

**FYI (First Year Infusion):
A vaccine for the first year plague in a regional university**

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Abstract

The massification of higher education in Australia has set the spotlight firmly upon issues of access, participation and retention across the sector. Yet recognition that not all groups of people have equal opportunity to access higher education is not new. With this context in mind, this paper begins by describing an approach to the first year of university experience that has been developed in a regional university. At this university, the student population includes a high proportion from low socioeconomic backgrounds and rural and geographically isolated areas, as well as students who are “returning to education as adults after missing educational opportunities in their youth” (University of Southern Queensland, 2006, p. 5). Whilst some might argue that the enrolment of students who are under-prepared for university study has reached plague proportions, this paper describes how a Faculty of Education has developed and implemented a systemic approach to enhance participation and to support such students in their experiences of beginning tertiary study.

The First Year Infusion Program – FYI for short – uses the notion of a learning community and works to dispel deficit discourses about students, while fostering social integration with embedded academic preparedness. In particular, the program promotes a problem-solving approach, assists students to draw on strengths from their lives outside university, and offers ‘just-in-time’ social and academic support. By engaging staff and students in evaluative dialogue, the program contrasts with traditional approaches that offer only academic support to students. Instead, there is recognition that social support and the development of a learning community are essential to academic success. In this supportive environment, the approach works to enhance students’ problem-solving capacities and to develop a sense of belonging as they make their transition into university study. Additional institutional benefits are enhanced retention and progression rates. This paper describes the program and identifies the impacts that adopting the Discourse of ‘university student’ has had on first year students who have participated.

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Introduction

In recent years in Australia, there has been an increase in the numbers of students accessing university study. With this massification of higher education, there has been a change in the characteristics of the student populations at universities and this seems to be particularly noticeable in regional locations. In the regional university where we work, for example, many students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and rural and geographically isolated areas. Many are first generation university students, the first in their families to attend university, or are “second chance” learners who are “returning to education as adults after missing educational opportunities in their youth” (University of Southern Queensland, 2006, p. 5). Student populations, therefore, seem much more diverse.

With these changes has come the view, sometimes heard from those working within universities and regularly heard from the media, that many current university students do not exhibit an appropriate academic standard that will allow them to succeed in tertiary study or to take up roles in the workforce. A notable example of this occurred during the Australian Federal Government’s *National inquiry into the teaching of literacy*, with claims that many Education students in universities lacked appropriate levels of literacy (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005). At that time, in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, one academic argued that “20 per cent of her students had serious literacy problems and another 10 per cent ‘just got it’” (Norrie, 2005, p. 1). The then Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, responded to this report by suggesting that the testing of students would overcome such problems:

We have established, at a cost of \$30 million, a national institute for quality teaching to oversee this process. By the time this government has finished with teacher training, those who go into training to be teachers not only will be tested on literacy and numeracy but will be tested on the way out. Our children need it and our country’s future relies on it. (Nelson, 2005)

Such views suggest that the enrolment of students who are under-prepared for university study – and for future roles in the workforce – has reached plague proportions. Unfortunately, deficit discourses like these are often accompanied by stories of blame, which lay fault with the students themselves, their families or even their previous teachers. Someone, it appears, has to be responsible for the perception that standards are lower than they used to be.

Attempts by universities to provide resources that will enhance students’ academic successes have often been conceptualised in terms of generic support programs, online resources and one-on-one opportunities for assistance. A snapshot view of university websites indicates that universities generally offer programs that attempt to ‘top-up’ what students need to know. These include study skills and generic skills programs which aim to improve the academic abilities of first year students (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005; Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Tinto, 2001). Whilst these measures are an essential component of the support that universities provide, we would argue that they should not be the only type of support that is on offer. If such programs stand alone, then it would seem that they imply that students are deficit and that the ‘pestilence’ affecting universities is founded in the deficiencies of students.

In contrast, we argue that the Faculty of Education where we work has found a way of enhancing student success at university, without invoking deficit discourses. The Faculty has developed and implemented a systemic approach that enhances student participation and supports students in their experiences of beginning university. This paper provides a description of the Faculty’s approach – called the First Year Infusion Program, FYI for short – and shows how it works to ease students’ transition into university. Interview transcripts from video-recorded focus group interviews with first year students are used to illustrate how the program works. The development of this ‘vaccine’ has also had spin-off advantages and the paper concludes by discussing some of the other advantages of this approach.

The First Year Infusion Program

The First Year Infusion Program began as a support program for self-identified ‘at-risk’ students in first year Education at the University of Southern Queensland. Initially, in the economic rationalist climate now evident in universities, concern about retention and progression issues set the foundations for a program that focused on ‘what to do when you don’t know what to do.’ Students who regarded themselves as ‘at-risk’ within the university context voluntarily joined the program, which involved a weekly two-hour Learning Circle meeting (Noble & Henderson, 2008). In the second iteration, however, the program moved to a broader focus and invited all first year students to become involved.

The Learning Circle uses a pedagogical approach that enables participants to reflect in a supportive environment (Aksim, 1998; Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005; Riel, 2006). Within the Learning Circle, academics, university support staff and students discuss problems that the students identify as impacting on their capacity to be successful university students. Through engaging actively in a process of learning and critical reflection, they confront and deconstruct both personal and academic issues (Macfarlane, Noble, Kilderry, & Nolan, 2005). In this way, problems become shared problems and collectively the participants find ways of overcoming perceived difficulties in the transition to university. The approach helps students to identify strengths that they already have – in their outside-of-university lives – and to apply these strengths to perceived problems in the ‘new’ context of university.

In focusing on both personal and academic issues, the First Year Infusion Program fosters students’ social integration as well as their academic preparedness. Within the Learning Circle, students are able to develop strong social networks, whilst also drawing on the expertise of other students, academics and university support staff to hone their abilities in the areas of academic literacies, information literacies, subject-specific knowledges and study skills. The students are able to access ‘just-in-time’ support that is relevant to their needs at that particular time.

The program is different from traditional support programs which usually focus solely on academic support. Instead, the program engages students and staff in evaluative dialogue, thus fostering social networks and embedding academic preparedness into the discussions of the Learning Circle (Noble & Henderson, under review). This approach is premised on the belief that social support and students’ involvement in a learning community are essential to academic success (Cross, 1998). Through this focus, the program enhances students’ problem-solving capacities and develops a sense of belonging as they make their transition into university study.

Theorising the FYI Program

The First Year Infusion Program deliberately set out to avoid deficit discourses about students. Even though the program was set up initially to provide support for self-identified ‘at-risk’ students, there was a calculated attempt to not conceptualise students in deficit terms. Gee’s (1996) notion of capital D Discourses – as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” that identify particular social groups (p. viii) – helped to theorise a productive approach to student support. By considering that students new to university have to learn a new Discourse – that of ‘university student’ – it became clear that they must become familiar with the “usually taken for granted and tacit ‘theory’ of what counts as a ‘normal’ person” in the university context and that they need to know “the right ways to think, feel, and behave” (p. ix).

This theorisation of the transition to university as the learning of a new Discourse enables academic staff and students to conceptualise the student learning journey as comprising students’ multiple realities and to consider what Gee (1996) calls “ever-multiple identities” (p. ix). The Learning Circle, then, could be seen as a way to engage students in critical reflection on their experiences and on their ways of ‘doing’, ‘being’ and ‘knowing’ within the university context. To create conditions where this critical reflection can occur, the Learning Circle privileges interactions and relationships, opportunities for students to explore their rights and responsibilities and to make choices, and belongingness and connectedness (Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005). As shown in Figure 1, these five elements help to create a context where students feel that they are able to raise issues, discuss their experiences and

problems, and problem-solve for themselves and for others, thus fostering a sense of agency that enables success in the ‘new’ context of university.

Within the Learning Circle, no student is seen as deficient. Instead, all students are regarded as embarking on a learning journey that will see them learn a new Discourse. The program helps pre-service teachers see themselves as prospective teachers from the outset of their university education, to engage in active problem-solving and to become critically reflective and metacognitively aware. They engage in a learning community where sharing, comparing, negotiating and problem-solving assists their take-up of the new role of ‘university student’ (Henderson, Noble, & De George-Walker, in press).

Gee (2004) argues that learning is “all about identity and identification” and that successful learning occurs in contexts where novices and experts share a common space (p. 37). Through the Learning Circle approach, the First Year Infusion Program enables students and academic staff to “affiliate around their common cause,” even though they can “differ dramatically on other issues” (Gee, 2004, p. 87). Participants in the Learning Circle represent a diversity of life experiences (e.g. school leavers and ‘second chance learners’; urban, regional, rural and remote, and so on), of university experiences (e.g. compare ‘expert’ academics and novice university students), and of age and gender. What brought the group together was the focus on the first year of university experience.

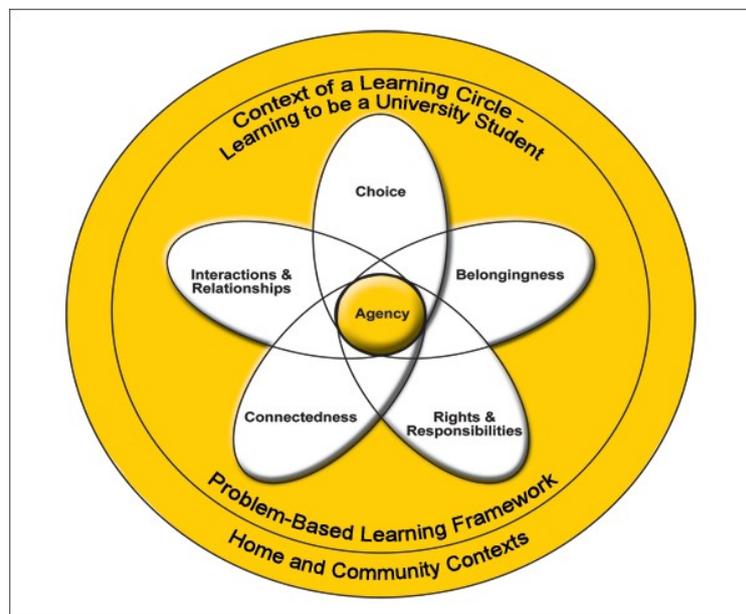


Figure 1: A context-agency model for conceptualising a Learning Circle for pre-service education students (Adapted from Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005, and previously published in Noble & Henderson, 2008)

Listening to first year students

Throughout the first two years of the program’s operations, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with groups of students, with approximately 25 students interviewed about their experiences of the First Year Infusion Program. This section of the paper draws from the transcripts of several of the video-recorded interviews. In the following excerpts, students talk about their experiences with the Learning Circle of the First Year Infusion Program. In particular, they identify significant aspects of their development of social networks and their engagement with academic issues within the university context. They also discuss how these two aspects have influenced their transition to university and their academic success. In particular, it became evident that social support was a priority for students.

Several themes were evident in the interview data. The students attributed their success at university to their involvement in the First Year Infusion Program. This, however, was probably not unexpected, as attendance at the Learning Circle meetings was voluntary and it is unlikely that students would have continued attending if they felt that there was no ongoing benefit. The sense of ‘belonging’ to a social group was another theme that was evident. Belonging seemed to play an important part in students’ perceptions of university. According to the students, being able to ‘plug in’ to social networks, along with the embedded focus on academic skills, helped them to find ways of being successful students. These themes are further discussed in the sections that follow.

‘Plugging in’ to social networks

It was very clear in many students’ comments about beginning university that feeling out-of-place or feeling overwhelmed by the university context was a major concern. Students suggested, however, that the First Year Infusion Program gave them a place to go on a weekly basis and that those interactions were useful:

I feel quite green with it all ... so with the FYI, it was actually really helpful for me to get on to campus and to meet some other people in the same position and also to meet some lecturers and academics as well.

I’m out of my comfort zone but it was more the fact that there was somewhere to go.

You can go there and you can come away kind of reassured slightly because you’ve communicated with you peers and perhaps your course leader.

It was noticeable that some students from rural and remote geographical areas were particularly apprehensive of the university context. For example, some were concerned about the size of the university, while others were worried about having to find and make ‘new’ friends or about finding the “right people”. As illustrated in the students’ words, part of the process of becoming a university student involved finding ways of ‘plugging in’ to social networks:

Well I’ve come from a small town about probably 450 people in it and this is like a big experience to me. Everything’s so different.

But it’s finding the right people out there; it’s very hard.

Meeting other people who are in the same position as you ... have the same values ... and get to know them.

I just find the uni really overwhelming and, probably because I’m from away, but the whole concept of the whole thing is just really overwhelming and the computers and everything, you know, trying to get into the swing of stuff. But to actually be able to go in that room and shut the door, it’s like you can send the whole uni life away.

It was just, you know, they were talking about lectures and quizzes and this and that and assignments, and I didn’t know what was what, and the temptation was there. I thought, if I go and sit in that car, I’ll start the car and I’ll go home. It was just like everything, it was too much all at once. Well I found it was.

Although the First Year Infusion Program had not planned to assist students in making friends, it did seem to facilitate that process for some students. Although students seemed to join the program for different reasons, the common purpose of the course helped to unite them as a group. As one student explained:

It was interesting that every one of us in the group was absolutely different, different as cheese and chalk, and yet we all had one common thing and we were stressed out.

And, you know, it really surprised me that you could have such a diverse group of people and yet there was one common factor and that was it was just too much for everybody.

At times, the students noted that inexperience with academic issues was a concern, but knowing that other students were experiencing something similar was just as important as learning the necessary skills. Indeed, several students suggested that their attendance at FYI helped them to realise that there would be someone who could “point me in the right direction” or to get me “back on track”:

Because sometimes I did just need to say, can somebody just get me back on track, rather than, I can't use EndNote or I can't find this reference.

It was just a confidence that I knew there was somebody there that could point me in the right direction. If they couldn't help me specifically with what I was asking they could tell me who to go to. So that was, I mean, as an older student you don't want, I suppose it's harder for me to say I need help or I need some direction.

Students identified the supportive environment of the Learning Circle as being especially helpful to starting university. In particular, they identified that it was important to have a place to go where they could ask the “little questions,” because “you know that you're not sure who to ask but they're important to you and sometimes they can be a block to you if you don't have them.” The Learning Circle thus provided a safe place where students were able to ask the questions that they might not have felt comfortable asking elsewhere:

And you don't feel belittled or that you're being judged, they just find a way to help you.

And just being able to come to FYI and knowing that there weren't any things I had to explain to anybody. If I was having problems with the assignment then there was somebody there. But if I was having problems at home or with the other things that were going on with my life I was like, oh they'll understand. And even though I didn't want to use that as the main focal point of going to FYI it was always there and it was always very empathetic.

For some students, the First Year Infusion Program offered a chance to learn the rules that applied to their new Discourse of ‘university student.’ As one student explained, the rules to a Discourse (Gee, 1996) are not always obvious and there is a need to identify the “rules of engagement”:

Because having never been in a university environment I come back to the rules of engagement. They're out there. They're a bit fuzzy and you don't really know until you've crossed that line probably.

That's the biggest thing for me is working out and trying to find clarity where it's very open to interpretation and your interpretations are from your background and your perspectives and that's different from an academic perspective to a student's perspective and from a student fresh out of high school to like us that have lived a bit of life and have reality perspectives that don't seem to match with academic perspectives. So you need that opportunity to bounce your ideas around.

Such views resonate with Gee's (1996) theorisation of capital D Discourse as well as his theory relating to successful learning (Gee, 2004). The FYI Program allowed novices and experts to meet in the Learning Circle and to problem-solve together. This approach brought benefits for all. As one student explained:

Can I just say, we spoke about peers learning from each other and then students learning from the lecturers, but I also think a really good thing is that the lecturers and the course leaders also learn from us. They learn from our concerns and our worries.

Like I've gone in there and ... we've shared our concerns and then hopefully it's a place that those concerns are noticed and then the course of whatever will be changed for the better for future students. I think that's a real key point.

Developing academic skills

Because the Learning Circle operated at all times without a pre-determined agenda, it was able to focus on whatever academic needs the students brought to each meeting. As a result, one student described the Learning Circle as "a place where we can really identify what ... we need to go and learn." The academic staff who attended the Learning Circle meetings responded to students' needs, even if they did not know the answer per se. The process was always one of problem-solving, with experts and novices contributing to the discussion. As explained earlier, the meetings focused on shared problems, with solutions that were generated collectively. As a result, students learned from each other as well as from academic staff. As one student explained, "Generally I learn a lot just from the people who go there, so my peers." Another stated:

Yeah, I think university is certainly a place where you have to, you have to do that. I mean, if I were a solitary learner I don't think my assignments would be anywhere near as good as they are now. You know, you learn from each other. I think you have to do that as a survival technique at university.

The process of collaborative problem-solving meant that the students were able to engage in specific "just-in-time" learning that addressed a range of issues, including academic literacies, information literacies, subject-specific knowledges and study skills, including time management. There was no expectation that every question could be answered by those present. However, there was an expectation that every question would lead to a plan for action. Students explained that they not only found answers to their own questions, but they also learned from other people's questions:

So you don't just learn about your question. You learn about other people's questions and you gather information from that as well that personally benefits you.

One of the strategies used by the academics in the Learning Circle was to help students see that they already knew useful strategies in their outside-of-university lives. Sometimes these could be transferred into the university context, even though the students did not always think this was the case. In one incident, two students talked about the three hours they had spent in the library trying to solve one problem.

- Student 1: It's like the day [name of student] and I spent in the library, for three hours
- Student 2: Three whole hours!
- Student 1: And we tried everything, didn't we?
- Student 2: Yeah
- Student 1: Trying to find out that simple problem, then we eventually thought
- Student 2: we have to get help. And we went to [name of academic] and yes, this is what you need to do. And in 15 minutes
- Academic: In actual fact, let's go back to that day, because I don't think I actually said that this is what you need to do. I think I asked a series of questions and
- Student 2: Yeah, you did.
- Academic: And who had the answers?
- Student 1: Well we both did but we didn't know it. We'd been up the library for three hours trying to figure it out.

Sometimes students lacked confidence in themselves and found it difficult to believe that they already knew answers to the questions they had asked. However, the Learning Circle was always supportive and provided a space where students could try out their knowledge, seek assistance from others, and never feel that they were inadequate.

However, there was no intention that the problem-solving processes would be “just-for-now.” The plan was that they would set students up for the future. Indeed, some students could see the long-term benefits of the process which generally provided them with multiple strategies. For example, one student highlighted the importance of networking in their future profession:

And I suppose the other thing that I like from it too is, I suppose, sort of the FYI group teaches us too the importance as professionals and professionals in the future about networking and how important it is to have peers you can talk to and discuss things with and bounce things off and also draw on their wealth of knowledge, because we all have different knowledge and different things that we have interest in and you can draw that into things that you’re maybe going to do in the future, or you’re already doing in an assignment.

There were, however, specific issues that were regarded as problematic by quite a number of students. Proficiency with computers was one of those issues. Many students – particularly those who were ‘second chance’ learners or those who had come from rural or remote geographical areas, where internet access may have been expensive or of low speed or poor quality – learning to use computers and to become proficient was essential. As one student pointed out:

Computers for me was a big hurdle and then I think here I am going into a profession where I’m going to have to be savvy and always be that one little step ahead of the students in my future classes so that I can help them. So that’s been an interesting learning curve for me.

In another case, a student had come to university with minimal prior experience of computers. In fact she had “never, ever sent an email.” Cases such as these highlighted the barriers that some taken-for-granted practices can cause for some students.

Just as many of the students identified their “little questions” as being important, there were times when they indicated that pieces of information that may have seemed trivial were sometimes really useful. One student, for example, explained that learning how to do hanging paragraphs in Microsoft Word had been a really helpful hint:

Another little thing was that day [name of academic] when you showed us how to do the indent, the overhang indent on APA, that was really helpful. That was a little trick that I didn’t know was available in that formatting option, so I’ve been using that.

Institutional benefits of the FYI Program

During the two years of operation of the First Year Infusion Program, students reported favourably about the impact of the program on their transition into university. Indeed, many students attributed their success at university to the approach of the FYI Program. For the students, participation in the program also helped to improve academic skills, enabled them to understand what it means to be a lifelong learner and enhanced their capacity to study effectively. They developed interpersonal skills and independent and interdependent learning skills, including problem-solving, critical reflection and learning across broad educational contexts.

A collation of the students’ results over the two-year period indicated that 100 per cent retention has been achieved for students who participated in the program. To date, no student has failed in any course of study and all but two students have continued their university study. Even those two students have active enrolments, but for personal reasons are not currently enrolled.

Academic and learning support staff who work in the program also report positive outcomes from their participation. The program offers opportunities for staff to learn from each other and to gain insights about university study from the students.

Conclusion

The First Year Infusion Program, which was established to support first year Education students in a regional Australian university, provides social support integrated with embedded academic support. Whilst academic skills are important to first year students, it is obvious that the enabling of social networks allows students to make the transition to ‘university student’ and to be successful in the university context. In terms of Gee’s (1996) conceptualisation of Discourse, ‘new’ students have to learn the Discourse of ‘university student’ and associated ways of doing, being and knowing. Such an approach allows students to build on their strengths from their outside-of-university lives and enhances students’ critical reflection and problem-solving abilities.

By constructively aligning the multiple contexts in which university students operate – within a problem-based learning framework – the program impacts on the quality of interactions, relationships and friendships that occur for the participants in the Learning Circle as well as on the students’ academic success. Through critical reflection, the students become agentive learners who privilege interactions and relationships, understand their reciprocal rights and responsibilities, and exercise choice in relation to engagement in their learning journey (Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005). In particular, the students attribute their perceptions of success to the sense of belongingness that is created by the Learning Circle (Noble & Henderson, 2008).

By building on students’ strengths, the program avoids deficit discourses that name university students as deficient. Gee’s (1996) theory of Discourse helps everyone to understand that all ‘new’ university students have to learn the appropriate Discourse. As part of a community of learners, students identify multiple ways of responding to perceived problems and learn to ‘be’ university students.

At the beginning of this paper, it was suggested that the enrolment of students who are under-prepared for university study has been said to have reached plague proportions. However, the First Year Infusion Program has established a Faculty-based vaccine that has assisted students to make successful transitions into university. The vaccine, however, is not a one-shot-fix-all panacea, but an approach that enables students to take on the appropriate Discourse for university study and to problem-solve their way to success. Social integration and academic preparedness work in tandem to foster students’ sense of belonging and to help them build the skills and strategies that they need to be successful. The approach has been successful in assisting first year students in their transition to university and offers a way of helping to ensure equity of access, participation and retention of students, including those from low socio-economic families and from rural and remote geographical areas.

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