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Engaging youth through self-reflective digital narratives: a Career Development initiative within a Tertiary Preparation program

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Widening participation of our nation's disadvantaged students has been a clear focus of Australian institutions since recommendations from the Review of Australian Higher Education, known as the Bradley Review, were implemented. Our own success in achieving funding through the Commonwealth Government Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) meant we were able to expand our already long running Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) to Year 12 school leavers and offer it in an intensive mode. The TPP Intensive is aimed at offering Year 12 school leavers an alternative pathway to university programs whilst also giving them exposure to tertiary study to assist them with future decision making relating to their careers. The first offering of this intensive TPP for Year 12 school leavers gave us the chance to review how our program assists this cohort of students successfully transition into undergraduate programs.

The target students for this program are those from LSES and/or rural and remote areas. The program includes free tuition as well as accommodation and meals for students who need to live on campus for the intensive blocks of study. The students attend two by two week blocks of intensive on-campus workshops and continue to study in between these intensive blocks as online students.

After the first offering of the TPPIP it became evident that the students would benefit from engaging further in their own career development, and reflecting on and creating their new

identities. Many of these students were the first in their family to attend university and lacked the necessary social supports to assist their transition. Due to resource issues, it is impossible to give each of the 50 or so students a one-on-one counselling session and follow-up with further sessions. In the second offering of this program we made use of the workshop time to deliver lessons on career development and get the students to complete workbook exercises that would assist them in preparing an assessment piece using a digital narrative. A combination of postmodern career theories which include narrative, contextual and constructivist approaches, (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009) were utilized as the basis for the CDL program, along with the implementation of an innovative assessment piece using digital narratives for the students to complete.

Using the critical ingredients identified by Brown & Ryan Krane (2000), the program included a number of career interventions including a workbook and written exercises, individualised interpretations and feedback, world of work information, modelling and attention to building support. The career development classes were broken down into four two-hour sessions conducted over the two intensive blocks of study. A final one and a half hour session was delivered as a seminar whereby the students were introduced to other services that exist within the university such as Student Services, Career Development Services, Health and Welfare and Scholarships.

Applying a constructivist approach, the students were initially introduced to the program through classroom activities which focused on establishing what influences in their life had impacted on them as individuals. The systems theory framework (STF) (Patton & McMahon, 2006) was used as the overarching framework to introduce the students to the notion of what factors are considered in career development. In addition they were required to complete the Career Interest Inventory on the My Future website (www.myfuture.edu.au) which introduced the students to further information regarding potential occupations they may wish to explore. Sessions were then extended to career decision-making based on the Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) approach (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson & Lenz, 2004) to assist them in gaining the skills to understand and make effective career decisions.

These young adolescents who have already formed identities influenced by their society and environment are being exposed to a completely different set of circumstances and so too will their identity adapt to these new environments and social groups. Through this transformational stage that our students were progressing, from Year 12 student, to pre-tertiary student with new found independence they could also be seen creating their new identity. Making meaning out of their stories becomes part of their self-reflection where they can identify relevant themes and important events that shape their identity and help them to imagine their futures.

To engage this group of students in a narrative which would form their career development assessment piece and be an efficient way for the Career Development Practitioner to connect with and assist the students, it was decided to allow them to use a digital storytelling approach. "Digital storytelling (DST) is a multimodal approach that brings the ancient art of telling stories to life using technology" (Flottemesch, 2013, p.54). The process of digital storytelling gives the students the opportunity to apply their knowledge to the topic (self) and become engaged in their own learning. Since narrative can be seen as an authentic, digital-age pedagogical strategy for diverse learners (Rose, Meyer & Hitchcock, 2005 as cited in Flottemesch, 2013) it applied well to our group of students. Digital storytelling also gives the students a medium to express themselves not only in words but with their own voices which then fosters their sense of individuality and owning their creations. This can assist with imagining better futures - expressing who they are and aspire to be (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007).

To complete the digital narrative, the students were required to produce a three to five minute digital story employing still images with voice over audio or narration to self-reflect on their school experiences to date, influences on their decisions, their skills, abilities, interests and aspirations. Students attended workshops in the iMac labs where they were introduced to the Final Cut 10 editing software they were required to use for their digital narrative production. To protect their privacy and to further facilitate creative self-reflection, participants were instructed to use visual metaphors rather than literal representations of self, presenting all images from the first-person point of view.

Common themes presented in digital narratives

Some common themes emerged from the students' digital narratives whereby the students recorded

being affected by bullying and felt a sense of alienation from their school culture. In addition, there were stories of family dysfunction and ill health which may have had a bearing on their secondary school academic performance and subsequently their preparedness for higher education:

Life as a high school student was some of the worst years of my life I have experienced. Though I was bullied it changed my mind for my future. It made me think long and hard about my future.

I had trouble being bullied at primary school by someone I thought was my friend... high school was a hard transition for me. I found it really hard to fit in.

I had always found it hard to feel comfortable at school. I've never had much confidence and I've never really been someone to socialise.

For our rural and low socio-economic students, digital storytelling was an important part of validating their personal and emotional perspectives, their struggles and aspirations.

In open-ended responses evaluating the Digital Storytelling task 2013 TPPIP students commented:

I really enjoyed writing about myself and then putting together a movie about myself.

The writing of my story in digital narrative helped me understand where I want to go.

The students' digital narratives were assessed by a qualified career development practitioner with students given feedback in relation to the themes that had been displayed in their narratives, their potential strengths and information and links to explore regarding future pathways.

In addition to developing the students' career management skills, they also gain the benefits of developing digital literacy skills. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been digitally excluded and this can help them to become digitally included. From the students surveyed there was a noticeable difference in the confidence level of using the editing software from beginning to end. Survey data collected from this

group of students showed that 74% of students had not completed a digital self-reflective task similar to this in the past, 87% of respondents indicated they enjoyed completing the digital narrative task, and overwhelmingly 75% of students indicated that their digital literacy skills had improved since commencing the TPPIP.

Summary

The outcome of adding digital narratives to the CDL component of the TPPIP has been mostly successful with increased opportunities for students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds to develop their career competencies, enabling them to create positive and empowered new identities, aspire to and transition through further education, and work toward meaningful futures. The students were proud of the self-reflective video clips that they had made of their current, future and ideal 'selves'. It appears that the digital narrative was an efficient addition to a career development learning program focused on adolescents from rural and/or LSES backgrounds.

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