

Ways to Engage Tertiary Preparation Students in Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the Study Skills Management strand of the TPP7120 Studying to Succeed course in the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) at the University of Southern Queensland. Upon successful completion, TPP provides direct entry to a USQ undergraduate program. Due to the content of the program, it has the ability to actively engage participating students in transformative learning whilst successful completion increases the students self confidence. TPP 7120 is a scaffolded two credit course which serves as an introduction to academic communication and study management skills through the teaching of generic academic and study skills. TPP is delivered online and by distance mode and is also delivered face to face on four campus sites in a collaborative facilitating framework. Students also have the opportunity to request hard copy materials and resources. There is an active online social forum which deals predominantly with questions relating to the course.

The importance of support

For many TPP students, particularly if they are first in family to enter tertiary studies, enrolment into the program can be likened to travelling to another culture. Prior to commencing in TPP, the reading habits of some students do not extend past the horoscope section in the local free paper. There are different languages to learn (academic reading and writing) and different customs (studying and writing assignments). Hays (1971, 1974) as cited in Haslberger and Brewster (2008) found "... language skills, and the adaptability and supportiveness of the family..." aided expatriate employees in overseas postings. Cohen (2004) noted that change had an impact on the family of the student as well. Students in enabling education programs such as TPP need a supportive home environment to enable them to study successfully including adequate language skills and a supportive family and or social network. McDonald, Cervero and Courtenay (1999) found there can be negative aspects to transformative learning if the student becomes estranged from her/his family and social network, as cited in Taylor (2007). Parents and partners are invited to an evening Orientation to assist in the students' successful transition to tertiary studies. In the beginning of the first semester in 2013 there will be a combined Community Engagement and University Pride Day where all enrolled students can bring their friends and family to have a look at the campus and meet some of the academics. For Transformative Learning to occur, a change in the learner's outlook is often necessary Cranton (2006). This can be difficult if the students do not have support from their families and social networks. No or diminished support for the student at home could result in the student withdrawing from the course.

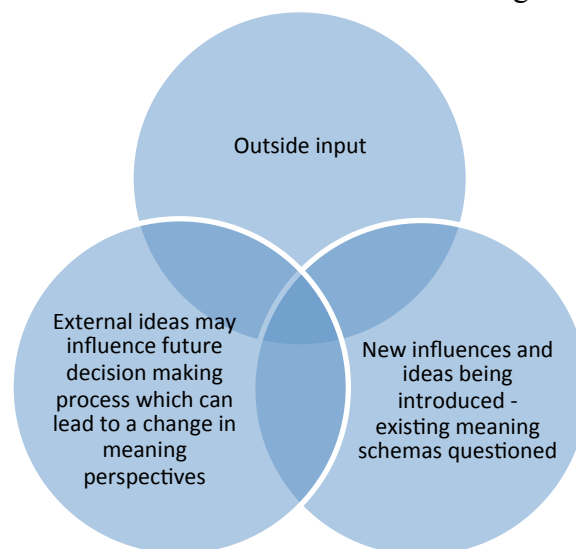
Interaction outside the classroom enhances communication opportunities between lecturers and students and also assists in breaking down barriers. Informal situations can encourage more natural encounters between the students and facilitators. Ettling (2006) as cited in Taylor (2006) states, "...the educational experience is never value neutral. The position, perspective, and power of the teacher are always present in the classroom" (p. 93). In addition

to on campus classes and online forums, TPP facilitators meet with the students in social situations for example morning tea or a barbeque lunch. This way, students also have the opportunity to interact with staff members and each other in an informal situation.

Assignments

The TPP7120 Introductory assignment requires students to briefly reflect on their goal of studying and their previous education history. This grants the student an opportunity to reflect upon their current life choice and the steps taken to arrive there. Reasons for enrolling can vary from wanting to study at University to being encouraged by a job provider.

The first career-management assignment discusses the broad range of influences on career development. The career guidance modules require the participants to reflect upon life choices and future careers. The influences include but are not limited to, family, geographic location, socio-economic circumstances, cultural influences, social policy and labour market. Baumgartner (2002) indicated that this initiates discussion and thought regarding students' existing meaning schemas which may or may not lead to changes in frames of reference (p. 45). The majority of students experience the class as thought provoking and realise they are influenced not only by their family and social network but also by government policy. Students are able to discuss influences on their identity and how it has been formed. Beaupre (2012) noted "Today, transformative learning can be described more as an explanation of how learners construe, validate and reformulate the meaning of their experience" (p.1).



Reflective thinking

In the second week, students are encouraged to reflect upon their life, past present and future with group work involving questions concerning their past life experience, where they would like to be in the future, how much further they have to go in order to get there and what they imagine the path will be like.

The first of the study-management skill assignments focuses on time management. In class, students are asked to identify when and how they procrastinate, ways they have procrastinated the current week and to discuss events which have prevented them from keeping to their proposed study schedule. The content of the study management module in the course materials requires students to question sometimes long held belief systems relating

to time management and procrastination, how feelings affect the way study is approached and symptoms of stress. Cross (1981) recognised that feelings and constraints can contribute to a student's pass/fail rate withdraw attrition. This material often provokes responses in students who are exposed to optional ways of looking at possible ingrained patterns of behaviour. Cranton (2006) suggests students need to be placed outside their comfort zone in order to begin the enquiry process.

Students who actively keep a Journal also have an important tool in aiding reflection. Lambert and Cuper (2008) wrote "Reflection is a vehicle for critical analysis and problem solving and is at the heart of purposeful learning." (p.1) A report based on the student's experience of study in the semester grants the students an opportunity to reflect upon their learning experiences throughout their TPP studies during the semester and helps them to prepare themselves for successful transition into undergraduate degrees. The report requires the students to reflect upon an element from six different aspects of their study and to further investigate by describing and evaluating each of the elements and then making a recommendation for their future study. A career management assignment asks students to review a decision which involves understanding and using rational and/or intuitive reasoning processes so they can make informed considered decisions about important options, for example, career and study.

Small group work as an aid in Transformative Learning

The on campus classes discuss these issues in small group work in a collaborative learning environment. "Experiential, hands-on, learning activities offer a powerful medium for promoting transformative learning. This means looking at alternative approaches to the traditional classroom" Taylor (1998). Dirx (2006) as cited in Taylor (2006) discusses the value of emotions in developing critical reflection in students. Taylor (1998) noted researchers found feelings must be fully recognised before transformative learning can begin (p. 34). Time for reflection and discussion is factored in the study material and in classes and active participation is encouraged. Requesting students to discuss issues together gives them assurance that they are not alone in feeling isolated or in their fears. Taylor (1998) recognised that some researchers found "...critical reflection can only begin once emotions have been validated and worked through" (p.34). Small group work presents an opportunity for the students to become more familiar with the other students in the class which in turn leads to them becoming more comfortable in a previously unknown milieu. Baumgartner (2002) writes "...the potential for group activities to foster transformational learning should not be underestimated. Group interaction fulfils intellectual and affective needs integral to the transformational learning process." (p. 58) Groups must be a 'safe' place so the students can safely voice opinions and thoughts. Ross (2010) wrote that groups have character that is difficult to predict and can be influenced by just one strong personality (p. 56), however Cohen (2004) found identity becomes more fluid when interacting with other students (although this was in a residential college setting).

A Suggestion

Art can be an important element of expression and used as a visual sign of transformative learning. Cohen (2004) wrote "...arts ...offer non-linguistic ways of making meaning that promote deep change" (p. 249). A suggestion which could be implemented into the course is to ask the students to provide an image which they think is self representational at the beginning of the course and another at the end. This would be a visual notification of any

change they have undergone during the course and serve as an additional prompt to reflect on a semester of learning.

Personalising student support

Students receive support not only from the class facilitator but also the students themselves can form virtual and face to face study groups. Hanley (2000) as cited in Ettlign (2006) noted students also learn from each other and the learning continues outside of the classroom (p. 64). Another form of student support is the online social forum which is also a method for students to make contacts. For distance students the forum can act as a method of reducing isolation. 'Meet Up', an hourly session on a topic to do with that week's work and facilitated by a former TPP student, is another form of student support. In class, students are introduced to other support networks and people for example, counsellors on campus, support groups and other professional organisations such as Lifeline and Beyond Blue. The Student Counsellor comes into the class early in the semester to introduce herself and her services. This puts a face to the role and contributes to eroding any existing barriers to normalising seeking self help. Student support is important not just for course work support but also if and when the student experiences transformation. Both Taylor (1998) and Cranton (2006) note students need support and trust to deal with changes which occur during and after transformation.

Conclusion

As a pathway program, the Tertiary Preparation Program is well equipped to position students for success, both as an aid in preparing themselves for tertiary studies and as a tool to instigate transformative learning. The following is indicative of the transformation that can occur in completing the program:

During the course, I realised learning is just a process and you have to go through the processes to learn. When I realised I could succeed academically it was 'mind-blowing'. I found some of the assignments from the career development modules were extremely challenging as I was forced to think what I would like to work with. I had worked in the same field for 30 years because that was what I had always done. Prior to TPP I hadn't examined different feelings in any great detail. Now when I watch the news I relate it to what I have been studying whereas before I wouldn't think about it so much.

Questions to Audience

In what ways does your educational institution foster engagement with the local community?

Does your educational institution utilise former students as ongoing support for current students?

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