EXPLORING SPACES FOR LEARNING: USING NARRATIVE MEDIATION PATH TO IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF UNDERACHIEVING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Learning to learn has been identified as a key educational competence. Over the next two years, as part of the INSTALL[1] project, NUI Maynooth is testing the effectiveness of an exploratory group technique, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), which has been developed to promote reflective thinking skills. To date, interviews have been conducted with 200 first year students. Common themes emerging from these interviews regarding student engagement are discussed. Notable was the number of concerns relating to coping with academic demands. From these 200 students, 20 students will participate in the subsequent phases of the INSTALL project utilising the NMP.

KEYWORDS

Learning to Learn, Underachievement, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The EU2020 strategic objective of a more cohesive growth through knowledge based economy calls for improved models to sustain the acquisition of the key competence, learning to learn, for disadvantaged and underachieving Higher Education students. The National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUI Maynooth) in collaboration with its European partners, INSTALL, is responding to this challenge by exploring innovative solutions to address students' constraints to acquiring and developing the learning to learn competence.

1.1 Learning to learn

The transition from second level instruction to university education involves students adapting to arguably a different type of learning. Traditionally within the university domain greater emphasis has been placed on self-initiated study. Consequently, for many students the challenge becomes one of learning *how* to learn.

The term *learning to learn* refers not to a unitary skill, but rather a range of skills identified as contributing to optimal learning, including cognitive skills, motivation, organisation of time, and self-regulation (see Amalathas, 2010, for further details). Within the literature, there is a particular focus on the important role played by metacognitive skills in learning to learn. Findings have shown that university students who score highly on measures of metacognitive skills tend to perform better on academic tasks (e.g., Van der Stel & Veenman, 2010). Reflection is one of the core metacognitive skills (Lew & Schmidt, 2011).

In terms of the INSTALL project, an exploratory procedure known as the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) has been developed to support the ability of students to reflect on their university experiences.

Specifically, this tool was designed for use with students following semesters during which they have struggled with academic activities. The NMP is a group narrative tool. Therefore, the project builds on the more recent research in this area which has investigated the promotion of metacognitive skills through social interactions with peers (e.g., De Backer, Van Keer & Valcke, 2012).

The current paper focuses on the research undertaken with students enrolled at NUI Maynooth and also discusses the research that will be conducted throughout the coming months as part of the INSTALL project.

1.2 Background

NUI Maynooth has expanded rapidly with an increase of 21% between 2004/05 and 2011/12 in the total number of students, to become one of the fastest growing universities in Ireland. Approximately one quarter of the students come from non-traditional backgrounds. In addition, NUI Maynooth attracts more students whose parents did not go to Higher Education than other universities (Irish University Study, 2009).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Twenty-first century university students are expected to be flexible, digitally competent, self-regulated, learners. To succeed, students must be ready to respond quickly to ever-changing intellectual and technological environments. Evidence would suggest, however, that students entering university directly from second level are ill-prepared, making the transition without the generic skills needed to cope at that level (Hyland, 2011: 16). Professor Tom Collins chairman of the NCCA voiced his criticism as follows:

> There is palpable concern in Higher Education regarding the capabilities and dispositions of students entering [university] straight from second level. The manner in which the points system rewards rote learning, instrumental learning and memorisation while simultaneously discouraging exploration, self-directed learning and critical thinking means that even relatively high achieving second-level students can struggle on entering third-level' (Collins: 2010).

The selection of school leavers for third level education in Ireland is founded on a points system based on an applicant's results in six subjects in the Leaving Certificate examination. The Leaving Certificate is a high stake examination, and because of this, the backwash effect on teaching, learning and the student experience is considerable (ibid: 4). The race to optimise points greatly influences the basic level of knowledge, cognitive skills and learning habits of students (Hyland 2011: 4). Concerns have been raised by policy makers and academics that the Leaving Certificate rewards rote-learning rather than problem-solving, critical thinking, or self-directed learning (ibid: 16). Such concerns about students not being adequately prepared for Higher Education are not unique to Ireland. Similar concerns have been voiced in the US, UK and in other EU countries (Hyland 2011, Gogus and Arikan, 2008: 279). Of course, there are also many other factors which influence student underachievement and non-progression, including social, cultural, financial, and institutional factors. The problem seems to be that most universities have not yet been able to translate what [they] know about student lack of 'preparedness' 'into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation' (Tinto, 2006: 5).

As part of the INSTALL project, NUI Maynooth is responding to this challenge by developing a tool, the NMP, to help students acquire skills related to learning to learn.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Phase One: Interviews with Students

Between September 2011 to May 2012, 200 face-to-face interviews took place with first year students who visited the Academic Advisory Office (AAO) in NUI Maynooth. For each student, a written record was kept to detail the reason for the visit. Analysis of the written records was undertaken by an independent coder to identify key themes to emerge from the interviews.

2.2 Phase Two: Implementation of the Narrative Mediation Path

Participation in the remaining two phases of the project requires fulfillment of a number of set criteria as shown in Table 1. All students will be briefed about the project and informed consent will be obtained.

Table 1. Student selection criteria.

Category A Academic Criteria	Category B Social and Economic Criteria	Category C Preferential Criteria
• Passed at least one module by compensation[2]. • Failed at least one exam in January or May and repeated it in August (and then passed). • Self reporting – may pass exams but do not have a score above 50%.	• Ethnic minority. • Disability. • In receipt of a Local Authority Grant. • First generation university student.	• Achieved one high grade in the first or second semester of first year of undergraduate degree programme. • Scored at least 375 points in the Leaving Certificate.

Note. Students must satisfy at least one of the criteria from Category A or Category B.

There will be two cycles of the NMP programme. Initially, the first sample of 20 students will commence the programme in October 2012. A second sample of 20 students will begin in February 2013. In the intervening period between the two cycles, refinements will be made to the programme. Prior to the start of the programme, students will answer open-ended questions related to their university experiences to obtain a preliminary measure of their entry reflective skills. Subsequently, the written responses will be evaluated according to the Reflective Functioning Scale devised by Fonagy, Target, Steele and Steele (1998).

The NMP programme will be presented to students across six meetings. Each meeting is guided by a trained instructor. There are four modules to be covered as follows: (i) metaphorical; (ii) iconographic; (iii) writing; (iv) bodily. A description of the contents of these modules can be found in Freda, Esposito, Martino and Monteagudo (2012). The modules are completed in a set order, with the sequence of the four modules arranged to encourage the cognitive, social, and emotional involvement of all the students. It is proposed that such an involvement is made possible by using narrative stimuli (e.g., vignettes, written accounts) and procedures designed to promote and develop reflective thinking skills.

To assess whether there has been any change in reflective skills, students will again provide written responses to a set of open-ended questions. Responses will be scored using the Reflective Functioning Scale.

2.3 Phase Three: Tracking Academic Progress

Six months following completion of training, the academic performance of each student will be monitored by examining the grades obtained by students for their chosen second year degree modules.

3. PHASE ONE RESULTS

The 200 written reports were reviewed to identify the main reason for the student's visit. Fourteen categories were established as summarised in Table 2.

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[2] Students may pass by compensation by passing two of their subjects, obtaining at least 35% in their third subject, and obtaining at least 40% on aggregate, provided that the two passed subjects are compatible in second year. Such students may only continue in second year with the subjects in which he or she has obtained at least 40%, hence students cannot pass by compensation in a subject that is a requirement in a second year programme.

Table 2. Categories employed to code the reports of the interviews conducted by the Academic Advisory Office.

Category	Brief description
Onwards referral	Student was recommended to contact the relevant university administrative department (e.g., Admissions) or academic department (e.g., Psychology), given the specific nature of the query.
Dislike of course	Student explicitly states a lack of enjoyment for the chosen degree subjects.
Failure to meet course requirements	A student who may not have submitted an essay or assignment; who has not attended lectures or tutorials; who has not achieved the required mark in a module.
Mental Health Issue	Any mental health issue (e.g., depression, anxiety), often accompanied by medical certification.
Physical Health Issue	Any physical health issue (e.g., illness, treatment, surgery, injury) often accompanied by medical certification.
Financial	Issues with grants, funding, debt.
Family	Bereavement, family illness, unemployment, childcare.
Commuting	Living too far away from the university which is affecting attendance, study.
Finding course difficult	Student explicitly states that the course is challenging.
Problems with studying	Difficulties with writing essays, knowing what material to study, compiling notes in lectures.
Time management	Difficulties in planning revision, study time, reading time.
Desire to change course	Student expresses a wish to study a different subject.
Transfer to another university	Student is considering leaving to pursue a programme in a different third level institution.
Other	Any other reasons which cannot be coded.

Figure 1 shows the number of students attending the AAO across the 14 categories. The most common reason for students to contact the AAO was to change their course. However, approximately 35% of the 200 students recounted problems explicitly linked to their chosen courses. Twenty-six students were concerned about a failure to meet course requirements. Other students needed assistance because they did not like their course (22 students) or were finding the course difficult (17 students).
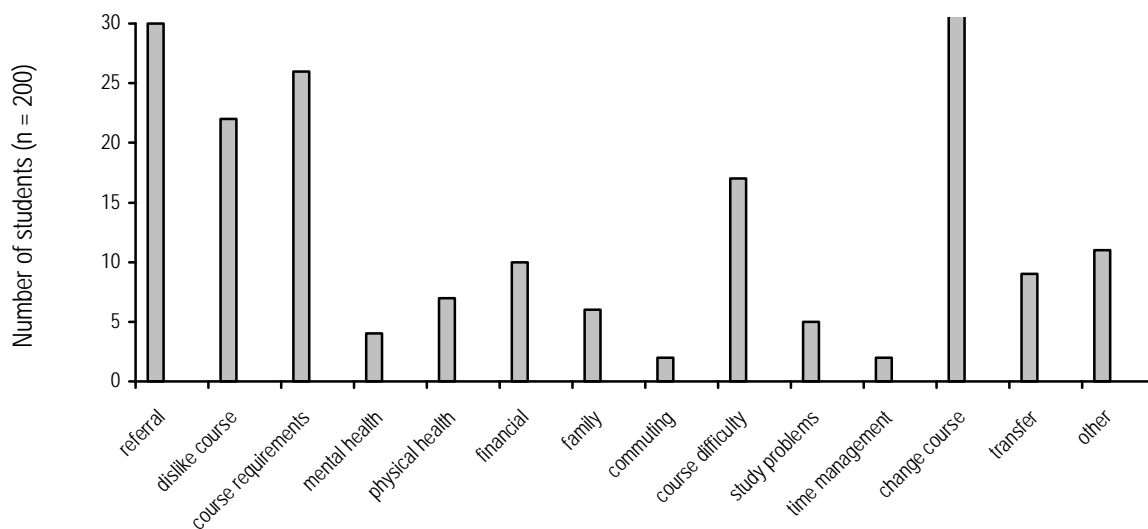

Figure 1. Reasons for first year students attending the Academic Advisory Office.

4. CONCLUSION

Student disengagement and academic underperformance is complex, although it is generally recognised as a path that can be traced, with problems that can be resolved through enhanced student support (Thomas 2005: 63, Mann, 2008). Student support services, such as the AAO at NUI Maynooth, can help to directly enhance academic supports for at risk students. Indeed, the initial phase of this research has helped to shed further insight into some of the most widespread difficulties experienced by first year students attending NUI Maynooth. A visible trend was that students expressed concerns specifically linked to their academic performance, for instance, about not fulfilling course requirements or finding the course difficult. Our goal now is to investigate potential ways to support these students. Helping students to acquire key skills such as the learning to learn competence offers one such possibility. Through participation in the INSTALL project, the aim is to test the effectiveness of the NMP in developing reflective skills. The ability to constructively think back on past experiences and to recognise the potential for change can all be categorised as reflective skills; skills that may be highly valuable for students attempting to successfully complete university.

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