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## **The bigger picture: undergraduate voices reflecting on academic transition in an Irish university**

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Though the majority of students make a successful transition to higher level education, mass education and the strategic marketing of universities have seen academic interest in the transition process receive significant attention in recent years. In Ireland, following two years of focused examination preparation, students are considerably underprepared for transition. This qualitative study uses student reflective journals in the first semester of first year as an innovative approach to examining transition to higher education through lived experience and the student voice. A total 36 undergraduate students kept an academic reflective journal relating to their learning. They were encouraged to describe their feelings in relation to their learning, how it differed to their previous learning experiences and to reflect on two increasingly deeper levels. A grounded theory analysis found students addressed these issues by basing them on previous school relationships, such as making friends. This approach to transition revealed that group work was problematic as learning from peers differed significantly from their educational experience at secondary school. They also reflected on the use of the journal during the semester thereby providing a unique insight into the transition process. Results indicate that transition should be viewed both as an ongoing process during an undergraduate programme and an integral part of lifelong learning.

**Keywords:** academic literacy; lifelong learning; reflective journals; reflection; transition

### **Student transition in a time of flux**

The majority of first-year students appear to adjust to university (Grayson, 2003; Lowe & Cook, 2003). There is, however, intense research activity around transition from a variety of perspectives (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2008; Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2001). This research activity connects to mass participation in education and changing perspectives on university education held by ‘traditionally-aged’ college students (Keup, 2008; Zepke & Leach, 2007). Overall, this change is accompanied by different ways of learning and doing for incoming students. This transition can be viewed from a long-term perspective as being part of learning as a lifelong process, as already espoused by higher education libraries in relation to ‘student curiosity, motivation and self-understanding’ (Ward, 2006, p. 402).

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The most influential theoretical perspective on first-year transition (Tinto, 1975) views transition as a longitudinal process and provides a link to a lifelong learning view.

Tinto's (1975) original path model, the conceptual schema for dropout for college, examines initial student commitment to a particular academic system. Commitment leads to academic and social integration resulting in the decision to persevere or drop out of higher level education. Pascarelli and Terenzini's (1983) research produced a path analytic validation of Tinto's model whilst noting that 'it may not capture the full complexity of the phenomenon' (1983, p. 225). Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) adapted aspects of Tinto's (1975) model to examine the role of active learning as an influence on academic integration, and results demonstrated that such learning clearly influenced social integration, institutional commitment and the subsequent decision to complete a course of study. Tinto has also continued to develop his perspectives on the relationship between student persistence and retention and his model is still influential in the literature as Lowis and Castley (2008) confirm the need for early intervention. It is also critiqued for taking an assimilationist or acculturation approach to retention (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000) and that arguments for change do not result in institutional change (Pitkethley & Prosser, 2001).

Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007, p. 224) consider that the modern university 'has been created within an economically driven political agenda in which budgetary constraints dictate pedagogical decisions'. Transition therefore occurs at the nexus of institutional, lecturer and student concerns and expectations. All of these are in a state of flux as even traditional student populations change (Keup, 2008) and higher level institutions have their own particular concerns around national strategies and relations with potential employers. University resources have also been directed at maximising numbers resulting in an impersonal experience (Willis (1993); teaching first years can also hold little status or reward for lecturers (Student Forum for National Strategy for Higher Education, 2009; Tinto, 2006–2007), so that the student 'voice' can have little impact on institutional processes (Sheridan, 2011). Universities are thus simultaneously deeply concerned with transition as well as negating it. It is therefore of significance to hear the student 'voice' through their reflections at a turning point in their lives: the first semester of first year.

### **Reflecting on the process of transition**

O'Connell and Dyment (2006, p. 671) note that a 'modest body of research has examined the use of journals as a pedagogical tool in higher education' though used significantly in professional development and planning. Moon (2006, p. 1) defines a learning journal as a 'vehicle for reflection' and that reflection in an academic context (Moon, 2006, pp. 37–38) involves a stated purpose for the reflection followed by an outcome: learning, action or clarification. From a student learning perspective, Park (2003) considers the use of learning journals as empowering and that it aids students in becoming autonomous though not all students are initially positive about reflection. However, what is intriguing is the process of students expressing initial scepticism or resistance and then realising the benefit of reflection in relation to progress with learning. There are thus benefits in using a learning journal for both student and lecturer, particularly as feedback in relation to a course or module of study (Park, 2003) though there are also concerns around grading reflection (Hubbs

& Brand, 2010; Pavlovich, 2007; Stewart & Richardson 2000). There is also the potential for a mismatch between lecturer expectations and student performance (Clegg & Bufton, 2008; Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Moon (2006) considers that there are levels of reflection and quality and depth of reflection relates to the nature of learning processes, which also includes emotion and the transformation of these processes. Clearly, with first-year undergraduates, who may be asked to reflect on their learning for the first time, this is a serious consideration as they may be particularly uncertain about what it is that they are meant to do. Nevertheless, Moon (2006) discusses 18 possible uses of a learning journal ranging from recording and learning from experience to personal development and self-empowerment.

The range of use demonstrates the powerful effects of a learning journal in an academic context; it has the potential of developing undergraduates into autonomous learners who are reflexive and pro-active in resolving the problems that they encounter in their academic journey and beyond.

The use of a journal across the first semester of first year thus casts a novel light on transition as lived experience. This is of particular relevance to the Irish context where a report on student progression notes an overall non-completion rate across the Irish higher education sector as 15% for new entrants (Mooney, Paterson, O'Connor, & Chantler, 2010, p. 7). Based on centralised records, the quantitative study does not capture the student voice. Consequently, this research provides insight into such statistics from the perspective of university first-year students.

### Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken in this study to complement existing quantitative approaches (Braxton et al., 2000; Lowe & Cook, 2003). This approach allows for an in-depth investigation of what is of concern to first-year students (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999) from *their perspective* in relation to *their academic activity*; it includes both negative and positive experiences and the resolution of problems. Additionally, it charts the development of the reflective process, which, as Dearnley and Matthew (2007, p. 383) state is not automatic as students can find initial reflective writing difficult with some students dismissing it as being without value.

Following submission and approval by the university ethics committee, two classes who had already completed reflective journals and had completed the assessment process were approached. The study was outlined including measures taken to protect individual privacy. A total of 36 students provided consent for their journals to be used for the research.

The journals in this study are a combination of writing freely in relation to academic matters or using a template adapted from McGuinness (2007), which guided students to:

- Provide a weekly synopsis of goals, resources used and activities undertaken in relation to learning.
- Outline difficulties encountered with research; include feelings about learning with particular emphasis on differences with previous learning.
- Provide a general reflection on their experiences and an occasional but significant reflection on the reflection process itself.

The template appeared to decrease anxiety and has been continued since the study. In this context, it is interesting to note that 90% of the students in Langer's (2002) study followed the template provided.

Students were given the option of either typing or handwriting their journals. Almost all students chose the handwritten option, an interesting selection that could be interpreted as providing the final link between the handwritten essays of their final-year schooldays and the expectation of typed documents at university. It also makes the reading of the journals quite a personal experience as there is such an immediate link to each student's thoughts and feelings that are not mediated through a formal document.

## Results

Charmaz (2005) offers a set of guidelines with which to interpret the grounded theory approach; this is a systematic but not linear process as it involves constant comparison throughout the analytical process until comparison yields no new insights. Initial coding is first engagement with and distillation of the data. Discussion contributes significantly to this process so yielding the *in vivo* code 'stress' as used by participants in this study. Secondly, data are further refined by focused coding into analytical or higher categories as presented in Table 1. The third stage or theoretical coding moves the analysis towards theoretical development through the identifying of core categories in relation to the phenomenon of student transition in first semester presented in Table 2. Finally, this analysis was presented to participants and forms a significant part of the discussion in this paper.

The codes were grouped into 15 categories, each with a total number of bundled codes as shown in Table 1. Of these codes, the last four categories have already been discussed in-depth in relation to the development of information literacy. Consequently, they are only alluded to in this analysis.

Despite a focus on academic issues being the intent of the journal, students did not compartmentalise their experience but reported it holistically so that the resulting four core conceptual categories inter-relate; for example, the personal journey of identity transformation is itself accompanied by stress as well as stress relating to

Table 1. Categories with total number of codes.

Category	Total codes
Transition	89
Navigating the campus	22
Making friends	39
Joining clubs and socs	34
Lecture issues	50
Using technology	91
Group work	90
Stress	146
Time management	31
Solutions/being proactive	57
Benefits of journal/self-reflection	36
Using the library	81
Researching/preparing for assignments	156
Issues with citing and referencing	28
Academic writing	18

Table 2. Four core conceptual categories.

Student identity transformation	Emotional challenges	Academic related issues	Skill
Transition	Stress	Lecture issues	Navigating the campus
Making friends	Time pressure	Using technology	Using the library
Joining clubs and socs		Group work	Researching/preparing for assignments
Solutions/being proactive			Issues with citing and referencing
Benefits of journal/self-reflection			Academic writing

academic issues. The grounded theory approach confirms the lived experience as it highlights the over-lapping of these four categories.

These four core categories are interpreted as resulting in the core outcome of a personal transformation relating to the development of a student identity. This transformation is accompanied by the emotional challenge of managing change successfully, which includes self-reported stress and time pressures during the course of the first semester as students try to manage their activities. Secondly, there is a shift in understanding what it means to learn: learning no longer comes from a figure of central authority but occurs from working with others as well as being self-directed. This realisation is also a major contribution to student identity: it opens a new way of being with peers through working with others without first establishing school-type friendship patterns.

**Findings**

*The student voice: beginning transformation to student identity*

The reflective journals provide students with an opportunity to map their learning goals and discuss both the activities and resources used to progress their learning. The students were asked to emphasise how this learning differed from their previous learning experiences. Aside from these criteria, the students had free rein as to what they wanted to include in relation to academic issues. It is interesting to note therefore, that making friends and joining clubs and societies was a priority as evidenced by the following two journal extracts:

I feel that the social aspect of college life is just as important as the academic.

I found that by asking people for help instead of getting bogged down with work, I managed to figure it out eventually.

It seems students’ reflection on how they begin to understand their transition into university life is grounded in a sense of the social and how they gain support from their peers.

*Academic-related issues: lectures*

Many of the students entering university are faced with new approaches to learning that take time to learn; the initial weeks and even months for a first-year student are

spent adapting to autonomous research practises. While previously many students worked under the confines of memorising data in order to pass the final-year Leaving Certificate, university learning requires them to be both independent researchers and to be able to switch to working with peers for group tasks.

Many journal entries commented on adjusting to large lecture classes and specifically the difficulty in learning how to take effective notes.

I still find it hard to take my notes in my \_\_\_\_\_ lecture. However I think the notes I did take should be ok for the presentation.

Knowing how much of what needs to be noted in a lecture is a learning process; the ability to summarise key points is not automatic, it must be learnt. Yet many lecturers expect their students to be skilled from day one. When tasked with sourcing information for an assignment, many students identified re-reading their notes as their first and for some, their only, port of call. There is a belief by incoming students that they must adhere to the authority of their instructor be that a teacher or lecturer. Others look only to the prescribed texts on their reading lists. There is a paralysing fear of deviating from the 'voice of authority'.

Added to this is the extra complexity of getting to grips with the dynamics of contributing to academic discussions in online forums and for some, the concept of a virtual learning environment is alien.

### ***Groupwork: more complex than it appears***

Groupwork was another issue that students discussed in the journals as being problematic. While in general, students felt at ease seeking support from their peers, when it came to assignment work that grouped them with peers that were not friends, the more earnest amongst them were often frustrated with having to assume a leadership role:

I found that I was constantly asking if everybody was ok with what we were doing. Some of the group then seemed to be all right with whatever was pitched to them and were happy to go along with everyone else.

However, the question of leadership and developing self-assertiveness created moments of deep reflection:

I need to be more assertive and to take on the leadership role more often so I can take control of my work.

Finding and asserting the first-year voice can feel daunting for some, even if the example above is clearly leading the student to realisation of what has to be achieved on a personal level to accomplish an academic task.

Over 30 coded references discussed the problems involved in scheduling group work activities:

I sent two emails to them stating that I had booked a room in the library for us to discuss our plan of action. However, surprisingly no one showed.

Other journal entries acknowledge the newness of the group work experience and the benefits that collaboration brings:

A strange feeling to work with people who at the start you do not know. This was the case for \_\_\_\_\_ presentation. However, now we are good friends and we worked well together. Despite my worries beforehand, as I had never experienced working in those conditions before.

There is evidence of reflection here, and this student has clearly made the transition successfully.

### ***Emotional challenges: the stress of transition***

There are 146 coded references to stress, so that this is a significant finding and much of this relates to organisation and time management. The journals detailed realisation of the personal significance of these two activities. Students discover they have to become far more pro-active in managing their learning in relation to time, finding a balance between socialising, study, part-time, paid work and the concerns of the moment:

I came in early and intended to go to the library and get books but I was so cold after my journey in and I bumped into a new friend I made and went for cup of coffee.

Juggling work and college work is starting to slightly take its toll on me at the moment. Although I'm on course with some of my modules, there are others which have fallen slightly by the wayside.

However, a combination of institutional factors and other commitments also contribute to feelings of stress. As the student catchment area is quite large, many students live in counties outside Dublin and travel in by public transport, which may or may not deliver them in time for class.

The following three extracts from the journals are typical of the type of the statements around stress:

It's a lot harder than I thought to find a proper balance.

Work is starting to mount up. I just hope I can get it all done.

There is so much reading to do to help build on what's been discussed in the lectures so I thought I should get a head start on it. By doing this I hopefully won't get too stressed out coming up to exams and deadlines.

In contrast, students also demonstrated empowerment by initiating a plan of action such as going to a writing workshop, going to see a lecturer/tutor or changing a module. At first sight, these can appear trivial but each act is a measure of success in managing a completely new learning environment. It is also evident in successful initial negotiation and management of the virtual learning environment particularly as students arrive at university with a wide range of IT skills. These range from fear of technology to a few students who have already encountered a virtual learning environment. All these successful negotiations lead incrementally to successful transition with steps or stages accompanied by self-reported stress.

***Benefits of journal: self-reflection***

The benefits of the journal are evident in moment of self-reflection with these two extracts revealing initial thoughts near the beginning and then the end of the first semester:

At the moment I still feel like a little fish in a big pond but I realise that there's so many others in my same situation so I know I'm not alone.

Overall I've really enjoyed semester one I've made new friend and gotten into a routine. I think I'm starting to get the hang of writing paper and doing presentations, I'm not one hundred percent confident but I will be. Some of my lectures have been a lot harder than others or than I thought. I think next semester I'm going to really try getting started on assignments a lot earlier.

The second extract shows a realisation that assignments, with submission dates often bunching at the end of the semester, have to be prepared for. Though this may appear self-evident, such knowledge comes from the experience followed by the moment of reflection for the student. For students, there is often a moment when they understand that their journals have lead them to such realisations.

**Discussion: theorising transition**

In Ireland, students leave school having learnt to memorise data to pass the final-year Leaving Certificate. This is reflected in Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education Report (2011) particularly the second page of the 2009 student contribution:

The type and process of teaching and learning in second level was seen as a barrier to being ready to successfully access third level learning. The strong emphasis on rote learning, the absence of training in higher order thinking skills and the focus on the Leaving Cert as a memory test, which had students see the Leaving Cert from a short term perspective, did not furnish students with the skills to progress to college.

Transition is thus problematic, and the results of this study demonstrate the degree of reworking of a student's understandings and relationships. The category of emotional challenges, including stress, therefore provides a strong indication of transformation.

The results of this study were returned to students for confirmation and comment. As they are no longer in first year, it is useful to see two reflections on the findings:

Looking back ... I guess it was a fairly stressful time ... the main source of stress for me personally was not knowing what was expected of you (i.e. not being familiar with the standard requirements on essays, presentations etc). Throughout the first semester I remember constantly stressing over my results; would I ever pass my modules!? ... Needless to say, the days leading up to the date when the results came out were absolutely nerve-wracking ...

I particularly agree with the point you made about learning being more self-directed. This form of learning undoubtedly leads to the construction of a new type of relationship with students; one that is not a friendship but requires working with others. It

plays a crucial role in the transition as students are introduced to a new form of interpersonal communication. Up until this point this would, for the most part, be alien to students. In secondary school learning is centralised and the majority of relationships are friendships. Considering the amount of time, five or six years, students spend in secondary school and the fact in this time students are becoming young adults it is understandable that there may be a consensus that friendships are the key type of relationships in the working world as it is the main form they have come in contact with throughout school.

Transition, as Clegg and Bufton (2008) state, is a between-time; students are close to the past consisting of learning and socialising at school. In first semester the familiarity of directed learning is replaced by the challenge of carrying out individual research on a subject, on judging its value without being able to call on meaningful comparisons as to the potential for success or failure, hence the stress of the experience. This link to the past also highlights academic expectations around groupwork where students are expected to make arrangements to work with peers. However, this experience relates to the future, such as collaborative practice in the workplace at a time when students are not yet concerned with being a graduate with the capacity for lifelong learning to accompany different stages of the adult life.

### Conclusion

This study, grounded in the student experience of transition, confirms the use of the learning journal; it uncovers the key elements of individual identity transformation in this process with evidence of active involvement with learning, which charts problems, solutions and also self-empowerment. It foregrounds group work as an issue in transition as it occupies a learning stage for which students are particularly unprepared in terms of the social roles they have played so far in their everyday life.

Consequently, transition can be envisaged in a framework as part of a long-term process that leads the student over time to graduation and beyond. A higher level institution's formally identified programme *outcomes, attributes, skills for lifelong learning* can be contained in such a framework. There may be strong input from support services, the student union, high level working groups, librarians, careers staff, and individual lecturers, but this activity becomes the responsibility of none unless a coordinated approach is taken where transition is integral to the life cycle of a student programme, rather than an add-on induction process.

### Notes on contributors

Vera Sheridan programme Chair, BA in Contemporary Culture & Society, Faculty of Humanities, Dublin City University from 2007 to 2011. Research interests are in the area of identity across educational, cultural organisational and national contexts. She has publications in Higher Education relating to international students and FQS on grounded theory and interculturalism and also supervises doctoral students in interculturalism. She is also a Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.

Siobhán Dunne is the humanities and social sciences librarian at Dublin City University with responsibility for the design and delivery of information literacy skills programmes for staff and students across three schools. She has been actively researching how librarians and faculty collaborate to improve the first-year learning experience and is particularly interested in measuring the outcomes of interventions that achieve this. Recent research interests include online learning, lifelong learning and the value of bibliometrics.

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