Studies in Learning, Evaluation Innovation and Development
http://sleid.cqu.edu.au
6(1), pp. 51–64. May 2009

Transitioning into university: 'Interrupted' first year students problem-solving their way into study

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Abstract

For many 'new' university students, especially those who might be called 'mature age', 'interrupted' or 'second chance' learners, the commencement of university study is often fraught with difficulties. Whilst family and paid employment commitments sometimes compete with study time, some students worry that they do not have the wherewithal for tertiary study or that they may not be successful in their new venture. This paper sets out to investigate some of the concerns experienced by a group of 'interrupted' learners who are enrolled in the first year of an education degree in a regional Australian university and to consider their views of a support program that they have accessed. In contrast to the traditional approach of offering academic support to students, this program emphasises social support and the development of a learning community as essential to academic success. In providing a time and a place for students to meet with a group of academics on a weekly basis, the program operates with no fixed academic agenda and positions students and academics as life-long learners. In this supportive environment, this approach works to develop enhanced problem-solving capacities as the students make their transition into university study.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education.

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ISSN 1832-2050

Introduction

The massification of higher education in Australia has seen an increase in the diversity of student populations in universities. Students enter via multiple pathways and only some students use the straight-from-school-to-university route that was once accepted as the 'norm'. Increasing numbers of older students – sometimes called 'mature age', 'interrupted' or 'second chance' learners – seek a tertiary qualification and many are keen to complete that qualification in as short a time as possible. Additionally, in the current economic rationalist climate, there is considerable pressure within universities for faculties to ensure that students remain enrolled. Retention and progression issues, therefore, are given high priority. As a result, many universities have expended substantial energy in the

design and implementation of programs to support students in their transition to tertiary study.

It would appear that many of the efforts to provide support for 'new' students in higher education have been aimed at helping students "fit the system" of university. There is considerable evidence that "add-on" academic skills courses, which aim to improve the academic abilities of first year students, have remained a popular way of dealing with the perceived problems of at-risk students (Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Tinto, 2001). Such practices, however, tend to construct students as deficit, locating potential solutions to students' deficiencies in study skills courses and other remedial programs offered by universities' learning support mechanisms (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005; Henderson & Hirst, 2007). In many cases, the teaching of academic skills has been through generic courses focusing on pre-determined sets of skills that students should master if they want to be regarded as successful scholars (Henderson & Hirst, 2007). However, such approaches offer a narrow view of the factors that may impact the ability of students to make the transition into university study and to be successful students.

With this context in mind, this paper begins by describing an approach to the first year of university experience that has been developed in the Faculty of Education in a regional Australian university. The program uses the notion of a learning community and works to dispel deficit discourses about students and to foster social integration with embedded academic preparedness. In particular, the program promotes a problem-solving approach and assists students to draw on their strengths from their lives outside university, while offering 'just-in-time' academic support.

This paper focuses specifically on a group of mature age or 'interrupted' learners who participated in the support program. It begins by describing the approach that was used to support first year students, as well as providing some background detail about the students. It then discusses the concerns that the students articulated about beginning tertiary education and their opinions about the program they had voluntarily chosen to join. The paper highlights the features of the program that seemed to be offering a successful way forward for interrupted learners.

An approach to supporting first year students

The support program considered here was designed as a way of working with the academic and social issues identified as important by first year students, including interrupted learners, at a regional Australian university. The student population was known to include a high proportion from low socioeconomic backgrounds and from rural and geographically isolated areas, as well as those who were "returning to education as adults after missing educational opportunities in their youth" (University of Southern Queensland, 2006). Within this context, it was recognised by Faculty staff that there was a need for a program to provide support for students whose backgrounds might suggest that success with university study might not be a foregone conclusion.

It was also recognised that many students are trying to juggle complex home lives along with university study. For example, many students have committed substantial time to employment and other community activities, while some, including interrupted learners, have families to care for and support. These complexities can mean that university study "runs the risk of simply becoming

another appointment or engagement in the daily diary" (Krause, 2006, p. 3; Turnbull et al., 2006).

While many first year student support programs seem to focus on 'topping up' students with academic skills, there have been calls for finding ways to ensure that students are supported socially as well as academically (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004; Noble & Henderson, 2007, 2008; Tinto, 2001). Indeed, Tinto (2008) has argued that "quite simply, the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate" (p. 5).

In an attempt to integrate both social and academic support, the program we designed focused on a Learning Circle approach (Aksim, 1998; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005; Riel, 2006), which would involve students in a learning community where sharing, comparing, negotiating and problem-solving could help them with their transition to their new role of 'university student'. This was based on the notion that involvement "with the people and activities of learning communities" is most likely to ensure success (Cross, 1998, p. 7). According to Tinto (2003), one of the advantages of learning communities is that they enable students "to take courses together" (p. 1). Although this is usually understood as working together within particular courses, the Learning Circle operated in the spaces between courses. It enabled students to problem-solve together and to develop networks that extended beyond particular courses and beyond the place and space of the Learning Circle. Approaches that "lead students to spend more time together and more time together learning" tend to be the successful ones (Tinto, 2008, p. 7).

There were no fixed agenda for the Learning Circle meetings. Instead, the topics of discussion originated with the students. At times, these included academic issues, such as planning assignments, referencing and searching for appropriate reference materials. At other times, social issues were paramount, with students and staff engaged in discussions and problem-solving about employment difficulties, financial issues and even homelessness (Noble & Henderson, 2008). One of the main tenets of the program was that students did not come to university as empty vessels, but they brought capacities and strengths from their previous experiences and learnings. The program aimed to draw on – and to build on – these strengths. This meant that the Learning Circle facilitated the transfer of the problem-solving capacities that students already had – from their lives outside of university – to the university context, as well facilitating the sharing of problem-solving capacities and knowledges amongst students, academic staff and university support staff.

The program was offered to first year students as a one-stop shop for support. By meeting in a designated place for a two-hour period each week, they were able to access academic staff, support personnel and library staff, and to discuss any concerns that they had in terms of their social and academic well-being and success. By linking to both forms of support – social and academic – we hoped that students would learn to navigate the "often-foreign landscape" and "the unfamiliar terrain of university" (Tinto, 2008, p. 4).

By bringing together first year students and university staff, the process created a learning community (Cross, 1998; Tinto, 2003). As Cross explained, learning communities offer opportunities for collaborative learning and the co-construction of knowledge. Additionally, the approach created a space for academic staff from the faculty to work with staff from other sections of the university. In doing this, the program operated on the understanding that a cross-campus collaboration, rather than a range of disparate services, would have a much better chance of being

successful. When reporting on a study of 20 US universities, Kinzie and Kuh (2004) noted that "sharing responsibility for student success really does matter" (p. 2).

Interviewing 'interrupted' learners

During the first two years of the program's operations, students who participated were invited to be interviewed about their first year experience, their reasons for choosing to attend the weekly Learning Circle meetings, and their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program and the way it operated. The data presented in this paper were drawn from semi-structured focus group interviews that were recorded on digital video.

Amongst the students who attended the Learning Circle meetings on a regular basis were interrupted learners and this paper draws on data that came from interviews with twelve of this group of students. The interrupted students were a diverse group in terms of the life experiences they brought to university, their previous experiences of school and tertiary study, and their employment since leaving school. Some students had not previously attempted to enrol in any form of formal study since leaving school and, in one case, the gap between leaving school and enrolling at university had been 35 years. The students had a range of occupational backgrounds, including health care, landscaping, child care, office work, and the army. Many were parents, although the level of responsibility to their children varied, as some had school-aged children and others had families who had grown up and left home. All of the students were first-generation university students.

To theorise the processes of the Learning Circle, we argue that Gee's (1996) notion of Discourses – as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing" (p. viii) – offers a way of understanding how 'new' university students, including interrupted learners, are expected to take on a new Discourse – that of 'university student'. Gee's work recognises that the learning of a new Discourse requires the adoption of the "usually taken for granted and tacit 'theory' of what counts as a 'normal' person and the 'right' ways to think, feel, and behave" as part of the social group who inhabit a particular context (p. ix).

For some first year university students, the Discourses of university resonate with the Discourses they use in other parts of their lives. For many of the first year students who enrol at our university (and we would argue that most of the interrupted learners would be in this group), the Discourses of university are quite different from the Discourses they have experienced previously. As Lundell and Collins (1999) point out, success in the university context requires competent use of the 'right' Discourse, which includes "certain modes of social behavior, certain ranges of spoken and written English, certain conventions of dress and interpersonal relations, and certain modes of inquiry" (p. 14). Without these markers of success, students' chances of successful tertiary study are limited.

Analysing the students' talk about the program

In analysing the interviews that were conducted with the group of interrupted learners, we considered two aspects. First, we identified the concerns and issues that the students talked about. Although we already gained insights into some of these through the workings of the Learning Circle, we were interested in hearing the students talk specifically about their concerns as interrupted learners in the first year of their degree program. The first analysis, therefore, was a thematic analysis

that set out to answer the question: What were the significant barriers that the students highlighted as impacting their first year experience in the university context?

Second, feedback from the students over two years had indicated that they regarded the support program as useful to them. Indeed, we assumed that they would not continue to attend if there were no perceived benefits, particularly as participation was voluntary. In asking the students to talk about how the program had worked for them, we were interested in analysing their points in relation to what the literature said about successful programs for interrupted learners. To this end, we draw on Lundell and Collins' (1999) derivation of Gee's work.

Lundell and Collins (1999) have used Gee's theory of Discourse to identify the implications for developmental education. Whilst we would locate our approach to the first year experience as drawing from both constructivist and developmental approaches (see Cross, 1998, for an explanation of these approaches), we regard Lundell and Collins' use of Gee's principles or features necessary for the success of interrupted learners in higher education as a useful analytical frame. The features are:

1. The 'new' Discourse of 'university student' must be made available in ways that "will not promote conflict with nor frame as deficit their primary and other extant Discourses";
2. interrupted students will learn the new Discourse through situated practice;
3. Lower order and higher order skills will be learnt together as part of meaningful practice (called 'automaticity' by Gee);
4. Students need to be "actually functioning" in the Discourse;
5. There is a need for interaction between novices and masters so that the learning is scaffolded and students learn "the 'right' and 'wrong' ways of operating";
6. Students need to develop a meta-awareness of what they already know so that they can build on that knowledge;
7. Students need to engage in a process of critical framing and thus begin to develop "an awareness of the limits of both the old and new Discourses" and "the potential of each Discourse", and
8. Students need to become involved in a process of transformed practice and to see that all Discourses construct people in particular ways. They also need to develop the strategies to critique, resist and deflect challenges, failings and others' constructions of themselves as inferior.

(Lundell & Collins, 1999, pp. 16-19)

In analysing the interrupted students' interviews, where they talked about the Learning Circle meetings, we looked for evidence of the features described by Lundell and Collins (1999).

The students' issues and concerns

One of the major barriers identified by the interrupted students was the use of technologies in their study. Most of them said that they had used computers prior to arriving at university, but their experiences had not required them to use computers to the exclusion of other forms of communication. Computers, therefore, were

described as a "big hurdle." As one student pointed out, "I didn't think about the fact that everything would be electronic – and even submissions; they don't do hard copy."

For some students, learning what others might call the 'basics' of computers was a challenge. One student had "only used a computer for typing" and "I'd never been hooked up to the internet." She explained that when she saw an advertisement for a course offered by the university's support staff, she realised that "I can't sign up for that because I don't know how to send an email."

Another difficulty highlighted by the interrupted students was their range of responsibilities. Whilst they regarded their study as important, they talked about other aspects of their lives that also required time and effort. Comments like the following were not uncommon:

> And like I said, because I'm also juggling everything else, you know, I've got a child, I'm married, so I've got a house to run, and even some of the straight out of school students said to a couple of us that have got children, "I don't know how you do it. There's no way I could do it." And I said, I would have said the same as you when I was your age, but now it's because I've made this choice I have to find a way to juggle everything and fit everything in.

The students talked extensively about their concerns with time and effort. Some of the students explained that it was necessary to find ways of allocating time to study and this sometimes meant either limiting study to particular times or ignoring other tasks that needed to be done. For example:

> Because I have a family and children my study hours are limited pretty much from when the children go to bed at 7 o'clock at night till I, through exhaustion, go to bed myself.

> It was all rushing around, dropping off children, trying to get to lectures, sorting out babysitters … this semester's been so much more workable and I've had study time in the middle of the week which I stick to … The washing can get wet in the rain; I have to study.

Another issue that many of the students raised was the question of where they could go when university, as one student put it, "all seemed too much." Several students talked about the panic they experienced during their first experiences of university, with comments such as:

> I was in a constant state of panic … that's how I felt in the initial part.

> I thought things were just happening too fast for me … I couldn't cope!

What really pleased the interrupted students was that there was a place for them to go to seek help. Interestingly, the classroom where Learning Circle meetings were held was regarded by the students as a place that was both calm and safe.

> It [the room] was just like a haven … it was like, please shut that door and lock us in.

> To actually be able to go in that room and shut the door, it's like you can send the whole uni away. And you're in this little protected environment where nothing's actually expected of you.

Students' views of the support program and its qualities

As explained earlier, this section of the paper examines the program that we conducted with first year students in terms of Lundell and Collins' (1999) derivation of Gee's notion of Discourse. Using the eight principles identified earlier, we draw on students' comments to see if – and how – those principles are operating.

Learning the new Discourse of university student

Many of the interrupted students were very aware that they had no prior experience with the Discourse of 'university student', although they did not use that particular terminology when talking about their experiences. It was evident in many of their comments that they felt 'out of place' in the university context. For some students, there appeared to be the fear of not looking like they belonged with the student cohort. One student, for example, highlighted the angst she experienced about her age: "I didn't go out to O Week because I thought I'd just be too old." The student's positive experiences with younger students helped to change her views:

> Once I had stopped putting up the barrier thinking of myself as old and having to change myself in any way to be able to communicate with other people, it wasn't a problem. It was more my mindset that had to be changed than the younger people. They didn't really worry.

For others, it was evident that the long time gap since previous study was a concern. For example:

> It was quite a few years since I'd studied, so I knew I needed to get as much help as I could … Knowing that you've got someone here telling you all the time that you can do it, then that self belief starts coming in there.

Some students found that the need to shift between familiar Discourses of their lives outside of university and the Discourse that was required within the university was quite stressful. One interrupted student who lived approximately three hours drive from the campus identified particular road signs as being critical to the shifts she made between 'being herself', the part of her life where she felt more comfortable, and 'being a university student'.

In reiterating one of Gee's points, Lundell and Collins (1999) highlighted the importance of avoiding deficit discourses and building on what students already know. We found that the students were generally aware that they brought different experiences – from each other and from younger students – to the university context, and they regarded these differences as positives. In the words of one student:

> 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 an interest in.

Situated practice

The program that we offered to first year students relied on students bringing their concerns to the Learning Circle. This meant that we were not preparing specific lessons or teaching episodes for the students, but were instead responding to their current needs, regardless of whether those needs were social or academic. In this way, we believed that the Learning Circle provided opportunities for situated practice, where learning could occur within the university context and in relation to issues that were impacting the students' capacities to cope with first year university.

For some of the students, this was an unusual way of working. At the end of his first semester at university, one of the students explained that he had not understood initially that what happened in the Learning Circle meetings was dependent on students' agendas. He said:

> It probably took me a while before I realised what you guys wanted to do. Like I was probably a little bit more reserved in the questions that I'd ask, because I didn't realise that you were here – available. I just thought that we'd sit here and listen to what you guys had to say.

What this student had realised – albeit part of the way through his first semester at university – was that the Learning Circle meetings were designed so that students were situated in practices that were meaningful to them, rather than focusing on practices that academic staff thought would be useful. As The New London Group (1996) argued, situated practice allows students to be immersed in learning and to become part of a community of learners. Some students highlighted the importance of being part of this community. For example:

> … just being able to come to [the program] 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, it was always there.

Higher and lower order skills in meaningful practice

Because so much of the students' talk and learning in the Learning Circle was about assignments and aspects of 'doing' assignments, it was clear that they regarded these discussions as a meaningful part of the practice of university study. Although it appeared that the students were learning both lower and higher order skills, what seemed to be important was that the program offered "just in time" support and interventions and focused learning that the students regarded as necessary for progress and success.

> To be able to ask the little questions, you know, 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 answered …. and [the program] was enough for me to get going with the course and answer the things that I needed answered.

In the interviews, students identified many skills that they had learned. Several noted that the incidental – and sometimes quite insignificant – learning was a major benefit.

> Another thing was that day … 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.

Students' participation in the program was testament to their motivation to learn and master the lower and higher order skills associated with the Discourse of "university student." While the students' comments in the interviews revealed that there were some anxieties associated with acquiring the skills they identified as important, they recognised the ongoing and recurring nature of their skills development over time and the program's responsiveness to their learning needs:

> But I think it's sort of like stages; you take from it [the program] what you need at the time so you can move on to where you need to go and then maybe I'll be ready to ask some more questions.

> Peer wise there's, like other people have questions in FYI that, while you're in that setting you're also keeping an ear on what's going on with them and you pick up other things and learn some other things about StudyDesk, accessing information, that sort of thing. Just because you're in that sort of environment and that's happening at that time. 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.

Functioning in the new Discourse

It was clear that the interrupted students saw the first year program as an important part of their first year study, not as an add-on. One student highlighted the importance of working out the "rules of engagement" that related to first year assessment:

> You still have to work out the rules of engagement, find out the actual requirements be they written or the sort of hidden requirements. Those are the things that as a first year student have been probably what I've been stumbling around trying to work out.

It became evident that students must feel they that are able and allowed to function in the new Discourse. In the interviews, this was often expressed as confidence and belief in themselves, as well as belief by other members of the learning community – be they academic staff or peers – that they could be successful. For several of the students, functioning in the Discourse required them to let down their guard and become open to asking and receiving help. For example:

> 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. But once I got there [to the program], I was a little bit more open to being able to let myself be helped.

Interactions between novices and experts

The interrupted students emphasised the importance of the interactions between novices and experts that occurred in the Learning Circle meetings. One student confided that she had been shocked that university academic staff could actually care about students. She explained:

> I always put lecturers on a very high pedestal. I was shocked, absolutely shocked to know you both are doctors in your field. And I thought they're so everyday, ordinary, gentle, and kind, compassionate people. How can this be? And in my mind, probably because I'd never met people like yourselves, I just assumed that they'd be aloof and distant.

For many students, engagement with academic staff usually occurs within 'course spaces', be that scheduled teaching times or consultation times; however, these interrupted learners quickly recognised the value of access to academic staff in the spaces between courses. One student illustrated this when she commented:

> And with [the program], I suppose the thing that's been most important for me to succeed this time around is that I'm having more sort of face-to-face with lecturers and finding out that there's not a problem asking for extensions or asking for help or acknowledging that, yes, there may be things in my past that are affecting my study, and probably are still going to be hurdles, and they sort of help me find other ways around it or over it. So it helps me this time to succeed and finish the course. And you don't feel belittled or that you're being judged, they just find a way to help you. And I think also being older too, you haven't got that fear of asking, that's what I find.

As some of the other students observed, the new students – or novices – did not only learn from the experts. They also learned from each other and they recognised that there was the potential for academic staff – the experts – to learn from them:

> 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 … we've shared out concerns and then hopefully it's a place that those concerns are noticed and then the course or whatever will be changed for the better for future students. I think that's a key point.

Consistently emerging from the interviews was the notion of learning the 'right' ways of operating within the Discourse, and the function of both academic staff and peer 'experts' in guiding and scaffolding. In one interview, it was pointed out that students' interpretations of assessment task were not always the 'right' ones. For one student, the academic perspective seemed quite different from the student perspective:

> Quite often my interpretation of the assignment requirements has been way off and I've gone barreling down that way because that's my interpretation, and I think that's the right one and it's proved to be incorrect. So taking it to the [first year program], you get maybe the academic perspective of it as opposed to the student perspective of it.

This same student was concerned about overstepping academic boundaries such as knowing when collaboration might be considered collusion and academic misconduct. As noted previously, this student referred to such issues as the "rules of engagement" and found the program afforded her the opportunity to explore these academic conventions:

> I think for me working out the rules of engagement … finding out exactly what it is about assignments that the markers require. I've used [the program] for that purpose because at times it feels like there's a bit of a hidden agenda or you're not quite sure about the

> working or you just have no idea about what on earth it is that you're required to do.

Developing a meta-awareness

Several of the students commented that, because they were older than the school-leavers who enrolled at university, they had more life experiences to bring to their study in higher education. In the words of one student, the fact that they had "lived a bit of life" allowed them to bring some "reality perspectives" to their study. However, this student also talked about the difficulties when their perspectives "don't match with academic perspectives."

For many of the interrupted students, there sometimes seemed to be a tension between the broad knowledge base that they brought to university and the specific requirements of the study they were doing. In the case of technological skills, many of the students recognised that this was an area that required considerable effort in order to be proficient enough to operate within the university context. In relation to assessment, several students commented on the hidden agenda that sometimes eluded them. As noted in an earlier section of this paper, one of the students discussed the difficulties of working out "the rules of engagement" and knowing exactly what was required in, for example, a piece of assessment.

Several students recognised, however, that knowing "what we don't know" is important in trying to deal with such issues. As one student stated: "I think as mature age students we are a bit more able to identify what we don't know and therefore we seek that information proactively." Nevertheless, not all students agreed. Some had found that, at the beginning of their university study, they did not always know the questions to ask and that their growing ability to know what to ask was part of their learning to 'be' a university student. As Lundell and Collins (1999) had noted, learning tends to be easier when the learner comes "to know better what it is that he already knows on related matters" (p. 16).

Critical framing

Lundell and Collins (1999) note the importance of students being able to critique Discourses, to identify "the limits of both the old and new Discourses" and to recognise "the potential each Discourse has in their domains of strength" (p. 17). This critical framing is what The New London Group (1996) identified as the ability for students to "denaturalize and make strange again what they have learned and mastered" (p. 86).

As discussed earlier, many students were able to recognise the challenges and barriers to success emerging from within the newer 'university student' Discourse, but also from their already established Discourses. Some students discussed how the primary and other Discourses 'invaded' their study, and in some cases became instruments of 'self-sabotage'. Through the process of critical framing, most of the students were able to identify their limits and strengths across the Discourses. One student identified the need for a role reversal between her primary and 'university student' Discourses:

> Cause I'm always the one dealing out the help at home. I'm always the one they come to, to answer all the questions. And then all of a sudden it was flipped and I had to do it. I'm out of my comfort zone but it was more the fact that there was somewhere to go.

Transformed practice

It was evident throughout the students' interviews that they believed that they were well on the way to having achieved transformed practice. In Kalantzis and Cope's (2005) extension of this notion from The New London Group (1996), transformed practice is described as students' demonstrations of being able to apply knowledge appropriately in typical situations as well as being able to transfer knowledge to new situations. For the interrupted students who participated in this research, there was considerable evidence that they believed that the first year program had been instrumental in helping them to transform their study practices and their capacity to operate within the 'new' context of university. One of the students talked about their learning as the "things that we've already sort of graduated through" and how they had been able to assist students who enrolled mid-year to cope with the transition into university study.

Students also recognised the value of the program's approach in developing the social and academic skills required for the Discourse of their future professional lives

> And I suppose the other thing that I like from it too is I suppose sort of the [program] teaches us too that 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 … So I find that's a really interesting point of [the program] as well.

It seemed, then, that for some students the first year program had transformed their "ways of being, knowing and doing" university (Gee, 1996), as well as having a positive impact on their developing professional identities. Although this was an unexpected outcome of the program, it offered further evidence of the benefits of the program from the students' perspectives.

Conclusion

Understandings of interrupted or mature learners' ways of engaging with the Discourse of university student are imperative to redressing falling retention and progression rates across tertiary institutions. What is apparent from this study is that, for many of the students, their perceptions of 'belonging' are often compromised. It seemed to be the marriage of academic and social support in this first year program that challenged students to 'think otherwise' and to shift their image to one of 'successful learner'. The just-in-time supports that were offered helped the students to develop sustainable and transferrable practices that allowed them to negotiate university study, particularly in relation to the barriers to study that the students identified.

In examining what students said about the program – in terms of the features described by Lundell and Collins (1999) – it was evident that the Learning Circle approach enabled students to learn 'how to be' university students. Opportunities to engage in situated practice and to examine their Discourses in critical and reflective ways helped students to develop specific knowledges and meta-awareness of what they were required to do – and 'be' – within the higher education context. The first year program was not a transmission model, whereby expert academics taught novice students how to study or how to be successful students. Rather it fostered students' engagement in learning, problem-solving and critical reflection, focusing on issues that the students regarded as important and working through responsive and just-in-time interventions.

By operating in the spaces between the courses in which the students were enrolled, the approach offers a different way of thinking about learning, the provision of student support, and universities' efforts to improve student retention and progression. Additionally, there was evidence, in what the students said, that the program not only improved their experiences of the first year transition, but it also enhanced their student learning journey towards their future profession.

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