were conducted with seventeen participants during the first year of study to explore the social and academic processes involved in transition, the types of hurdles faced by individuals, strategies implemented both individually and institutionally to overcome these difficulties and possible reasons for levels of academic performance. The rich descriptive data engendered by interviews presents a detailed picture of what attending university meant to the women involved.

Before analysing the content of the interviews, the methodological basis of the study will be outlined followed by the geographical and temporal context of the research. The discussion will focus on how students reflected upon their arrival at university, how they choose to survive and move through this environment before concluding with reflections provided in the final interview at the end of the academic year.

Methodology

The ultimate excitement and terror of a qualitative project is that you can't know at the start where it will end. (Richards, 2005, p.125)

The theoretical perspective favoured in this research is one bounded by qualitative paradigms, which evokes an 'emic' focus that strives to reveal individual points of view. During the interviews, subjects were encouraged to narrate their experiences and essentially highlight how meaning is created and maintained in a world characterised by obstacles, interruptions and constant renegotiations. Czarniawska (2002) highlights how it is necessary for the interviewer to provide space for the speaker to create such rich narratives and avoid being over-prescriptive in the interview by focusing on bringing the participants 'back' to the point. Hence, the interviews were semi-structured in nature which enabled them to be '*...sites for the production and distribution of narrative*' (Czarniawska, 2002, p.735).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest the creating of 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) is undoubtedly facilitated by the adoption of 'multiple analytic strategies'. The interviews in this study were analysed for themes and processes using an approach informed by Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2007). In addition, the narrative form and metaphorical content of these conversations were studied in order to generate additional theoretical applications and insights. By continually returning to the data with different 'conceptual lenses', the interview dialogue is not perceived as indicating one absolute truth but rather as distinct pieces in an evolving puzzle. Thus, true data saturation never occurs instead there is always something additional that can be gleaned when data is approached from multiple angles.

This approach is then fully grounded in people's everyday understanding of their university experience, framed by questions that enabled entry to this '*lived experience*' in order to avoid becoming '*...overly concerned, if not precious, about aspects of the first year experience that are of little consequence to the students themselves.*' (Mc Innis, 2001, p112). By interviewing students whilst they were engaging with this university experience, the study is able to realistically draw conclusions about the types of influences and factors that impact on the first year experience

Research that focuses on particular 'non-traditional' student cohorts is limited, a factor highlighted in literature on first year retention and transition (Lynch, 1996; Mclean, Hartley, Ryan, McDonald & McDonald, 1999; Richardson, 1994; Weil, 1988; Wilson, 1997). Undoubtedly, universities need to recognise the diversity of student populations and Borland (2001-2002) suggests that institutions should concentrate on seeking out and reflecting the personal and curricular desires of the actual student body rather than false perceptions of this population. Ozga and Sukhmandan (1998) recognise the importance of identifying how the experiences of particular student groups differ, a need echoed by Zwerling (1992). Distinctions exist not only between various students cohorts but are also engendered by the context of this research. The study was set within an Australian higher education institution at a particular point in time and the following section serves to situate the study.

Research Context

The increasing number of students entering higher education in Australia, witnessed in the last two decades, needs to be explored on a number of levels. On the one hand, this 'open door' policy is perceived as offering an opportunity to change life circumstances and extend personal choice. However, there is a need to make sure that this 'open door' does not simply become a 'revolving door' (Blythman & Orr, 2001-2002, p232). The move from an elite to a mass system is not necessarily accompanied by increases in either choice or opportunity; instead students in countries like Australia, enter a university landscape that is delineated by hierarchy.

The Australian higher education system has been identified as being highly stratified with ‘...more elite research-orientated institutions at the top of the hierarchy and newer, more technologically orientated universities at the bottom’ (Abbott-Chapman, 2006, p4). When statistics and trends are examined the divisions in levels of access within the Australian university landscape also become apparent. The participation of people from low-SES backgrounds has been consistently calculated nationally at 15.5%, but this participation is clustered in regional universities (James, 2008).

Further, while the numbers of students entering university may have increased, Government funding to universities has decreased and the need for universities to generate independent funding is now a necessity (King, 2001). Australia is the only country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where total public funding to tertiary institutions declined between 1995 and 2004. Across the OECD, funding to tertiary education increased by an average of 49 percent however during the same period in Australia, this funding declined by 4 percent (Gillard, 2008). Instead of public funding, Australia pushed the financial burden of education to the private sector, with individual students and their families expected to pay more through higher tuition fees.

Between December 2007 and March 2008, increasing university and college fees resulted in a 3.8% growth in the cost of education (Ross, 2008). In 2008, the cost of tuition for a full time undergraduate student on a government supported place ranges from \$4077 to \$8499 (approximately 2,270 – 4,730 Euro) for the year of study depending on which course is being undertaken. The Higher Education Contribution System (HECS) does enable students to defer this payment until the individual is earning a specified amount (\$39,824 or 22,166 Euro in the 2007-08 income year); once students reach this threshold, the debt is paid back through the taxation system. However, if the student decides to leave before graduation, they will incur the full debt but with no degree.

For students who are older and/or are the first in the family to come to university, the large financial investment involved in pursuing higher education is particularly disadvantaging. The student loan system is informed by the discourse of a young student who has a life-time to repay any debt that is incurred. Similarly, the reality of debt and the costs involved may result in low SES students opting for vocationally focused courses that have the promise of a job ‘at the end of it all’ (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003, p.217). Older women are further disadvantaged as they may have little or no financial backing to undertake study and once qualified have less time to repay the loan.

The financial realities of attending university are very obvious on the campus where this study took place. This small subsidiary campus of a larger metropolitan institution, is located in an area that is recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged. The surrounding region has higher than state average levels of unemployment, low income earners and families in receipt of government pensions or benefits as well as lower university attendance rates than state or national figures (2% compared to 4% for state and national). (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001-2003).

The Research Location

The campus is multi-sectorial and has three partners including the university, TAFE NSW (College of Technical and Further Education) and the local community college. The upshot of this is that an array of programs are offered at this location and in turn, these attract a diversity of students ranging from sixteen year old school leavers entering vocational traineeships right up to students in their sixties and seventies who are often simply interested in enriching their life and increasing their knowledge. Most of these students have a number of responsibilities and activities competing for time in their daily life and only a small percentage of the students live on campus; the rest either live in the surrounding suburbs or commute. This campus is characterised

by a 'commuter culture', where students come to lectures and then have to rush off to other commitments, as the following quotes highlight:

I'm not here long enough to socialize... (Kira, 38)

I want to make sure that I am there at the beginning of the lecture and I know that I've got to leave by usually 2.30 to pick up my kids ...as much as I would love to sit there and get to know a few more people I can't... (Sheila, 31)

...by the time we all get here and it's finished it's five o'clock so we're running out the door all having our own places to go...everyone has got commitments they are all working and they have got kids or partners or trying to get home to study... (Katie, 33)

Participants

There is a high proportion of female students studying at this campus, many of whom are mature-aged, have limited schooling or have been absent from the education sector for a number of years. This research study focuses on seventeen women, many of whom share, in varying degrees, similar educational and occupational biographies. The women's ages ranged from 18 to 45 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years. All of the people that responded to the invitation to be involved in the study were white Anglo Australian. Fifteen of the students can be classed as mature age¹ whilst two were under 19 when the study commenced. The intent was not necessarily to focus on mature age or white Anglo students but given the demographics of the campus and its surroundings, it is not surprising that the majority were older or that all the participants were mono-cultural. Of the fourteen mature age students, thirteen were mothers, nine initially resided with their partners (one later separated) and five were single parents. The two younger students were both living at home with their parents; Table 1 indicates the marital and parental status of each of the students.

Table 1: Marital and parental status of participants

Name (age)	Partnered	Single	Children	Sole Parent
Annie (18)		√		
Catherine (44)			√	√
Clara (23)			√	√
Heidi (47)			√	√
Helen (22)	√			
Jane (32)	√		√	
Katie (33)	√		√	
Kira (38)	√		√	
Linda (32)			√	√
Mary (18)		√		
Nicki (33)			√	√
Rachel (22)		√		
Sheila (31)	√		√	
Stephanie (34)	√		√	
Sue (39)	√		√	
Susie (38)	√		√	
Vicky (45)	√		√	

* Kira's marital status later changed

¹ In this university, those over the age of 21 are classed as mature aged students.

The sample of students was never intended to be representative of the student population or even those who were first in the family to come to university but rather comprised of those who responded to the invitation to participate. The project is a small one and so makes no claim to be statistically significant or having an ability to make precise or universal predications about the university sector. Rather the study set out to highlight the micro and highlight the meaning that this experience had for a group of women.

While the research focussed on individual experiences of university, and whilst each story is unique, the narratives also shared commonalities. The four interviews conducted with each of the students occurred during the 2006 academic year, the content of the interviews was examined in order to identify broad thematic categories but these evolved and changed as the interviews proceeded. The issues and concerns identified by students emerged gradually throughout the academic year rather than remain static, revealing how transition to university is an ongoing process, rather than one that is limited to the initial stages of the university year. The quotes and concepts referred to in the following sections are derived from all four interviews.

Discussion

Latham and Green (1997) point out that transition is not limited to tertiary or educational environments, instead this process has a centrality to life. These authors define transition as involving 'movement from the known to the unknown or...the partially unknown' (para. 3). As such, transition can be regarded as inextricably bound up with the multiple journeys undertaken throughout life and these authors argue that regardless of circumstance, such movement is invariably 'problematic'. Latham and Green do contend that the move to the university setting is somewhat unique as unlike other transitional experiences within education, the move to university is usually governed by choice in that most students have made a personal decision to attend. Certainly, the students in this study expressed a high degree of motivation in relation to commencing university; this was particularly the case for the older students, many of whom described a number of barriers that they had overcome in order to secure enrolment. Indeed, the fact that the participants were 'non-traditional' in the sense that they were all first in the family to consider university, may partially explain the struggles to actually enrol, leaving them unprepared for the many obstacles encountered upon their arrival. (O' Shea, 2007)

Arriving

For those students who have no parental history of university attendance there is often a steep 'learning curve' as there is no one available at a local familial level to provide guidance as students 'navigate' the culture of this tertiary experience (Harrell & Forney, 2003, p155). Theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) and Connell (1994) perceive social positioning as intrinsic to the nature of educational experience. Those students who lack the 'cultural capital' reflective of university discourse are faced with a further obstacles that can ultimately preclude success within this domain. Certainly each of these students described how the images they held about the university environment differed dramatically to what they actually found:

...umm it's so different to what I thought it was going to be I thought by coming here it would be disciplined instead I'm here for 1 hour and then I go it is very hard to not divert on the way home ...you have to be really disciplined... (Katie, 33)

Misconceptions were not limited to the older students but also reflected in the narratives of the younger students who had come directly from school. Annie had derived her ideas about university from popular culture, in particular American television shows. Mary, the other school leaver, relied on her cousins and friends' brothers and sisters for information about university, describing how she eaves dropped on conversations:

...my friends have had older sisters and brothers and the stuff that they have said I use to pick up - oh that must be what it's like...

There was clearly a lack of legitimate sources of information for those students who had no familial or previous tradition of university attendance. Instead, having nowhere to go to seek the information required; individuals must settle for what they hear or pick up from often ill-informed sources. This mismatch between reality and perceptions can partially be explained by the fact that the majority of respondents based their ideas about university on previous educational experience, most then expressing surprise and disquiet when the anticipated support and structure was not forthcoming:

The shock of the expectations that I mean I know that it's not like TAFE or like school where you get spoon-fed. But, okay, read chapter three by next week is fine if that is the only subject that you are doing but I've got all these other things. It's just like it was daunting to think, wow, there is so much expected from me from day one... (Nicki, 33)

I imagined that it would be y'know fairly tough and be lots of work but I didn't well I probably didn't think as much.... I hadn't been to school for so many years and no one in my family has ever been to uni... (Sheila, 31)

I expected it probably a bit more like TAFE where you sit down and you talk about the subject a little bit longer than a week. With uni it's a subject you go to a lecture that's your subject, you might work in a lab you may not and that's it! Basically the rest of it is up to you to read and I don't know being with a family ...probably makes it hard but with five kids, one with special needs and working too and I found coming to uni as well as trying to study is very hard, very hard... (Kira, 38)

Unsurprisingly, Kira was not the only mother to mention the difficulties of juggling children and study, Merrill (1999) argues that when studying the university experience of mature female students it is vital to locate such analysis within 'the wider confines of their lives' (p3). The study's focus on female students is derived from a realisation that many women, particularly mature aged students, have a number of competing demands on their time that provide additional pressures when engaging in university study. Redding and Dowling (cited in Fleming and Murphy, 1997, p21) argue that female students are frequently 'pulled in many directions' as they attempt to maintain equilibrium in the personal and public areas of life. In the first set of interviews, one of the things that emerged quite quickly was the grim determination each of the older women expressed in relation to succeeding. The students talked about the changes and challenges faced in order to come to university, often the act of enrolling required much negotiation with family and partners.

Five of the mothers mention how they have discussed this decision with their children prior to enrolment and while not seeking approval, positive reactions were clearly important. Sheila actively sought the opinion of both her children, who were four and six at the time, about her decision to enrol: '*I said: "Mummy wants to be a teacher!" And they said: "Ohhh, yeah that sounds good mum"...*'. When children reacted positively, the students felt assured and more comfortable about their decision as Linda highlights: '*I mean my kids are behind me 100% I wouldn't have come here if it was going to affect them*'. Linda positions university as a very clear second to family, her arrival at university is conditionally tempered by the reactions from her children and for her, a negative response will precipitate her departure:

...if this became too much for my kids again, I would ultimately defer I'd have to stop because they are never going to stop being my primary focus.

Seven of the mothers mentioned how they had wanted to come to university after leaving school but how developments had occurred which made this no longer possible. As Catherine puts it: *'...I was going to then go back but that just never happened life happened...'*. Life literally did happen for two of the students, Stephanie and Clara, both of whom had babies before completing High School. For the other five, a combination of relational and financial prerogatives led to the decision to postpone the thoughts of university. Interestingly, all seven mention how this desire was never abandoned; instead it simply receded only to re-emerge later in life:

...so coming now was very much about something I want to do it's a life goal I guess for me. (Vicky, 45)

I've always wanted to go to Uni... (Heidi, 47)

I wanted to come to uni and do this exact course for the last at least 3 or 4 years... (Clara, 23)

The huge personal and financial investment surrounding the decision to come to university imbued this process with certain expectations. When I rejoined the students at the end of the first semester, the actual reality of attending university was reflected upon. Of the initial seventeen students, one had already departed the university (Vicky), the others describing this initial period of university attendance similar to an act of 'survival', particularly those who had both family and work commitments.

Surviving

I was having a lot of pressure on my finding time to study because I either was at work or ... sometimes the kids pressurising me for time with them. I just wanted them to leave me alone and let me do what I needed to do ... I am really missing spending time with the kids and they are growing up and I am looking at them and I am thinking where do I start? And I am constantly thinking to myself where do I start to get back to knowing these kids again and doing things with these kids? ... I want to be the Mum, I want to study and I want to be the Mum ... sometimes I think I am being selfish. (Stephanie, 34)

Stephanie's difficult balancing act was a common theme amongst the older women with children, the responsibility for successfully integrating family and study was firmly placed on their shoulders. Merrill (1999) identifies the 'guilty mother syndrome' as a theme that emerged in many of the interview conversations she had with female adult students. These students frequently referred to the difficulty of 'straddling' the competing 'worlds of education, family and employment' (Merrill, 1999, p156). Edwards (1993) refers to university and family as two 'greedy institutions' both of whom demand high degrees of attention and participation.

Women are under pressure to achieve success in each of the two greedy spheres by showing that neither suffers because of their participation in the other. They must show that their educational work is not affected by their family commitments and that their family lives are not suffering because of their studies. (Edwards, 1993, p63)

'Satisficing' is a term used by Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) to refer to decisions that people make that while not being optimal are deemed to be good enough. The act of satisficing is apparent in the older women's attitudes to study. The pressures of successfully juggling home, study and work translates into the act of satisficing as certain things are sacrificed in order to satisfy the minimal requirements of the course. Satisficing was one of the ways that some of the women managed university study in a life full of competing demands.

Five of the mothers talked about how they had adapted strategies designed to keep family and university life separate. For example, Sue has very clear demarcation around 'university' time and 'family' time ensuring that university did not encroach upon other areas of her personal life:

... my view is that I'm at uni from 9 till 3, Monday to Friday ... I am trying to do that so that uni is at uni and home will stay home and try not to take up too much family time.(Sue)

In Sue's case, part of the reason for keeping these two areas so distinct can be related to the lack of support received from her husband around her decision to come to university. In the first interview, Sue describes how it is 'a bit difficult chatting with my husband' about university and suggests that this might be because '*...he feels threatened by it ... I think he is just waiting to see how I'll go and y'know how's its goin' to affect us negatively, I think he's waiting for the bad bits.*' Sue's quote indicates a 'wait and see' attitude in terms of how university was going to disrupt or modify existing family and living patterns.

Similarly, in Stephanie's case her husband agreed to her study on the proviso that Stephanie could continue to fit '*the study in with work and family cos that's the biggest issue fitting all in and getting them all to work together, then he's quite happy now to let me go ahead and do that...*' Equally, Susie highlights how despite enjoying and relishing her 'homework' there remains an expectation that this remains secondary to 'housework':

I enjoy it and I love doing homework and things like that so its just time I think time with the housework that still has to be done cos if it doesn't get done [he says] 'Oh you haven't cleaned the house today'. And I think oh well I am trying to study...

University attendance has the potential to fundamentally shift the power balance in marital relationships and it is not unusual for divorce or separation to ensue. In Edward's (1990) study of thirty three mature age female students, a quarter of the marriages dissolved after the woman commenced study. For Kira, university opened up a new world of knowledge and encouraged her to question her life and her place in it; this development possibly both undermining the ownership of knowledge and challenging the power dynamic within the home:

I tried to explain to him I want 'why's' you don't. I want to know why I'm not happy, why did it happen, why do you do this, why do you stay out all the time. I want to know why and you don't, you just want to let it ride. I said a lawyer wants to know why they are not winning a case, a fashion consultant wants to know why that dress didn't fit. I said I am just like them now, going off to uni I want answers I want to know why things happen...you don't and therefore we are sailing in different directions...

Kira's arrival at university proved to be a catalyst for the demise of her marriage. While not the only reason, Kira recognises that university opened her eyes to a new world, which led to her questioning her current situation. The demise of her marriage and the difficulties of looking after her five children only making her more determined to continue. While reducing her academic load to one subject, Kira explains that both her own sense of determination and the gains in her confidence have compounded her desire to study; Kira is simply adamant that she is '*not going to give up*'. This perspective evidences how overcoming obstacles has the potential to further empower and motivate students to persist. As Kira reflects: '*I probably gained confidence...so my gain I suppose is confidence ... I said to myself well I can do it, if I don't give up...*'

While Kira's relational transformations were quite radical, she was not the only participant to experience quite fundamental shifts in marital relationships. As the older students became more involved in studying, particularly by the third set of interviews, the invisible work of women became more apparent. Katie's husband might be '*struggling a little bit*' but Katie now realises

that *'the house does not fall down if I don't do everything...and he can be drying clothes in front of the heater at 5 in the morning not my problem'*. There is a hint of liberation in this statement, echoed by Susie, who admits to not minding that she now has to *'sacrifice on some of the housework'*.

As the year progressed, the participants also reflected on the actual strategies they had developed to both manage university study and also the other elements of their lives, both personal and public. One of the most consistent themes was the need to create and maintain friendships on campus but whereas for seven of the students these relationships on-campus were spoken in terms of social connection, the remaining students referred to friendships in more pragmatic terms, use of friends was more strategic in nature. These students focused more on the functionality of engagement with others rather than the creation of personal connection. Rachel admits that the people she talks to in university would not be defined as *'friends'* but rather are *'people that I associate with'*; similarly, Nicki *'flutter[s] between different groups'* and admits that she *'only speaks to people at uni I don't take any of that back home'*.

The need for students to socially engage with the university environment has been identified as a vital factor in retaining and engaging students. Kantanis (2000) argues that *'social transition underpins a successful academic transition to university'* (para 9) whilst Johnson (2001) suggests that fostering a *'sense of community'* amongst participants is one vital way of creating such relationships. However, the fostering of any such community is difficult when students have little face-to-face time not only with other students but also academic staff.

...being here you sorta see it just like no-one sorta cares about you as such. If you don't do the work they don't care, they don't follow anything up ... if you don't hand an assignment in that's your problem and stuff like that and it's too hard well it took me a while to get use to it and I'm still getting use to it...
(Mary, 18)

The lack of 'face time' with lectures was something that all the participants remarked on, many had anticipated having time to discuss academic concerns with their teachers and instead: *'...there was no-one really to ask or to talk about what you were feeling or what you were experiencing as much ummm, so yeah I think that was kind of a disadvantage...'* (Mary). Some of the participants made reference to the reluctance of lecturers to 'spoon-feed' them, which often resulted in ambiguity over expectations and requirements. Helen explained how she was more inclined to discuss assignments with her peers as she had once: *'... asked a questions about something and it was like: "Just read it you know you should be able to figure this out" which doesn't work very well when you are an adult and you are telling her "well I can't figure this out" so...'* Equally, Linda describes how: *'I think (pause) I'm not enjoying the lectures like I thought I would umm I feel that perhaps we don't get enough guidance from the lecturers'*. Much of the contact that students reported having with lecturers was mediated through electronic media such as discussion boards and email. There was a general disaffection with this type of communication, the limitations of temporal and spatial distance impacting on learning and understanding:

...its like you've taught your lesson and then they walk away, I mean like you can email them but at the time its not the same as talking to them about the work and sitting down and trying to explain something to you...(Kira, 38)

...a lot of people have been saying to me oh why do I have to check my student mail or there's no communication anymore like it's basically the Blackboard [ICT program] is your teacher and stuff like that. (Annie, 18)

Clearly, the use of such communication technology adds additional facets to first year transition. Gatz and Hirt (2000) argue that the increasing usage of these technological forms has altered the intrinsic character of university life and suggest that *'the theories and models we use to*

understand students should reflect those changes.’ (p.317). Institutions need to recognise that technological applications need to be utilised as an addition to learning not as something that can replace interpersonal interaction. Creating space and time for interactions with students may be difficult for many academics due to teaching demands but for the participants in this study, it was often the small things that would seem to make a qualitative difference to their learning experiences:

... I guess it's a bit like a teacher when you're going into a classroom and the teacher say: 'Hi Linda how are you going today' or 'Hi John'. And if they know who you are and they show a bit of an interest and even ...I guess showing a bit more of the human side. (Linda,32)

Reflecting

During the interviews, students reflected on their university experience in a multifaceted way and as the year progressed there was a chance to revisit and further elaborate on these reflections. Shifts in perceptions of self were noted by a total of six students; some of these were referenced in moderate terms such as Clara who now simply feels *'proud of myself'* and Linda who reveals that she has become *'stronger throughout the year'*. For others these changes were more radical in nature such as Rachel who reflects on university enabling her to become a *'better person'* and Nicki who at the end of this academic year expansively states:

I feel like a different person and I feel like a better person and I feel like I could be a better Mum to Mark [son]...I am happy and that is a really good feeling.

Nicki perceives university as not just facilitating her own self-learning and discovery but also, negotiating a new sense of self. Equally, Heidi reflects how university is *'very empowering'* as it provides the space for her to voice *'opinions and instead of people looking at me...like you are a bit of a 'know it all' ...'*. The impact of university extends beyond the lecture theatre and the campus boundaries, effecting and negotiating disparate elements in students' lives.

When the first interviews are examined, it is perhaps not surprising that six of the students with children describe themselves primarily as mothers; if a student identity was perceived it generally had low priority. As the year progressed, this positioning and identity changed as the women became increasingly immersed in the academic environment. The actual process of becoming a student was largely defined in terms of personal change, for Rachel she now has a *'different outlook on life'* which has meant that she is *'much more critical'*. Both Sue and Susie indicate they have become more open-minded, becoming a student is associated with broader horizons:

I am not so introverted like self-centred like my life and my kids, get through the day like whatever to survive, so it's gone beyond that now. (Sue, 39)

One of the unexpected outcomes from the study was the ways that the students reflected upon their participation in the research. All of the respondents indicated that the interviews and the research had positive repercussions. While the outcomes that were articulated differed between participants, some very clear patterns emerged. The research process was defined as bringing rewards both to self and others; offering an opportunity to improve the experience of future students and also providing a space to reflect and articulate what they themselves were currently feeling.

We are able to voice our opinion and say: 'Yeah this is why we are here; this is how important it is. (Heidi, 47)

Given the first in family status of these students, there were few people outside the university environment who were able to 'share' this university experience; indeed, in some cases, there was little interest expressed in the personal domain in relation to what these students were doing. The interviews allowed the women to reflect on how they were feeling and work through issues which otherwise would have stayed '*.....up here going around and around your head. We've been able to verbalise it and actually get it out and worked through some of it...*' (Nicki).

Ivanic (1998) identifies that for older students entering university can engender a range of emotions and feelings including '*...crises of confidence, conflicts of identity, feelings of strangeness, the need to discover the rules of an unfamiliar world*'. (p7) This research indicated that such feelings were not limited to the older students, instead each of these respondents varyingly reflected on university in terms of a 'rollercoaster', full of emotional highs and lows. The opportunity to talk about these experiences made a qualitative difference to their transition to university life and may have assisted in normalising these feelings. Certainly, all the students in this project highlighted a need to have their fears and apprehensions both recognised and validated.

Conclusion

When examining student retention the focus should not only be on identifying the variables of the departing students but also include the reasons why students choose to persist in their studies and how this persistence and engagement is enacted at an individual level. This research indicated how transition to and engagement with university was a continuous, ongoing process rather than something that occurred in the initial weeks or months of study. Transition was not a time-bounded phase but instead the academic year was characterised as a series of highs and lows, distinguished by a period of building up, often accompanied by some sort of emotional high, a possible low and then the whole process repeating itself; similar to the rollercoaster ride mentioned earlier .

The year could best be described as composed of a series of 'critical moments', which included the initial arrival, adjustment to learning, acculturating to a new social environment, forming a student identity, navigating assignment due dates, recommencing the new semester or academic year, participating in exams and so forth. 'Critical moments' can be defined as times of risk where individuals feel more vulnerable to obstacles or difficulties that are encountered in a new environment (Nutt, Skinner, Tidd, Poras & Scott-Marshall, 2005). Making the repetitive and ongoing nature of these moments explicit to students is necessary so that individuals are better prepared for the somewhat volatile and changing nature of the university experience. With such knowledge and understanding, students may become better equipped to persist in this environment. Reflecting on these critical moments within the university context and alerting students to the characteristics of these along with support strategies designed to assist students through these stages, may reduce the possibility of attrition. Indeed, for some students, critical moments may also occur prior to arriving at university, which makes the recognition of personal life histories another important facet of this arrival process.

The narratives told to me revealed determination and also a gradual strengthening of the recognition that this was the right decision for these students despite the difficulties and renegotiations this choice engendered. For those of us who work in the student support field, the acknowledgement and validation of such narratives is important. Zwerling (1992) argues that it is necessary to seek out and explore the personal journeys students have undertaken in arriving at tertiary study. Drawing on Mezirow's (1978) concept of 'perspective transformation', Zwerling highlights the importance of encouraging students to reflect on and define their life stories in order to avoid finding '*... themselves trapped in those histories*' (p.54). Indeed, it is important for support and teaching staff to understand the length of the journey undertaken already by students and provide the necessary scaffolding and support that will assist in overcoming future obstacles and critical moments.

This article is based upon how the students elected to describe their university experience, such accounts are not necessarily transparent reflections on reality but rather should be regarded as an indicators of how students 'make sense' of this process. The stories that the students told to me were undoubtedly 'mediated through the lens of gender' (Tett, 2000, p190). Hence the representations described are not simply reflections of truth but instead represent attempts at 'making sense' of life. The accounts provide insights into both the mundane and the exceptional, highlighting the successes and defeats engendered by this decision to come to university, but grounded firmly within the narratives of the women themselves.

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