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"Are we there yet?": Making sense of transition in higher education

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"Are we there yet?": Making sense of transition in higher education

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Abstract*

This paper reviews a first year transition program first implemented in 2011 and designed for students commencing higher education at the regional campuses of an Australian university. A significant proportion of students attending these campuses are mature age, the first in family to attempt university study, Indigenous, and/or from low socio-economic backgrounds. Our project aims were to facilitate academic participation and hence retention in a higher education environment that relies on various multimedia technologies and blended learning models. Ongoing evaluations of the project clearly indicate its efficacy. Even so, longitudinal analyses raise questions about how current social inclusion policy shapes praxis; indeed, about how we do social inclusion and transition in higher education. The following discussion grapples with some of the unresolved tensions between transition as institutional policy and the complex, differentiated and sometimes messy transitional experiences of first year regional campus undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds.

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Introduction and context

In 2010-2011 we were increasingly concerned about some of the struggles facing students commencing undergraduate study at the regional campuses of our university. These campuses attract students from diverse educational and social backgrounds, including first in family to attempt university study, students from Indigenous backgrounds, those from low socio-economic (LSE) backgrounds, students affected by disability, and mature-age students. The campuses are also a place to commence higher education study for students with an ATAR¹ incommensurate with entry to a larger or central campus. Too often, we saw the excitement that marked student attendance at Orientation sessions dissipate into an overwhelmed sense of anxiety by about Week 8; in part, due to the unexpected, unfamiliar, and sometimes completely confusing demands of university study. It seemed to us that, without relevant and accessible first year transition programs, we were at risk of setting at least some of these students up to fail. More recently, the government-directed Australian Qualification Framework Council (AQFC, 2013) in tandem with the independent regulator of higher education, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act (TEQSA, 2011), combined to provide a systematic paradigm that informs and regulates learning outcomes across the sector. At the same time, university teaching and learning environments are becoming more reliant on various multimedia technologies and modes of subject delivery.

Regional university campuses have meaning—economically, culturally and socially—for those

¹ The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) denotes a student's ranking relative to his or her peers upon completion of their secondary education. It allows students who have completed different combinations of secondary level courses to be compared.

who come to study from the wider host communities. However, they also present challenges around technological accessibility, digital literacy, pedagogical design, learning support, social inclusion and, not least, transition. For example, regional campus degree programs at our university utilise a range of multimedia technologies such as videoconferencing, podcast lectures, web-based resources, online discussion spaces, and face-to-face tutorials. The combination of technologically-mediated distance learning and face-to-face teaching are characteristic of the blended models utilised across the regional network. As well as developing academic language and literacy capacities to current higher education standards, students require some technological sophistication to succeed. Our research over the past five years clearly demonstrates that on entry the latter is not always the case. For many of the students central to our discussion, the blended learning environment of the networked campuses presents challenges over and above commencing university study. While a basic but sound level of digital literacy is the expectation inherent in this type of degree delivery, the reality is that, with widening participation initiatives, universities are actively seeking to attract students from backgrounds where social media access is still not a given. Lefoe, Gunn and Hedberg (2002a) identified communication with central campuses when problem solving and learning to navigate the various technologies as just two of the issues that differentiate the learning experience of regional campus students from the experiences of their central campus peers. These remain issues of concern in 2015. Teaching staff at the networked campuses are primarily casual—working on sessional contracts—and although they bring an undoubted commitment to the work, the constraints concomitant with casualised, multi-location teaching have also been recognised as relevant factors in this type of higher education

model (Beaumont, Stirling & Percy, 2009; Davis & Fill, 2007; Lefoe, Gunn & Hedberg, 2002b). Oliver and Trigwell (2005) contend that the term “blended learning” is problematic in that it fails to capture the variety inherent in the model. They argue that the term is too elastic with difficult-to-define variables between mixes of delivery methods, curricula design, pedagogical intention and student learning experience. Furthermore, it glosses over the institutional and pedagogical politics that have seen the widespread adoption of the model in the first place. While we agree with Oliver and Trigwell’s reservations about the inconsistencies in usage of the term “blended learning” and the pedagogical implications of the model, it nonetheless captures the style of higher education delivery at the heart of this discussion and so will be utilised.

Ideally, development of academic literacies will take place within a subject as an integrated process (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Nakata, Nakata & Chin, 2008) and there are subjects where academic language and learning (ALL) lecturers have collaborated with subject coordinators to develop integrated learning resources. In 2014-2015, this process at our university has been rejuvenated by university-wide curriculum review procedures implemented by faculty-dedicated teams comprising ALL specialists, educational designers and faculty academics. One of the aims of the review process is to ensure the integration or embedding of academic and English language teaching and learning in core and capstone subjects. It is an endeavour that will take time to complete and is currently focussed on professional development of faculty educators at the central campus. As we have already indicated though, the regional campus network relies on part-time, casual teaching staff who do not necessarily have the professional development or support to always implement integrated resources effectively at a

distance from the central campus and subject coordinator.²

Our first year transition model sits in the middle ground between optimal integration and generic supplementation: that is, while taking place outside of degree programs, the various components and accompanying learning resources are explicitly aligned with curriculum-specific ALL requirements. While various evaluation processes indicate the value of the model to first year transition and student experience, we find ourselves grappling with unresolved tensions around what “transition into uni” means for some of our students. In the following discussion, we provide an overview of our transition model and then examine some of these tensions through the lens of various student perspectives. We argue that too often subject lecturers, equity students and, indeed, ALL teachers, become entangled in the sometimes competing imperatives of teaching directives and equity policy implementation.

Embodying praxis: the model in action

Although not quite avoiding the “piecemeal approach” counselled against by Kift et al. (2010) and Krause et al. (2005), our graduated, curricula-aligned ALL program connects with students’ transition into university at key points in the lead up to, during, and at the conclusion of the first semester of undergraduate study in a blended learning environment. Our intention has been to create a “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) that engages students from diverse backgrounds in the co-production of knowledge. Wenger’s notion that various forms of engagement with academic codes and conventions facilitate deeper understanding of “repertoire, style and

² Since the time of writing, a new professional development framework for teaching and learning includes workshops on teaching strategies for regional campus tutors as well as access to a collection of online modules.

discourse" (p. 95) underpins the pedagogical focus of the model. It seemed to us that these regional student cohorts were "learners [who] must often deal with conflicting forms of individuality and competence as defined by different communities" (p. 160). We deemed community of practice theory relevant to the model because it involves peripheral learning, academic practice, and developing a sense of belonging such that students feel confident in becoming contributing members in their new communities.

Our model also draws on recommended constituents for best practice induction programs (Haggis, 2006, 2008; Kift et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2005). It comprises a three-tiered program that involves: (i) a pre-commencement "immersion" day designed to introduce students to the language, technologies and expectations of the academic environment; (ii) first semester weekly curricula-aligned seminar streams designed to scaffold the development of analytical thinking, researching and academic writing in specific disciplines; and (iii) a mid-year, day-long writing intensive designed to provide students with the opportunity to experience various stages of higher level, discipline-specific critical thinking, analysis, academic writing, paraphrasing and appropriate acknowledgement practices. We focus on ways to create inclusive learning environments within the various components of the model as well as provide meaningful and relevant experiences that account for differences in experiential learning styles (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Simpson & Yunfei, 2004). At the immersion day for example, we provide practical opportunities for students to understand and rehearse formatting academic documents according to guidelines on relevant subject outlines, how to save work to a USB drive, how to create electronic folders for managing their various academic documents, strategies for getting the most out of videoconference and podcast lectures, and introduce a range of

email/online communication styles appropriate to an academic context. The weekly curricula-aligned seminar series for each degree program delivered in the first semester encourages the ongoing development of students' academic potential through peripheral participation. A recurring theme from the student feedback we collected at the outset of the project was their unfamiliarity with the language and formal protocols of academic writing and critical thinking, which they found difficult to understand and therefore difficult to apply. This feature of first year experience has also been identified by other researchers (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008; McKay & Devlin, 2014; Stirling & Rossetto, 2007; Tumen, Shulruf & Hattie, 2008). Before commencing their second semester, students have the opportunity to revisit their academic writing and critical thinking development at a mid-year writing intensive.

Evaluation methodology

To evaluate the various learning components of the project, we record student attendance numbers and use a five-point Likert scale (1-very useful; 2-useful; 3-neutral; 4-not useful; 5-waste of time) to rate each module. These methods are supplemented by student commentary about their overall experience. All feedback by these modes is provided anonymously. While there is certain facility with these measures, there are also limitations. The necessity to report on the efficacy of limited duration teaching programs led us to question along with others (e.g. Graham & Harwood, 2011; Labonte, 2004) whether education drives economic imperatives or whether economic imperatives drive education. As with many Australian universities, student attrition and retention rates feature in our university's strategic plan (2010-12; 2013-18) and initiatives to address this area of first year student experience attract funding. While formal reporting

processes were integral to the funding we received for the initial development of the project, we remain concerned that data collected after only one semester of study merely provides a sense of the short-term impact on a specific selection of developing academic capacities. Although we have tried to enrich the scope of data collection by soliciting qualitative feedback from students at each step, it is still a reductive process and it is perhaps only possible to gain a deeper understanding of the value of this type of early stage intervention by tracking students over the course of their degree programs.

That being said, the process of developing quantitative and qualitative mechanisms encouraged us to grapple with the challenges of the project and in so doing, develop a clearer idea of the equity profile of the students and the impact of our initiatives on their first semester learning experience. For example, at the conclusion of the first semester in 2011, there was a first year failure rate of 4.8% across the regional network. This constituted a 2.5% lower failure rate across the regional network compared to the domestic cohort at the central campus. Collaboration with the Indigenous Centre resulted in zero attrition rates for Indigenous students at the central campus in the 2011 first semester. A significant reduction in regional campus attrition rates between the previous year and the first year of the transition program was also recorded (Stirling & Rossetto, 2011). Of the 135 students who attended the 2012 immersion days provided at the regional campuses and the Indigenous Centre at the central campus, 88.6% ($n=120$) self-identified as coming from LSE backgrounds and more than half were first in family to attempt university study (Stirling & Rossetto, 2012). From 2012 until the present, we have noted that a majority of student mentors for new enrolling students at all regional campuses are past attendees of the program.

Although the short term differentiated attrition numbers between those students who attend all or an aspect of the program and those who do not remain small, they are nonetheless encouraging given the high percentage of equity students across the regional network. Clearly, though, this type of short term evaluation only provides limited perspective on a more complex process (Coates, 2014). After the first flush of success with the model to facilitate successful transition for many regional students and its relevance to key aspects of various equity policies, ongoing conversations with students began to reveal a far more nuanced picture.

Truths and consequences

In salient ways our program connects with “transition as induction” (Gale & Parker, 2014; Kift et al., 2010) through the pre-semester immersion day, the curricula-aligned seminar streams across first semester and the mid-year writing intensive. Mentoring opportunities for senior students who have experienced the program in their first semester engage with a selection of the second level criteria identified by Gale and Parker’s (2014) “typology of transition” (p. 738). While it is clear from ongoing evaluations of the various model components that a majority of students certainly benefit from their involvement and the program accords with university policy and the strategic plan, we found ourselves contemplating what, in fact, “transition” meant for some. The quantitative evaluations of the project necessarily yoked transition to institutional primacy around first year retention rather than engaging with transition as the complex, differentiated, and sometimes messy process for students that we were observing—the multi-faceted process of “transition as becoming” identified by Gale and Parker (2014, p. 738, pp. 743-5). While qualitative analyses indicated that most students felt empowered by their involvement

with the project, we found that for some it was far more problematic.

To consider the complex dynamics of transition for regional campus students, we now offer a selection of narratives representative of ongoing conversations with the cohorts we support, reflected through that lens comprised of various student perspectives flagged at the outset of our paper. We argue that these types of representative student accounts are crucial to elucidate that still under-theorised space between what we intend with various teaching and learning initiatives and what is actually received. Out of respect for the confidentiality of our students' insights we include narrative representations rather than first person accounts. These narrative representations do, however, connect with a range of empirical realities. The value of this sort of strategy as an ultimately productive process that illuminates the potential disarticulations between theory and practice, between policy and implementation, has been argued elsewhere (Stirling & McGloin, 2015) and we use it here to reflect on what we hear from students about their first year experiences and what these narratives can tell us about diversity as lived experience in current higher education climes.

The blended learning model utilised by the regional campus network is a significant factor in transition for these students. While some will bring a certain social media brio to their multimedia learning engagement, others find themselves completely out of their depth. As we have suggested above, assumptions about the more-or-less straightforward accessibility of information delivered via multimedia technologies for the at-a-distance recipient are not always realised in fact. One of the authors regularly accesses meetings videoconferenced from the central campus to the regional network and is as regularly so frustrated by the process that she intersperses videoconference attendance with trips to the campus to attend key meetings in person. This is not an

uncommon occurrence for regional campus staff, some of whom drive considerable distances to redress the limitations of a virtual attendance at selected meetings. While the videoconference medium has undoubtedly advantages for a regional context and offers at least a modicum of presence, if not participation if a meeting or class is very large, there are quite often notable discrepancies between intention at point of delivery and the realities at point of reception. Much depends on the performance and technological sophistication of the presenter and their capacity to develop resources and provide discussion such that both are accessible to the wider audience. If they do not get this right, the at-a-distance audience too often finds itself squinting trying to read badly formatted PowerPoint slides, trying to actually see the person delivering the presentation, and/or trying to hear what is being said between the presenter and members of the face-to-face audience. It is not unknown for profoundly dispirited recipients to hit the mute button and mutter unhappily among themselves during particularly challenging videoconference performances.

The complexities of accessing lectures via this medium have been well recognised in one of the graduate programs delivered to one of the regional campuses. Although these graduate students also have face-to-face teaching in their local tutorial sessions, the relevant faculty supplements the multimedia lecture experience by regularly transporting students to the central campus to attend some face-to-face lectures with their central campus classmates. These students already have undergraduate degrees and thus a certain capacity in dealing with the other demands of higher level critical thinking, academic writing, and so forth. Nor are podcast lectures infallible to gremlin mischief, usually in the forms of compromised audio quality or non-recording. If we translate even some of these types of techno-glitches to a first semester, first year

regional campus cohort significantly populated by students from those equity backgrounds sketched above, we can see how their transition into higher education demands a far more complex repertoire of academic strategies than is readily apparent.

A first year, first semester, mature age Indigenous student tells her subject tutor (who is not paid to attend the videoconference lectures) that she finds it difficult to catch what the subject lecturer is saying during the videoconference. The lecturer speaks very quickly and the younger, more confident non-Indigenous students talk all the way through the lecture (they know how to work the mute button at their end of the connection). She is too embarrassed to ask her classmates to be quiet and when the subject lecturer does pause and ask if there are any questions, the student is too overwhelmed by the technology at this early stage of her higher education experience to speak up. The student asks if the lectures are recorded so she can listen to them again in a quieter context but is told by the subject coordinator that lectures are no longer recorded because this discourages students from attending. When the student's growing distress is again brought to the attention of the subject coordinator in efforts to find a solution, the lecturer is offended and defensive. The student withdraws from the subject. It needs to be said, that this is not an uncaring or disaffected educator; indeed, the subject coordinator spends a great deal of time creating online resources to complement the lectures and so facilitate student learning. She is affronted by follow-up requests on the student's behalf because she feels she already goes that extra distance in creating quality online learning resources despite an already overburdened teaching workload that involves subject delivery to five geographically differentiated locations. What is at stake here are the competing realities between point-of-delivery normative assumptions made by an overworked and under-supported subject

lecturer (*I'm working as hard as I can and trying to ensure that I produce technologically savvy resources in compliance with directives on digital literacies*) and an at-a-distant student who, as yet, has not acquired the technological sophistication, or "digital literacy", to be able to engage. What is also at stake is a disarticulation between centralised institutional teaching imperatives and the first year, first semester, regional campus learning experiences of a diverse student cohort.

A number of LSE students confide that they encounter significant and unexpected obstacles in other areas of their lives as they become more "academic" and comment on the sometimes considerable tensions they face as they move between the terrain of the "socially inclusive" environment of university life and the "social inclusiveness" of their everyday lives beyond the campuses:

I love being at uni and I'm starting to do fairly well but a lot of my friends think I've changed. That I'm up m'self.

Find it a bit surreal sometimes when I go to work [on building sites] after a class...it's like trying to speak different languages and forgetting where you are.

It's been really hard. I know the degree's going to give me more opportunities but I don't belong anymore. I miss my old mates—I mean they don't mind me hanging out and all, but they just don't seem as comfortable with me, not as open.

(Sample of student comments, 2012-2015)

With the pressure to develop competency in academic discourse, many students feel that "becoming" in the language of academia constitutes a loss or overwriting of prior experiences, prior ways of being, prior ways of articulating knowledge and identity. And there is a sense in which this is true enough. But what does it mean for example to a student

who can write fluently, critically, cogently—ungrammatically—about her empirical knowledge of marginalisation because of gender, class and poverty, to have the paper returned with the comment "How do you know"? This is of course a somewhat cryptic and, for the student, confusing request for evidence of scholarly research. For the student, the "knowing" is hard won through lived experience: she "knows" because she lives it.

A mature-age male Indigenous student is referred by his subject tutor to the ALL teacher and complains that he feels that his "language is being changed". He has achieved some publishing success with his poetry before coming to university but is now struggling to understand the writing demanded by the academic essay genre which necessitates that he articulate his ideas in a language style and format that he finds to be "alien". He understands language as being inherently political and is angry and confused: he expresses the view that as an experienced Indigenous writer he is still "not good enough" for university. Nakata (2011) argues for a model of academic language and learning development that is cognisant of and engages with the knowledges Indigenous students bring to their transition into higher education systems. Nakata, Nakata and Chin (2008) point out that "[t]his knowledge, or these assets, set Indigenous students apart from others and institute them in a particular relation to the knowledge and practices of the academy, which have historically excluded, misrepresented, and de-valued Indigenous knowledge and perspectives" (p. 138). Through his poetry, the student has constituted himself as a politicised writing subject who challenges the encoded power relations of colonialist language (Freire, 1998; Freire & Macedo, 1987). For him, subjectification to the conventions of academic writing threatens a diminishment of his pre-university identity as a writing subject of some expertise and reveals the intimate relationships between language,

identity and power. In Freire's (1998) terms, this is the "human experience" of education and intervention into these diverse human experiences "implies both the reproduction of the dominant ideology and its unmasking" (p. 91).

Yancey (2004) contends that "what we ask students to do is who we ask them to be" (p. 739). Following the work of Michel de Certeau, she invokes the concept of *palimpsest* to think through the complex layering between subjective responses of students to the demands of academic writing and the (con)textual product. She argues that students initially rely on what they already know, at some point in the learning process combine this with knowledge acquired through their academic endeavour and, finally, "can do both in the *context of the subordinate* (the context of what might be)" (italics and parenthesis in original, p. 741). Her observations are specific to the production of student portfolios, a genre, as she describes it, that lends itself to the sorts of negotiations she describes above between the *I* who initially thinks/responds and the *I* that writes. De Certeau's notion of palimpsest as a semiotic device which can reveal the "imbricated strata" of text production provides for Yancey an approach to student portfolios that "makes meaning more complex, more sophisticated (if not always more immediately coherent) as it makes it more specific, less anonymous" (parenthesis in original, p. 741). But how might this in-text negotiation take place in the more prescriptive academic essay and report genres such as those engaging two of the students represented above? These representative student narratives reveal a far more difficult and somewhat fraught process of finding voice—of figuring out how to combine what they already know with very new academic knowledges, some of which may in fact run counter to what they already "know"—in these types of (con)texts.

It seems to us that to engage students from diverse equity backgrounds as merely the *tabula rasa* upon which we can inscribe the academic literacy and language markers of successful transition into higher education places important differences and the politics of identity inherent in diversity and social inclusion under erasure. These differences and diversity are “[subordinated to] the context of what might be” (Yancey, 2004, p. 741); that is, difference is reconfigured into a recognisable product of a corporatised university system. We prefer the neologism *palimpsestuousness* (Dillon, 2005) to try to grapple with the much more fluid process experienced by these students in navigating between differentiated modes of expression and writing. Dillon argues that while historically, palimpsests are the product of layering and multiple overwritings and are always vulnerable to the ghosting of hitherto effaced inscriptions, there is a much more dynamic and interesting process to be engaged here. Interpretation of the palimpsest necessarily involves reclamation of the earlier writing regardless of cost to the more recent inscription; historical inscription and current inscription are coherently incommensurate. For Dillon, the term palimpsestuousness describes a dynamic process marked by interruption, entanglement, contestation and struggle. It denotes an engagement that involves “an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none” (p. 254). For our purposes in trying to better understand transition for the students who populate this paper, it affords ways of creating learning processes that explicitly involve them in a dialogic process that will yield a mutually negotiated synthesis of disparate knowledges rather than a mere “overwriting” by a dominant order.

The regional campus students represented by the narratives offered here—and these are only a very small sample of representative scenarios—find themselves having to negotiate, becoming what Giroux (2009) calls

“border crossers” (p. 691) as they move between university, family and their broader communities. This sense of location, dislocation, re-location, can have profound effects on a student’s capacity to learn and to also take satisfaction in that learning (Stirling, Hopkins & Riddick, 2010). The ambivalence expressed in their views is inflected through the multiple and intersecting discourses of gender, class, age, ethnicity, and cultural differences constituting diverse subjectivities at a particular moment of a particular sort of transition. The process of identifying with the subject position of “university student” involves what Hall (1996) refers to as a “suturing” together of otherwise disparate subjectivities or identity positions. Their ambivalence can also be understood through Butler’s (1995) analysis of subjectification. She points out:

The more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved. Submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection. Where one might expect submission to consist in a yielding to an externally imposed dominant order, and to be marked by a loss of control and mastery, it is paradoxically marked by mastery itself ... the lived simultaneity of submission as mastery, and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the subject itself.

(1995, pp. 45–46)

Hall (1996) insists that this sort of subjective transition is always a work in progress and can be strategic rather than merely a process of replacement or re-subjectification.

It may appear as though we have flirted rather promiscuously with fairly wide ranging conceptual frameworks to think through some of the issues that arise from our practice. What can we say? We have. However, this is by no means an opportunistic or gratuitous flirtation.

We are critically aware of the complexities attendant to transition into higher education for many equity students, particularly those entering higher education through multimedia learning and teaching environments. And levity aside, we are deeply committed, in the words of Gale and Parker (2014), to trying to "change the conversation" (p. 744) about diversity and transition. Gale and Parker argue that further research around transition into higher education must engage more comprehensively with broader literatures on transition and with "education research and social theory" (p. 747). We agree. We would also argue for a more extensive engagement with the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies.

Conclusion

As ALL teachers, we find ourselves recruited by various equity policies to provide multi-level and complex layers of learning support that will somehow address successful transition into higher education for students from diverse backgrounds and with differentiated entry capabilities, while we also facilitate the development of academic literacies and multimedia competencies. While our transition model has gone some way in successfully scaffolding student transition into higher education at our university's regional campus network, it has become clear that it is now time for a radical recalibration of what we think of as *transition* in this context. The student experiences represented above, although only a small example of what we see and hear in our practices, suggest that not to do so can result in transition initiatives that raise as many issues as they resolve. Currently, there are still worrying tensions between the pro-active impulses of widening participation and social inclusion policy and the provision / ongoing provisioning of comprehensive infrastructure geared to meet the specific and multi-layered needs of a diverse student cohort intersected by those multiple and complex markers of age,

gender, class, varying abilities, cultural and socio-economic differences.

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