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Focusing on six first year firsts: A professional development framework supporting teachers of first year subjects

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Abstract

The first year of university is a critical period for student engagement. Crucial to smooth transition is how teaching staff support new students in their first year experience (FYE). However, across higher education institutions, staff receive varying levels of professional development, and often, little explanation of how to translate theory into practice. In 2014, at Wollongong University, a new professional development framework was developed to assist teaching staff across the university to translate transition principles into effective curriculum practices. The framework identifies six moments in any first year curriculum where students experience their first contact with different academic elements and highlights how staff can better engage students in these moments. This framework can be applied by teaching staff across the higher education context from tutor to lecturer and whole of course co-ordinator. Run as a pilot FYE module in 2014, in 2015 the framework continues to be used for curriculum renewal across the university.

Keywords

professional, development, year, framework, focusing, supporting, teachers, subjects, firsts, first, six

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Focusing on Six First Year Firsts: A professional development framework supporting teachers of first year subjects

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Abstract (150 words)

The first year of university is a critical period for student engagement. Crucial to smooth transition is how teaching staff support new students in their first year experience (FYE). However, across higher education institutions, staff receive varying levels of professional development, and often, little explanation of how to translate theory into practice. In 2014, at Wollongong University, a new professional development framework was developed to assist teaching staff across the university to translate transition principles into effective curriculum practices. The framework identifies six moments in any first year curriculum where students experience their first contact with different academic elements and highlights how staff can better engage students in these moments. This framework can be applied by teaching staff across the higher education context from tutor to lecturer and whole of course co-ordinator. Run as a pilot FYE module in 2014, in 2015 the framework continues to be used for curriculum renewal across the university.

Key words: First year experience (FYE); curriculum; engagement; transition

Introduction

First year experience (FYE) has become a catchcry across Australian universities as they grapple with attracting and retaining students. In 2010, shocking figures on the cost of student retention, served as a wake-up call to many universities, with the Hobsons Retention Project estimating the financial cost of student attrition to universities at an average of \$36 million per institution (Adams, Banks, Davis & Dickson, 2010). This report concluded that student success and retention were largely predicated upon factors related to student FYE.

Recent statistics released by the Department of Education (2013) highlight that despite the plethora of FYE research and intervention in Australia, retention and attrition rates in Higher Education (HE) have remained relatively stable during the last decade. For example, overall rates for retention of commencing domestic Bachelor level students in 2005 that stood at 84.60% were more recently measured at 86.18% in 2012; and rates of attrition dropping from 15.04% in 2005 to 13.47% in 2012. In a recent article published in *The Conversation*, Kift (2014) stated that a lack of movement in these vital areas is 'morally indefensible and hugely wasteful' and called for greater efforts at a whole of institution level to support student success.

FYE must become core to the business of universities (Kift, 2014). Institutions must focus on the transition process for all students, especially supporting those students who come to

university, for whatever reason, least prepared (Tinto, 2006-7) and taking into consideration the increasing student diversity. Zepke (2014, 704) contends that working toward deep student engagement requires recognition that a sense of belonging is borne of “more than a ‘one size fits all’ set of ‘how to’ suggestions”.

Forging important spaces to open up conversations about the FYE, Kift and colleagues (Kift, 2009; Kift and Nelson, 2005, Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010) emphasise a whole-of-institution approach to FYE. Referred to as ‘third generation’, this approach encompasses both co-curricular support and activities, such as student support services or orientation activities; and curricular activities, curriculum design, assessment and pedagogy. In an effort to translate the importance of university-wide FYE strategies and practices into first year curriculum, Kift and colleagues (Kift, 2009; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010) developed a ‘transition pedagogy’, a ‘set of interconnected organising principles that stand out as supportive of first year learning, engagement, success and retention across disciplines’ (Kift, 2009, 10). This pedagogy included the curriculum design principles of: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring. These principles are broad themes that target academic staff, who are designers of subjects and courses, to shape curriculum that is intentional, integrated, explicit and coordinated.

While transition pedagogy has had wide uptake, concerns have been raised with taking transition as an unproblematised conception (Gale and Parker, 2014). Following others (Bernstein, 2003; Lynch, 1989), Gale and Parker (2014) argue that institution-wide conceptions of transition often fail to recognise the ‘hidden curriculum’ or move students beyond initial induction and socialisation. They suggest that a greater focus on ‘transition as becoming’ directs attention to students (rather than subjects) and their vast experiences in transition. A second concern relates to the audience of interest for transition pedagogy. While curriculum designers play a significant role in making choices about supporting transition, so too do teachers with little curriculum design input, such as sessional teachers, lab demonstrators, contract or leave replacement teachers and tutors. This cohort of teachers are at the coalface, interacting and engaging with students and therefore could significantly benefit from professional development and opportunities to unpack their practices and expectations for effective transition.

Therefore, using Kift’s organising principles for first year curriculum as the theoretical foundation for understanding transition pedagogy, a framework was constructed by the University of Wollongong’s Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Unit for translating these organising principles in a way that unpacks the hidden curriculum, is student-focused, and engages all teachers in first year experience. The curriculum offers multiple access points to engage students, facilitate learning and set the foundations for success, if each critical point is explicitly addressed in the academic programme (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011).

The ‘Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points’ is a framework used in professional development to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their engagement with students at six critical moments in the first year of university study. The purpose of this paper is to outline the development of the framework, unpacking the six key curriculum points. The following section highlights how the framework has been integrated into a professional development module on FYE, including some initial feedback from participating teachers. The paper closes by presenting final reflections on future uses and possibilities.

Developing a framework

The framework was constructed through finding connections and synergies amongst three different sources: literature on FYE, contemporary media articles and data from staff and students. The literature was reviewed to explore past research and approaches on the pedagogy of teaching in the first year. Contemporary media was sourced to fill out the strong theoretical foundations and ideas presented in the literature with current discussions being undertaken around FYE and transitions into university by academic staff. Consultations with current teaching staff from across Wollongong University faculties and campuses were conducted. Additionally, focus groups were also held with enrolled undergraduate students, asking them to reflect on their own experiences of transition to university.

The framework was developed with four purposes in mind. Firstly, it was developed as a teaching and learning tool for critical reflection by teaching staff on FYE. The second purpose was as a means to make tangible Kift's transition principles through drawing attention to teaching practices at specific points throughout the first year curriculum. Thirdly, the framework was developed as a way of organising different teaching practices for personal reflection and collaboration through sharing. Finally, the framework was developed to engage teachers at all levels: sessional, early career, experienced teachers, subject and course co-ordinators across all disciplines.

In order to draw teacher's attention to classroom activity in this initial phase of university life we have identified six critical curriculum points. These six points (see Figure 1) highlight critical moments in the first semester and, taken together, present a framework for reflecting on teachers' practices in the first year.

Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points

FIRST subject of a course

The first year of tertiary study finds many students unclear about what they are supposed to learn and what the rationale and purpose is for particular teaching formats and activities. Students have to learn how to learn more effectively (Mitchell, 2014) and teachers' activity in tertiary classrooms is often the vehicle for much of that learning. Teachers who are serious about equitable participation need to be transparent and explicit about the processes, approaches and objectives of the subjects they are teaching, in order to address the diverse needs of their students (van der Meer, 2012).

The first subject of a course is often the first step towards a career. Students transitioning into university can find this first step of the process challenging. It is for university staff, and particularly teaching staff, to signpost the critical points of the FYE providing a 'roadmap and a guide' through the uncharted territory that is academic life (McMillan, 2013).

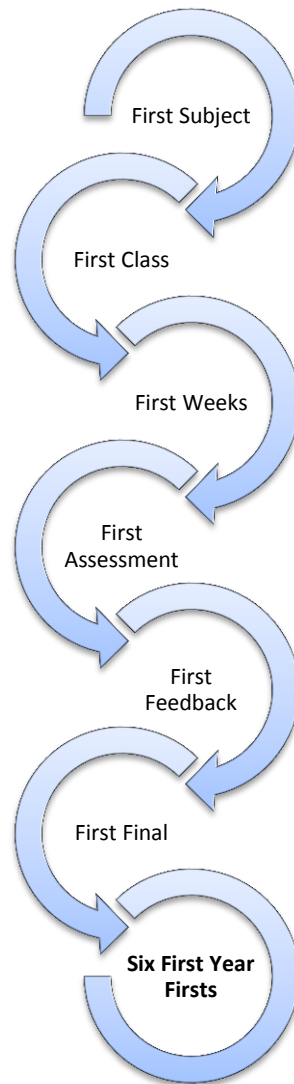


Figure 1. Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points

FIRST class (tutorial or lecture)

New students are often anxious about their first days of university. Teachers in higher education have a responsibility to assist their students to settle into the new learning environment or culture (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011). Academic culture refers to ‘ways of thinking and behaving that are shared by people who teach, work or study at university’ (Brick, 2006, 233). It is crucial for teaching staff to unpack these ways of thinking and behaving with students new to university study and life, from their first class, in order to open up academic curriculum.

Learning skills related to time management (van der Meer, Jansen & Torenbeek, 2010); understanding subject requirements; learning how to access tutors or lecturers; and understanding teacher availability; were all closely related to students’ feelings of belonging as if these new students had to learn how to become ‘fish in water’ (Zepke, 2014). The type of activity that is included in the first lesson is also important to students, with students

reporting that the social interaction associated with group work tasks further promoted a sense of belonging (Thomas & Herbert, 2014; Thomas, Herbert & Teras, 2014).

FIRST weeks

Success or failure during the first year is now seen as a predictor of future university success, dropout or failure. In March 2014, The Age reported significant statistics relating to student retention, noting that with as many as 30% of students dropping out of Australian universities, and the rate sitting at 9.8% at Wollongong University, this first year is critical to both retention and success (Gilmore & Marshall, 2014). In the first few weeks, students make decisions about their participation at university, their course selection and the relevance of subject content, particularly as the Census date approaches. The first weeks of the academic year are seen as a barometer of later feelings of belonging (McMillan, 2013).

Explicit teaching in the areas of academic expectations and supports available, as well as availability of well-being and lifestyle services is pivotal to initial and ongoing success in the first year and beyond (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011). As students settle into university life, the activity of their tutors and lecturers can greatly enhance their ability to undertake the academic workload. Unpacking academic expectations in each class taught sheds light on the various aspects of each subject. Explaining the details of subject outlines and assessments; reminding students of the weekly reading or assignment requirements; clarifying expectations for lectures, tutorials and lab work; assisting students with group work activities; are vital to student understandings of academic participation and must be attended to in the first weeks and reiterated during throughout the semester.

In addition, during the first weeks, it is critical that students are made aware of the many support services available to them. Becoming cognisant of the types of services available as well as where they are on campus and how to access them 'just in time' can further support student success. Services can include those related to learning development, counselling, student support, accommodation, scholarships or awards, and career advice.

FIRST assessment

Early in the first semester of study all students are required to undertake their first assessment tasks. This first assessment in each subject introduces discipline specific academic skills which will be a necessary requirement for long-term learning and success both in the university environment and later in the workplace (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). It has been shown that not all students are equally prepared for the university workload, with, for example, low-income students being found to be 'disproportionately academically underprepared' (Tinto, 2006-7, 12).

The literature also suggests that there is a misalignment of student perceptions of assessment expectations between secondary and tertiary education which ranges across discipline areas (Beckman & Ryner, 2011) and that there has been a reduction in students accessing teaching support services or staff in recent years (Cameron, George & Henley, 2012). Therefore, in preparing students for the first assessment task, teaching staff must explicitly highlight the various aspects of the assessment task. By focussing student attention on the purpose of the assessment task, teachers help students make connections between the task and subject or
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course learning outcomes, thereby unpacking the question ‘Why am I doing this?’ Other helpful assessment practices in the classroom include: giving examples; explaining requirements for academic referencing in their institution or faculty; reminding students of deadlines and penalties for late contribution; clearly examining all characteristics of plagiarism; and reminding students of support services available.

FIRST feedback

Feedback has been found to be ‘one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement’ (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, 81). However, its power on student learning outcomes can be either positive or negative, and therein lies the challenge for teachers in higher education. Feedback can be mistaken for being only a grade, advice or praise. Awarding a grade, despite the plethora of research denigrating this approach to feedback, is still widely used as the main stay of feedback provision. However, grade ‘feedback’ has been found to be an obstacle, with many students failing to notice other sorts of feedback when a grade is given. This form of summative feedback may well be useful at the end of a subject to highlight how far a student has moved toward their learning goal but formative feedback during the teaching weeks has been shown to be more likely to assist students to move toward subject related learning outcomes (Black & William, 1998).

The value of feedback resides in how the information is used to support students to progress toward their learning goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Providing extensive formative feedback, particularly for challenging assessment tasks, has been found to lead to greater student engagement and higher achievement (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Therefore, students in their first year must learn how to receive this feedback and how to implement its guides into their ongoing work for the current assessment task and beyond.

Within the first year, providing opportunities for students to learn to assess their own work is also vital. Known as *sustainable assessment* (Boud & Soler, 2015) or *assessment literacy* (Price *et al*, 2012), this notion of teaching students how to reflect on their own work (or that of peers) and provide themselves or others insightful feedback, through carefully constructed assessment tasks, not only prepares them for reviewing their own assessment output within each subject but has ongoing benefits. Price *et al* (2012) argue that assessment literacy prepares students for lifelong learning.

In the early stages of first year, new students provided with extensive, timely and clear feedback and the skills to understand that feedback and reflect on their own work are more able to assess how they are progressing within a subject and at university overall.

FIRST final exam or assessment

At the end of the first semester of study the outcomes of teaching practices can often be seen as students grapple with the pressures of finishing each subject. The final weeks of each semester and the exam period are a key time for stress and uncertainty for all students and especially those who are experiencing this for the first time.

For teachers of first year students it is a critical time to offer targeted support and remind students of their availability in person or through named technologies. It is also an important period for teachers to normalise help-seeking behaviours around assignment preparation, research, writing and referencing skills (McMillan, 2005); as well as for personal support. Here again, teachers must be well equipped with information regarding their institution's services.

Six First Year Firsts in action

The 'Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points' framework was piloted in November 2014 with a cohort of 50 UOW teachers from across disciplines, participating in an online teaching and learning course. This professional development course was facilitated through Moodle and featured ten online modules with optional face-to-face workshops for each topic related to teaching in higher education.

The framework was nested within the online module *The First Year Experience* and formed the second of three activities. The first activity outlined the importance of focussing on transition and provided an opportunity for participants to share thoughts or experiences on what they knew about first year students. To support this activity, a professionally edited video resource was compiled that featured students at UOW reflecting on the challenges and highlights from their own first year (to access video go to: <http://youtu.be/OJaBw0ntFZY>). Supplementing the video, the following questions were posed:

- What common themes arose as students reflected on their first year of study?
- What challenges did students articulate?
- What strategies did students employ to assist them to succeed in first year?

Participants were encouraged to reflect, write and respond to one another in a discussion forum.

The module's second activity engaged participants with research, resources and reflection in and around the first year. This activity was organised through the Six First Year Firsts framework, by utilising each key curriculum point as an elective topic. Each topic begins by highlighting research or contemporary articles on the issue and linking to UOW support staff and services. Next, either a teaching resource or video was offered to elaborate on the issue, specifically pointing to the role that teachers can play and the importance of engaging students in this academic area. Last, key questions were asked to elicit reflective responses on teacher's practices. For example, in the third curriculum point '*the first few weeks*', a second professionally edited video was developed with UOW students that outlined the tools or services students had used in their first few weeks (to access video go to: <http://youtu.be/cRQCT8jks98>). It features a link to several, relevant academic readings, links to UOW websites and contacts, and a resource on assisting students develop time management skills. A discussion forum was then conducted with the following questions:

- When could you introduce students to UOW services and how would you do this?
- Have you had an experience with this before?
- How might you help students set and develop their academic goals?

The final activity in the module involved participants considering their own teaching practice. Beginning with a reflective component, participants contemplate the content of the module (readings, videos, discussion forums) and consider how this input might impact their current teaching practice. They are asked to formulate remaining concerns or questions to share. In this third activity participants download a template *First Year Teaching Plan* which uses the framework, they are required to record one activity that they would like to try under each critical curriculum point. They are then requested to upload this plan to a common area and reflect on the module, finishing with the sentence starter: ‘As a teacher, one of the most important things I can do for my first year students is...’. An optional module evaluation was also offered.

Some initial feedback from the teachers involved in the pilot suggests the usefulness of the framework:

- “This was one of the most interesting modules in the course, I think because the first year experience so often determines the students' attitudes to the rest of their course, and to the discipline as a whole, even in later life.”
- “I have not been involved with first year students, but there is still learning here that I can apply to students that are studying for the first time in Australia.”
- “The video interviews of students allowed me to get a glimpse of the various issues being faced by first year students. They served as an eye-opener that I have to be more aware and understanding of the different backgrounds of my students.”
- “I'm still amazed that any university lets their first year students be taught by a pool of their most inexperienced teachers - and I am including myself in that pool! It has only been through talking with some of the truly expert and committed teaching staff at UOW that I have begun to understand the effort that goes into supporting first-year students - this module provided very useful background to those conversations.”

A continuing conversation

The ‘Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points’ framework for professional development has various applications. These applications include: the presentation of resources to foster constructive individual reflection, relevant to current teaching practice; disseminating and sharing of helpful teaching practices; and, making visible teaching activity promoting successful FYE (Tinto, 2006-7). In 2015, the framework is being used as part of a whole-of-course curriculum renewal at the University of Wollongong, the Curriculum Transformation Project (O'Donnell, Wallace, Melano, Lawson & Leinonen, in press). This project involves five transformational practices, one of which is the first year experience.

All members of a university – students, professional and academic staff – have a responsibility to ensure first year curriculum is relevant, supportive and meaningful (Kift, 2009). The Critical Curriculum Points framework, presented in this paper, offers a means of beginning this conversation amongst teachers in HE as they prepare for and undertake teaching subjects to students in their first year. The framework and resources disseminated in this paper are free and available for use across institutions.

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