

AFFORDANCES AND ENGAGEMENT: THE SHAPING OF ADULTS' INITIAL EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Issues of retention in higher education are very much on the mind of the Australian government and its universities. This paper proposes that a complex of factors shapes adult students' successful transition to higher education not solely those comprising the support afforded by the university. Instead, there is a rich and related interdependence between what the university and other forms of support (e.g. family, friends) affords and the agency, capacity and engagement of students. There are elements of particular personal circumstances that also shape the kinds of support these students can access, how they engage with what is afforded and then construe and make judgements about their experiences. Consequently, in understanding and promoting the successful transition of adult students into higher education requires a consideration of the students' experiences and access to support outside of university and their previous experiences as well as what is afforded by the university. However, rather than general prescriptions these complex of factors likely play out in quite different ways across a student cohort, thereby reinforcing the individual processes that comprise these transitions. Understanding the transition to higher education is premised on interdependence between the affordances of the universities and other and individuals' engagement with what is afforded.

Participation and retention in higher education

Student retention in and successful completion of their higher education studies is currently very much on the mind of governments and university administrators (McInnis et al 2000). Using data from the 2003 and 2004 cohorts of commencing adult teacher education students from non-traditional backgrounds (i.e. adult aged entrants), a range of factors associated with their successful transition to higher education studies are identified. Utilising a framework comprising a duality of kinds and levels of affordances or support encountered (i.e. university, family, friends and work) and students' engagement with what is afforded them, a complex and relational set of factors that comprise students' educational experience can be apprehended. The institutional support for their studies and endorsement of students' worth, in terms of assignment grades, stands as shaping students' perceptions of themselves and the qualities and utility of support they access in their transition to their studies. There is also family and affiliates' support and sacrifices made in supporting some students' study. Intersecting these are the individuals' construal of and engagement with what is being afforded them and relations among them.

Transition into higher education

The concern here is to understand how the successful transition to higher education plays out for adult students who are entering the university from a non-traditional route premised upon their vocational qualifications, work and life experience. These students are entering an initial teacher education program for adult and vocation educators. Typically, these students: (i) have had little or no preparation, recent or otherwise, for the academic requirements of higher education (e.g. academic literacies); (ii) are largely

part-time and engaged in a full-time working life; and (iii) have family commitments to manage as well. Also, (iv) for many, the decision to attend university is undertaken in order to transform their working lives or is shaped by events in their personal or working lives. These events include the cessation of their paid work, personal injury, frustration and disappointment with their working life or a powerful desire to change careers. There are also often life transitions and issues of personal worth and family commitment at stake in their transition to higher education. So beyond the specific issues associated with readiness to engage in relatively independent study in higher education, which requires writing and comprehension skills that are typically not well practised, there are also significant risk issues associated with their sense of self, their confidence as well as potential financial anxieties associated with this transition and involving cost to family activities and life.

Not that these students are without many of the qualities of personal organisation, determination and discipline that will support their transition to independent forms of study. However, they need to develop, often quite quickly, not only the ability to negotiate entry to higher education, to engage in the social practices associated with higher education; the ideologically and socially constructed ways of thinking and valuing in the different disciplines (Gee, 1996). For many, this process includes developing the academic literacies that are crucial to understanding, engaging with and expressing ideas in producing the written work upon which they will be assessed (Searle, 2003; Searle & Behrens, 2004). The development of these literacies stand as being pivotal in the judgements about their sense of self worth and their retention and progress continuity in higher education.

Social affordances and individual engagement

To understand the factors shaping successful transitions for these commencing adult higher education students, it is necessary to account for both individual and social factors that contribute to students' learning and decisions about continuing their studies. That is, to consider what contributions arise from both individuals' 'cognitive experience' and also the 'social experience' (Valsiner, 2000), from which the knowledge to be learnt is accessed and also from where their efforts monitored and judged. Individuals' cognitive experience comprises the cognitive, dispositional and agentic bases that comprise their capacity to engage with, negotiate and secure outcomes that arise from their engagement with the social world (i.e. inter-psychologically). Central to conceptions of individual learning or development of socially-derived practices, such as academic literacies or competencies, is the engagement (i.e. deployment, exercise) and transformation of individuals' cognitive experience through these inter-psychological processes. That is interactions between individual and social sources that can provide access to and the individuals' construction of the knowledge required for academic work, which has its genesis outside of the individual.

So more than social sources, individuals' intentionality and effort and targeting of their effort when engaging with the social sources of that knowledge will likely shape the cognitive legacy arising from engaging with the social world (Billett 2005). In this way, that engagement is also directed by and shapes individuals' construal of what they experience, which is likely to be person-dependent in some ways as it reflects personally unique sets of social experiences that comprises their ontogeny or life history (Billett 2005). Here, the concept of the pre-mediate experience is helpful as this shapes how individuals construe what they subsequently encounter. Pre-mediate experiences are the learning accumulated through individual personal histories that are in some ways

unique and lead to their cognitive experience: ways of construing subsequent experiences that have personal dimensions. For instance, individual's gaze is central to how they construe what they encounter on commencing their negotiations (the immediate experience) within higher education. Thus, the intentionality behind this engagement can be seen as having two dimensions: (i) the direction, focus and scope of engagement and (ii) the intensity of that engagement (Billett, Barker and Smith, 2005). In this study, the quality and relations between individual and social contributions of different kinds are used to understand their experience of transition to higher education. Other affordances shape these adult students' engagement with their studies including family, friends and community contributions. For example, 'engagement' may be taken to mean both the degree of 'connectedness' with the university (McInnis & James, 1995) and the degree of 'support for engagement in study' by the family, as well as possible 'distractions to study'. That is, the degree (i.e. high or low) of support they are afforded through their work, family life and social life.

Investigating adult students' transition to higher education

The study discussed here investigated transition experiences (i.e. their first semester of study) of individuals from two beginning cohorts of adult students entering an adult and vocational teacher education program. This program aims to develop students' professional teaching capacities to become educators in their vocational fields. These students are granted two years' advance standing (i.e. credit) on the basis of their vocational and instructional skills, qualifications and experience. A few have had recent experience in writing business or technical reports and comprehending industry specific documents (generally 'reading to do' rather than 'reading to learn', Mikulecky, 1982, 1984). However, as many students left school early and a long time before they enter the program (i.e. average age 33 years), their academic literacies are usually either underdeveloped or unpractised, at best. The students are offered a short, program specific, study skills program over a number of weekends prior to their induction into the course. Only a small percentage of students take up this offer, although this should not necessarily be seen as an indication of overconfidence, rather than late enrolments or these workshops coincided with other commitments.

All students commencing in Semester One of 2003 and 2004 were invited to respond to a survey about their first year experiences within their program. Fourteen of the 2003 student cohort (n=62) replied to the survey and 13 of the 2004 cohort (n= 42) provided responses. The survey had four sections. The first section included items focusing on their plans, progress and commitment to their program. The second section included items aiming to identify the factors shaping their progress in the program. The approach used here was to have the respondents identify 'high' and 'low' moments: where they had achieved success or experienced disappointments, and then report factors associated with those experiences. These data were elicited to obtain perspectives grounded in specific events and secure accounts more likely premised on actual events than unsubstantiated perceptions about their studies. The third section gathered data about students' engagement in the program and support that influenced their study life and the fourth section sought feedback regarding a voluntary study skills program, that was offered to students prior to the commencement of the more general program orientation.

The data from each section were tabulated and analysed to link different kinds of experiences to factors associated with the affordances and engagement they reported. Factors that the students designated as being associated with 'high' or 'low' moments were identified and categorised. Having considered the characteristics of what

constituted 'high' or 'low moments'; the factors that shaped those moments were examined in greater detail. The findings below are based on this analysis.

Contributions to successful transitions to higher education

The students report different combinations and qualities of affordances of the educational institution, other kinds of affordances and bases of individual engagement. Depending upon the contributions featuring most strongly, the responses to the survey items the data were categorised under the following headings: (i) Individual Engagement; (ii) Individual Engagement and University Affordances; (iii) University Affordances; and (iv) Other Affordances. That is, responses that clearly identified these categories of contributions to their learning were aggregated.

Individual Engagement

Several respondents from both the 2003 and 2004 cohorts reported that their success (i.e. high movements) were largely the product of their personal effort and engagement. That is, the factors largely resided within their own agency and intentionality. They used phrases such as "own efforts"(01), "on the whole it was my own efforts ..."(05), "heaps of effort and time"(12). These students reported being buoyed by the grades and feedback they received from the marker. For example, one informant stated, "*When I received my first marked assignment, I was really pleased with my mark. I haven't studied for a while, so I was pleased that I could still achieve*" (53). So while students reported achievement arising through their intentional and effortful engagement in their studies, it was the endorsement by an external source that saw that effort translated into a positive sense of achievement. It was the endorsement of their achievement afforded by the marker that buoyed their engagement and retention in the program. Yet, one informant (11) referred to a different kind of agency that guided and motivated her. This was the realisation of her own learning and potential to assist others to learn and was associated with personal empowerment, rather than external endorsement. Two other respondents also referred to other kinds of support: that of their partners, and one also referred to the materials that had been provided by the University and the realisation that "*knowing that my prior knowledge was useful and relevant*" (54).

For these students, the key contributions to their successful, transition to higher education were through individual effort and engagement (i.e. the exercise of their agency) and the external and internal bases by which they judged their success. For instance, a number of these informants, referred to the demands upon others (e.g. family members, spouse, partner) required for them to find the time and space to engage in the study life. So this suggests that even when the individuals nominate their own agency and intentionality as being the primary basis of their successful transition to higher education, that their efforts required the endorsement from an immediate social source, for instance (i.e. the markers' grade or the realisation of the social potential of their newly developed capacities). This presents an instance of a rich interplay between social and personal contributions to the successful transition to higher education, rather than just being one or the other.

Individual Engagement and University Affordances

Some students from both years' cohorts claimed that both the University's contributions of learning support, grades and feedback, and their efforts together were crucial to their successful transition to higher education. However, unlike the previous group of students, they also explicitly identified support provided by teaching staff including "*clear explanations*" (02) "*communication with (teaching) staff*" (13) and "*initial*

support from (teaching) staff" (14). This combination was clear in two respondents' claims about successful transitions: *"helped me stay organised and committed"* (09), *"I had planned my study, assignments knew what I was doing, I felt like I wasn't working on my own"* (13). The support afforded by the University here is held to be not so much directing the learning, but augmenting the individual's contributions. For example, one respondent (#50) claimed that: *"they gave me the self-confidence that I require to go on to the next assignment"*. In combination, the contributions from the course are seen as guiding and scaffolding their efforts. The support of the University provides a platform that is invitational by degree and upon which these students elect to engage in different ways. The term aligned with affordances -- the invitational qualities -- seems consistent with what these respondents are suggesting. That is, the university-based provision invited and supported their learning. So, again, this data elaborates the intermingling and interweaving of both social and individual contributions to the students' successful transition to higher education.

University Affordances

Some respondents in both the 2003 and 2004 cohorts claimed the support of the university as being central to their successful transition to higher education. While reference has already been made to those who attributed success and motivation to the grades they had received (not always high grades, but satisfaction with passing), others reported that particular members of staff had had a powerful effect upon their learning. This made the process of learning and reflection upon their learning very potent. For example it was claimed that these contributions assisted with the comprehension of the concepts within courses, *"XX helped me in understanding learning principles in teaching"* (52); the importance of engaging in study, *"I was made aware of how important reading and research were going to be"* (55); facilitating the process of learning, *"mainly clarifying what is required"* (59); and an awareness that personal anxieties and difficulties were not unique, *"realised you are not alone in having difficulty with understanding questions and balancing external commitments"* (57). In these responses, the supportive contributions of the university's provisions were emphasised.

Predictably, for some students the sources of 'low moments' were the opposite of what had been the source of 'high moments' for others. These low moments were sourced in receiving low grades by seven of the 14 respondents for the 2003 cohort. However, one student was disappointed at receiving a mark below 80% (04), indicating that what constituted a 'low moment', was not wholly dependent upon the external judgement, but perhaps on (in this case unrealistic) student expectations. Other sources of low moments were identified as lack of understanding about requirements *"having an overdue assignment which I felt I didn't understand"* (01); finding the experience of studying *"frustrating, disillusioning, stressful"* (03); and *"when one of my results was incorrect and showed fail mark in my results"* (14). However, in each of these responses resides an element of personal engagement. In particular, what was perceived to be of low affordance was assessed on the basis of subjective judgements.

Other students attributed their lack of success more directly and unequivocally to the course materials and provision. These included *"required text unavailable"* (01), *"the study guide and recommended text were poorly presented"* (04); a lack of guidance *"lack of understanding of topics"* (09); uncertainty about requirements *"not knowing what to expect"* (10); and *"[low] mark, as expectations weren't clear enough in assignment question"* (13). Inevitably, some students referred to the markers' comments and a belief by some students that the markers were not using the criteria fairly. Others

referred to the need for greater clarity in material (54), the volume of work to be undertaken (57), improved study guides (59) and the lecturing staff providing clear expectations for assessment tasks.

Again, the concept of affordances as invitations to participate and engage in learning appears to capture the sentiment being expressed in the respondents' data. Some students were able to identify particular attributes of the course provisions, which failed to afford them the support they required for a successful transition to higher education. However, these were not universally perceived as such across the respondents. This hints at the significance of the kinds of earlier experiences and expectations that lead to the development of the capacities to engage effectively with the academic discourse.

Other Affordances

The fourth category of responses was that identifying support from sources other than the University as being central to their success. Interestingly, two of the respondents from 2003 (04, 07) had been the recipients of University awards for academic performance. Yet, both of these claimed that the key factor that led to their success was the support of their spouses in assisting their studies and providing space for that success to occur (e.g. doing additional housework). While these respondents suggest the support of the University was helpful, the crucial factor was that afforded in their homes. For example, their spouses' assistance "*ensured I was able to read adequately and complete assignments in a timely manner*" (04) and "*no worries about meals, housework, ironing etc. Total freedom to be committed to my end goal*" (07). Similarly, other informants acknowledged the support of their families, their partners, and in one case, "*My mum is my biggest help in passing my assignments. I email her my work and she marks it for me. Much more efficient than spell check*" (60). Students also noted that families afforded support in the form of "*stable home, love and encouragement*" (56), "*assistance in fine tuning my assignment*" (51) and "*gave me motivation, involved in what I need to achieve*" (60).

However, the affordances from other sources were not always supportive of a successful transition to higher education. A similar, although less clear set of relationships were also exercised in the respondents accounts of the sources and causes of disappointments in their transition to higher education studies. These included work commitments, sickness and "*difficulty accessing resources*" (01). The 2004 cohort identified some similar sources of unsatisfactory performance but offered a wider range of sources. These included running out of time to finish assignments (50), having a computer malfunction (53), not receiving anticipated financial support for course (55), not enough time to study (60) and experiencing stress as assessment deadline approached (60). Here, there is a mixing of individual factors and those beyond individual that shaped their successful participation in higher education, albeit in distinct ways.

From these four categorisations of responses, almost universally, but not unexpectedly, the students reported that external judgements of their work that had constituted the bases for their categorising experiences as constituting 'high moments' in their transition to higher education. Typically, the level of grade awarded and comments provided by the assessors were the basis for judgements about progress. For two of the cohort, there had been recognition beyond that provided by the assessor for their academic success in the form of university-based awards. However, of the 27 respondents, only two referred to personal judgements about progress and personal utility that led them to see events as being high moments. As noted, one referred to their

recognition that they had experienced learning in the form of new insights through their coursework, and another claimed that the acknowledgement of the worth of their prior knowledge had constituted the 'high moment'.

With 'low moments', there was a similar pattern of interdependence between individuals and social contributions. This is exemplified by comments suggesting personal embarrassment or distress ("*I felt terrible*", "*felt bad*") as students reported having failed to perform up to expectation and were concerned about how their lecturers might perceive them. So, there were clear issues about individual's sense of self, and acknowledgement of personal shortcomings, that were less evident in the sources of 'high moments', which were largely attributed to external endorsements of performance. Yet they reinforce the interdependencies between the social and individual contributions.

Overall, it was possible to identify different kinds of affordances playing particular roles in the successful transition to higher education. Firstly, the data suggest that the verification of individuals' worth in terms of the grades they received or acknowledgement from the University were very important in terms of reinforcing these individuals' sense of self as competent individuals, as they negotiated a transition to studies within higher education. So, this emphasises the importance of what the university afforded in terms of the worth of the effort at both personal and family level that underpinned, for some, to secure the transition to higher education. Secondly, for some, the affordances of other sources were important in providing space and opportunities for these adult students who are balancing work, family and study life to engage effectively in a study life. Such considerations also work against that transition if the family cost benefit judgement is such that the sacrifices are too great, which could lead to a cessation of study. Thirdly, was the support for the development of the kind of academic literacy required to successfully complete university assignments. That is, their participation and, hence, learning was inhibited rather than invited. Again, this interdependence between the social and individual plays out here.

Transitions to adults' participation in higher education

In conclusion, the outcomes of this small study are twofold. Firstly, a consideration of students' bases of engagement is the product, in part, of previous and diverse sets of experiences and expectations. The interdependence between the affordances or invitational qualities and their capacities and engagement provides a basis to understand the complex of factors that underpin the successful transition to higher education. For example, some of these students strongly identified the contributions of the university to their successful performance as well as their own efforts. In each instance, the respondents referred to the grades and feedback they had received as constituting the 'high moment' upon which they had judged themselves to be successful. It was this endorsement in the form of degree of success afforded them by the university that was the central premise for many students making decisions about not only their success, but their worth as individuals and the utility of contributions. That is, their personal success, the efforts they exercised, the sacrifices made by their families were to be premised upon judgements afforded by the University. For a few, personal and professional fulfilment also provided premise is for their judgements. But in each case, however accentuated, there is evidence of interdependence between both the contributions of others and the capacities and engagement of the students.

Secondly, the study indicates that considerations of transition and retention of students in higher education cannot be based wholly upon university's educational provision. Students are likely to be engaged in multiple and demanding activities that

divide their time and energies, but these also open up opportunities for different kinds of engagement and its support. Engagement in family and work life can be invitational in different ways and different degrees but some students will need assistance to juggle these competing demands. Importantly, affordances beyond university are likely to be necessary and important for students' successful transition to higher education in an era when, it seems, Australian higher education students are increasingly distributing their time across a range of activities and engagements. Moreover, there are a range of personal bases that shape how individuals will go about engaging with what is afforded and experiencing the limiting dimensions of affordances, such as the need to return the investment of family and affiliates the investment they have made to support their engagement in higher education. Hence, strategies for enhancing transition and retention need to take into account the totality of the dimensions of contemporary students' lives, not just those that constitute their engagement with the university.

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