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Beyond curriculum reform: Embedding the transition experience

Sally Kift

Queensland University of Technology, Australia
s.kift@qut.edu.au

Karen Nelson

Queensland University of Technology, Australia
kj.nelson@qut.edu.au

***Abstract:** Successfully managing the process of transition into university involves acknowledging that students in all their diversity come to us to learn and that we are responsible not just to keep them, but for creating environments where active learning can take place. Curriculum renewal embracing these aspects underpinned by a constructivist philosophy provides only one part of a successful approach to transition. The second part is to establish coordinated, curriculum - mediated transition practices across the administrative and academic areas of the university so that students successfully engage with their learning experience. Based on an enabling strategic infrastructure and extensive curriculum renewal, this paper describes a program that seeks to embed transition practices systematically across a large university.*

***Keywords:** transition pedagogy, curriculum renewal, embedded institutional change*

Introduction

Designing coherent, cumulative units to engage students in their learning experience is a fundamental tenet of transition¹ pedagogy. Incorporating this principle into individual course and curriculum design provides further opportunity to scaffold specific discipline knowledge and generic skills vertically and horizontally throughout a discrete program of study. Initiatives of this type aim to support learning through engagement and providing environments that humanise the learning experience (Ramsden, 1992), but they are not designed to effect large scale institutional change. Nor does work for continual curriculum enhancement (through design and redesign) necessarily take account of the dramatically changing patterns of student engagement and the new learning environments in which modern learners should be immersed as preparation for their graduation as globally portable employees with the knowledge, skills and values needed to practice effectively in today's dynamic work environments. The latter two considerations in particular invite a wholesale rethinking of transition pedagogical approaches in a conceptual framework of foundation curriculum "renewal" that explicitly addresses fundamental issues around knowing who are students are and how the relationship between those students' learning and the formal and informal curriculum might be enhanced to ensure successful and significant learning outcomes. Such considerations push facilitators of learning environments way beyond tinkering with curriculum design.

However, for transition to be truly successful, curriculum renewal that engages new learners in their learning (QUT 2002a) must be embedded, integrated and coordinated with institutional practices that support those learners through (for example) timely service provision (QUT 2002b) and the inculcation of a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experience. (QUT 2002c). The overall objective is to ensure that the day-to-day transactions between learners and the various aspects of their learning are seamless (particularly in those crucial first few days, weeks and months of the first year), so they can focus energy on learning.

We can say then that successful transition has two goals. The first milestone will be achieved when transition pedagogy is embedded in course design and renewal so that “what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is assessed” (James 2002, p.81) and the linkages between those three facets in the unit and course design are made explicit to students in learning environments that take account of the contemporary realities of our students’ higher education context. The second goal involves cultural and systemic change in our teaching institutions. It is an ambitious goal that will only be met when all student facing activities performed by academic, administrative and support programs are fully coordinated, aligned with student needs and integrated into the curriculum as much as possible. As McInnis (2003, p.13) puts it “bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs [is] a substantial challenge for many universities.”

This paper describes a current program that aspires to provide the foundation for a sustainable, integrated, coordinated, institution-wide approach to managing transition that will enable this second target to be reached. The program is underpinned by extensive unit, course and curriculum renewal within two discipline areas to attain the first milestone, and acknowledgement at a strategic institutional level of the criticality and value of managing transition holistically.

To contextualise the description of our program and its guiding principles, we commence by summarising existing research that motivates this area of study, including the theoretical framework we have adopted for this research. Then we outline elements of the strategic infrastructure that enable our program followed by a description of the principles driving curriculum renewal using examples to exemplify unit and course renewal initiatives.

The new contemporary learner

Commencing students are highly diverse, in terms of both demographics and preparedness for tertiary study. Figure 1 highlights the extent of the diversity of present-day commencing students in our massified higher education sector. Whether undergraduate or postgraduate, they arrive at university with baggage and expectations as well as varied levels of preparation and doubts about university life. Not surprisingly, many new students are either not overly familiar or have completely ill-informed preconceptions with what might be encountered in the course of their choice (James, 2001). These factors may impact on their ability to achieve to their best or may ultimately influence their decision to drop out (Sharma & Burgess, 1994; McInnis & James, 1995; Spalding, 1998; McLean et al, 1999; Pargetter et al, 1999; TEPA Report, 2000; Elliott, 2002).

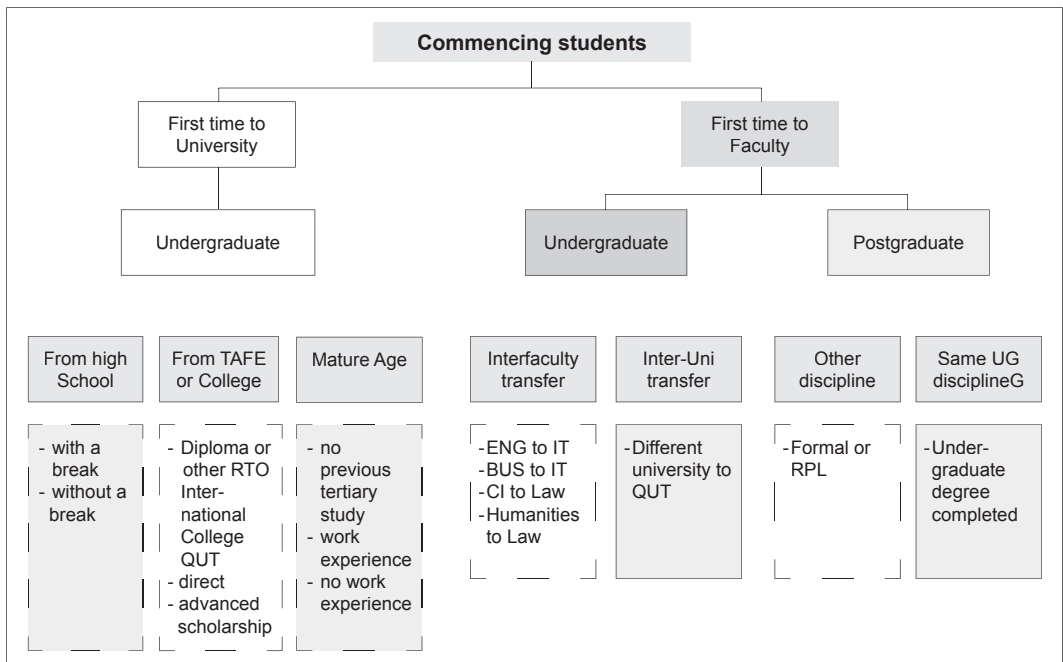


Figure 1: Diversity of commencing students

In adjusting to the requirements of University learning, students face a plethora of demands that are unique to the student-in-transition experience (Kift, 2003). For example, within the space of a few months they must finalise their course choices, decide which pre-entry seminars and courses to attend, participate in university and faculty orientation sessions, select or be allocated to specific units, manage timetables, begin classes and assimilate unit and assessment requirements, as well as adjust to their new discipline of study. These academic needs are compounded by additional adjustments they commonly make in attending University such as leaving families or familiar supportive environments, finding new accommodation, balancing full-time or finding new part-time work, making new friends and establishing new networks.

These challenges accompanied by contemporary patterns of student engagement and other factors militate against the development of a “student identity ... without intervention as might have been the case when small numbers of students studied and played their way through courses together” (McInnis et al 2000). Other environmental, social and cognitive factors combine in a catalytic atmosphere to affect students’ abilities to engage in the learning process; these are well documented (for example see Kuh & Vesper, 1997, McInnis, 2001) and include:

- Dealing with conflicting priorities (paid employment and family responsibilities, McInnis & Hartley, 2002).
- Motivation to attend university is “external” (e.g., parental wishes: see McInnis & James, 1995; Pargetter et al, 1999);
- Uncertainty about their choice of course (McInnis et al, 2000; James, 2002);
- Not the course or institution of their first choice, including when they seek to improve their tertiary entrance score (McInnis et al, 2000);
- Advanced technology delivers flexible online learning and decreases time spent on campus and/or where students coming on campus solely for classes have greater difficulty forming peer and study

- groups; these technologies may also effectively buffer personal contact between teacher and learner;
- Large classes, high staff-student ratios and increasing casualisation make informal interaction between staff and students more difficult (Clark & Ramsey, 1990; Kift, 2003);
- Peer interaction in the learning community (in terms of both its nature and extent) is absent or minimal (Tinto, 1993; Krause et al, 2002)
- The quality of teaching staff in the first year, which is deemed critical to student engagement (Clark & Ramsey, 1990; McInnis & James, 1995), is not guaranteed; and
- Information overload early in the transition process increases the sense of disassociation and alienation.

While early access to support services helps students cope and minimises the likelihood of dissatisfaction and withdrawal from university (Clark & Ramsay, 1990; Promnitz & Germain, 1996; Darlaston-Jones et al, 2001), it is how commencing students meet these challenges and adopt positive learning skills that shapes their entire learning experience (Pargetter et al, 1999; Huon & Sankey, 2002; Hattie et al.1996). The aim therefore is to create learning environments that allow students to make sense of their learning (in the constructivist way). Duffy & Cunningham (1996, p.171 cited in Laurillard, 2002, p.67) recently reduced current views of constructivism to two simple but common conceptions that are of use in focusing learning and teaching approaches:

1. Learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge.
2. Instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge.

Extrapolating then, it seems essential to situate both the coordination and integration of institutional practices and course & curriculum design that embrace transition pedagogy within a constructivist view. Realistically however, changing long serving institutional practices and curriculum renewal are both dependent on the presence of a supportive strategic infrastructure that makes visible the institution's intent for transition, and makes available student services resources, staff development, and technologies to support departmental and academic initiatives. The strategic infrastructure at our institution is now described.

Our enabling infrastructure

Strategically, our institution has explicit statements that articulate the tone of and intent for transition. These artefacts (“institutional plan and four strategic plans”) encapsulate the University's long term commitment to “delivering a high quality and innovative learning environment to students.”. Significantly for our program; the first objective in the university's learning and teaching plan is to “provide high quality learning environments and experiences to foster and support effective student learning”. This objective recognises that excellent learning outcomes are highly dependent on a student centred approach and a supportive learning environment, and effectively aligns the learning and teaching plan with a constructivist view of learning. Faculty and divisional plans address and operationalise the strategic plans, providing a forum for action.

These strategic elements form the basis of a transition or first year philosophy that has been enacted at our university based on two beliefs (QUT 2002a): namely that –

1. *Students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to have a successful university experience.* While the “informal curriculum” of social and community interactions and external commitments such as work and family need to be acknowledged, incorporated and supported, it is within the formal or academic curriculum that students must find their places, be inspired and excited, and work towards mastery of their chosen area to the best of their ability. Tinto has said (2002, p.4):

The more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate. This is particularly true for more able and motivated students who seek out learning and are, in turn, more likely to respond to perceived shortcomings in the quality of learning they experience on campus. *Lest we forget the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated.* In the final analysis, student learning drives student retention. [Emphasis added]

2. Students in their first year have special learning needs arising from the social and academic transition they are experiencing. From multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners and the first-year curriculum must help get them there.

Our institution has already made substantial investments in implementing this philosophy. A first year program officer coordinates and advises faculties and divisions about appropriate activities and initiatives. Importantly three papers have been produced in a cross-institutional faculty and divisional effort to raise awareness of the challenges and issues faced by transitioning students. These papers (QUT 2002a; 2002b; 2006c) identify three areas as the foci of attention and resources: engaging with learning, a sense of belonging, and timely access to support services.

Divisions supporting student learning environments are actively involved in the third of these focal areas. Current activities include: counselling and support services, establishing a teaching capabilities framework, on-line learning and teaching resources, release of electronic student portfolio, criterion referenced assessment, and professional development for academic and professional staff, to name a few. Once these are fully integrated and aligned with curriculum needs (as implied by goal two above), these resources become part of a holistic approach to transition.

The presence of these strategic elements demonstrates the university is committed to advancing positive learning experiences during the transition period. Our program (worth \$656,000 over three years in cash and in-kind) funded by the university's teaching and learning large grant's scheme and our faculties and schools, exemplifies this commitment.

If we take the principle of engaging students as learners seriously, and move to tailoring the rest of their engagement around that ideal (given that, in all of their diversity, the most obvious thing all students have in common is that they come to us to learn), then curriculum renewal is the key.

This activity is largely the responsibility of academic staff within faculties tasked with first year teaching and course design responsibilities. Considerable (and at times radical) changes have been made to the first year curricula in our faculties. The principles driving these changes are discussed below and illustrated with examples used in their implementations.

Embedding transition pedagogy

The conceptualisation of a customised first year which is logical, sequenced and integrated in its own right and which also provides the necessary scaffolding, both in and outside the classroom, to assist students in transition adjust to a more independent style of learning, would seem to be the obvious way in which to inspire, excite and motivate new students. James, (2002, pp.78-79) refers to the "overall coherence of the curriculum". Meyers et al (2004, p.2) refer to "cumulatively [developing] students' higher-order thinking and academic skills necessary for understanding and later personal and professional lives" and a "careful sequencing of curriculum" to produce educationally valuable academic outcomes. The first year curriculum should then form a coherent foundation for ongoing learning engagement. Furthermore, the potential for enthusiastic engagement in the curricula should be harnessed in the critical first days of the first weeks of the first year, thereby promoting a sense of belonging, so often missing for the contemporary learner.

In designing for holistic curriculum renewal with an eye to enhancing student engagement, there are certain broad principles which might be usefully articulated by way of guiding philosophy. These curriculum design principles are desirable aspects of facilitating a shift from passive to active (engaged, more time-on-task) learning and also lend themselves to encouraging the design of authentic learning environments, experiences and assessments (similar to that which students would do in genuine work or life situations).

The principles stated below incorporate many of the basics identified by us earlier in this paper. In our institution, principles 1-5 have been largely addressed through curricula renewal activities in faculty units and courses. These principles are illustrated by examples from our experiences and address the first goal articulated in this paper. Principle 6 however, cannot be achieved through curriculum renewal alone. The fulfilment of this principle is the goal of our program, which is discussed in the next section. The six principles are:

1. *The renewal focus should emphasise the creation of engaging learning environments that require students to make personal meaning of their learning context in the constructivist way.*

New learning environments acknowledge that professional practice does not occur in within discrete discipline boundaries by providing authentic tasks that student can identify with and make sense of because they are relevant to destination workplaces. Two units are jointly taught using an interlaced, multi-threaded inter-discipline model providing a robust design that approaches workplace reality.

2. *Take a longer term and agenda-setting (conceptually – curriculum renewal, as set out in the Introduction, rather than tinkering, piecemeal or consumerist reactive) view of constructive alignment of the curriculum for our students' cumulative benefit, even though it may uncomfortably challenge students' preconceptions of what it is they have undertaken.*

Both faculties have renewed their first year curricula to align with students needs. One faculty has already completed, while the second is now undertaking, further renewal of its undergraduate program to integrate the learning and teaching philosophy and practical approaches successfully implemented in first year units into all the core units that students will encounter throughout their three or four year course of study. Initially students were confronted by a curriculum that emphasised generic skill building in what was thought to be a more technical discipline. Refinements made to the design and related materials to align better with student needs (based on their experiences and with their input) were accompanied by decreased levels of student anxiety.

3. *Curriculum reform should be informed by the contemporary realities of the higher education context, such as –*

- *knowledge of who our students are (as discussed earlier);*
- *understanding of students' fears, preconceptions, and likely stressors (also above);*
- *acceptance (rather than disregard) of their multiple roles and quite reasonable desire for workplace preparedness (which correlate with employers' expectations); and*

The curriculum should be tailored around these matters first, to ease their transition to tertiary study and secondly, to support both their professional development and capacity for lifelong learning. In many ways, the requirements of transition and lifelong learning are synonymous.

Our discipline areas deal with large classes (in the realm of 500+ students each year) and in one case over two campuses. Diversity is acknowledged by using non-exclusive language; (e.g. practise new or refine existing skills) and by using projects that students can tailor to a context familiar to them whatever their background, as vehicles for learning. Adopting small class teaching models

(25 students per tutor and tutor as mentor) and providing extended contact time helps break down barriers between tutor and learner. Class time is used to explore or practise theory or principles already introduced and these activities form the “building blocks” of assessment items. Regular emails are sent to students that raise or address issues they may have encountered and seek to normalise concerns (Kift, 2004).

Quick feedback on early assessment items and actively monitoring individual attendance and participation are used to detect possible disengagements. All occurrences are followed up by the tutor and the unit coordinator actively intervenes as soon as possible if necessary. Class time is set aside to provide formative feedback and allow time for the development of all assessment items in consultation with tutors and teaching team members. Expectations, including professional behaviours, are clearly articulated using performance standards and models. Tutors actively get to know their students in the first weeks. Peer mentoring programs provide opportunities for students to raise fears or learning problems in a supportive environment. These practices enact Tinto’s exhortation (n.d p.9) for “intrusive monitoring and assessment of student academic progress that enable[s intervention] early, rather than later, in the student career...and [are] structured as so at provide feedback to students on a continuing basis early in the first year”.

Workplace relevance of the curriculum is emphasised by industry speakers who come in to discuss relevant skills and experience at various points through the semester. In two units the entire design is revolves around a small but authentic real-world project, and the students engage in teams to produce the outputs typical of a workplace project of the type.

4. *Individual units should be designed to produce cumulative benefits in terms of skills or graduate capabilities development.*

For example, in a first semester unit students are introduced to graduate capabilities in the areas of oral and written communication, team dynamics and conflict resolution. Models and strategies are used to articulate performance standards and support students learning during this introductory period. For example, the scaffold supporting skill development in professional written communication is gradually withdrawn (first templates, then guidelines, and then open specifications for content). In a subsequent unit students are expected to leverage the skills and knowledge previously gained to reach more advanced levels of performance, such as working in high performance teams and extemporaneous presentations.

5. *The curriculum, in both course and unit design, should deliver learning environments and other opportunities that emphasise the development of reflective, independent, lifelong and self-managing learners: learners should be routinely encouraged to reflect upon their personal and professional growth and transformation in terms of knowledge, skills and values acquired and refined, particularly on the basis on feedback received.*

Units have been introduced that require students to critically reflect on the material they have encountered and their experiences using journals and written skills portfolios. Students are requested to make sense of curriculum items in terms of professional practices or discipline expectations. By submitting exemplars of their work accompanied by descriptive passages, students are able to make explicit the skills and knowledge that they have acquired that is embedded in these products. The student e-portfolio project is a university initiative that will enable these reflections to be maintained by the student throughout and beyond their university career. Students will be able to make available, in tailored form, the contents of their e-portfolio to different audiences.

6. *Finally, the challenge is to reconceptualise course delivery in terms of a holistic approach to fostering student engagement by bringing together the academic, administrative and other support programs available under the organising device of the curriculum.*

The goal of our program to provide an institutional-wide framework that enables transition to be integrated and coordinated, mediated by curriculum initiatives and aligned with students needs. It should enable all transactions between learners and the institution make sense in terms of the students' engagement with learning; and when students' need, provide access to and resources from appropriate and relevant professional and administrative support areas.

Principles 1-5 have guided our thinking and enactment of a student-centred transition pedagogy to date and have served us (and our students) well in our individual Faculty efforts. However, as intimated under the sixth principle, as our curriculum mediation of transition has matured, our two Faculties have been inexorably led to the same conclusion: that the learning and success of students in transition must be a shared responsibility of all areas of the university – academic and professional, student services and environmental support – and, while much can be achieved by faculties formally and informally through the curriculum, embedded institutional change is dependent on the creation of organisational structures (Swing, 2003). This is the challenge of and opportunity provided by our current program of change, which is now described.

Enhancing transition: an ambitious program of change

The purpose of our program is to address the needs of students in transition at our institution in a comprehensive way. It is underpinned by and builds upon Principles 1-5 articulated above, emphasising the links between improved student engagement with the learning environment and positive learning outcomes leading to enhanced academic skills and increased capacity for success at university and beyond.

We will pilot, develop and communicate a university-wide sustainable, integrated, coordinated, curriculum-mediated transition framework. Reflecting the constructivist view, we will harness action research to deliver immediate outcomes for the faculties and incrementally positive impacts on students' learning, while at the same time learning from and evaluating initiatives as they are implemented. This research methodology allows the team to learn from previous and current interventions in its bid to deliver an effective, practical framework for student engagement. The program has three major projects that will be addressed simultaneously, these are: (A) mapping of current activities – including sources of data and resources² in all faculties and divisions; (B) identifying & trialling of new initiatives and tools in different faculties; (C) constructing the institutional framework in consultation with all stakeholders and developing a usable practical staff development program.

An institutional-wide focus is already well established with programs being driven by a core team consisting of us and key personnel from the major divisional areas that have contact with students in transition. This structure provides links to current and planned faculty and divisional initiatives (e.g. the curriculum renewal and e-portfolio projects described earlier) and importantly allows us to draw upon the knowledge and expertise arising from these projects so that the initiatives become part of the holistic transition framework.

Annual progress in the three projects (iteratively through the action research cycles) will have the following focal guidelines.

- Year 1: Project planning –the identification and collection of existing resources, information and strategies throughout the university; the collation, organisation, evaluation and gap identification

of transition tools related to student transition needs; identification of students' communication preferences from existing survey work; and planning an optimal transition program to include orientation and the timely delivery of relevant learning activities and tools to students which will be driven through the curriculum context.

- Year 2: Piloting transition tools & draft framework elements in two faculties - the practical testing, refinement and timely delivery to students, by their preferred communication modes, of transition tools (existing and freshly developed where gaps exist) together with ongoing refinement and evaluation of the working framework in consultation with all stakeholders. Staff development needs and requirements will be identified and consolidated.
- Year 3: Developing and communicating the framework – sharing of the tested, refined framework across the university. A range of strategies (notably staff development) will be employed to effectively transfer and embed the framework throughout the institution. These strategies will be determined during Years 1 and 2.

Ethics approval has been sought to directly involve approximately 4,000 students in twelve units in three schools and two faculties together with the academic staff associated with these units. As well as the representatives on the core team, the programs will also involve professional staff from key divisions and professional areas.

Summary

Although considerable inroads have been made, we know this project is ambitious. It involves long term change in terms of culture, ownership and practices and we have been warned that embedding institutional changes for transition may take as long as ten years to effect (Swing, 2003). However, we believe our institution is well positioned to advance closer to this goal. The fundamental elements of a strategic infrastructure and a focus on (and willingness to undertake) holistic curriculum renewal exist, as does evidence of divisional and faculty initiatives focused on enhanced transition practice. As illustrated above, considerable progress has been made in curriculum renewal (to engage students in learning), in faculty and divisional initiatives that demonstrate institutional commitment to students to enhance a sense of belonging both on campus and off-campus (e.g. tailored orientation activities, peer mentoring, electronic access points and targeted email communications), and in access to extensive professional services to provide timely access to support (e.g. from counselling to information literacy and academic skills training).

Using these elements and by leveraging the existing goodwill and well-established networks, and by adopting a rigorously open-minded approach to the project that keeps all stakeholders informed (and on-side), we are sure to make progress. Any success achieved is not for our benefit but to enhance the experience of our students in transition so that they are well equipped both for their learning journey with us and for their life-long learning when they leave us prepared for the world of work. The goal of an institution-wide framework to enable transition is no less that a responsibility we owe our students collectively and individually. Whether we are teachers, administrators, support staff or professional staff, working together we have a great capacity to transform (or not) the student experience by mediating our students' navigation of the academic, administrative and support aspects of their learning engagement, beyond curriculum reform, proactively, to enable transition.

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Notes

¹. In this project, "transition" consists of four nominal periods representing a continuum of student needs: These periods are: (1) acceptance of offer to enrolment, (2) orientation to weeks 2&3, (3) semester 1 including final exams, and (4) semester 2 through to the beginning of year 2. In reality, preparation for transition begins in high school and includes student counselling, decision-making about future directions, course preferences, etc; activities over which we have little direct influence. Transition may also extend into year 2 for students who repeat subjects or who reduce their workload to manage work or personal circumstances. Importantly, the framework resulting from this project will scaffold activities along the continuum of transition needs to ensure appropriate & relevant use.

². The resources, information, and strategies referred to in this application include: divisional services, resources advisers & counsellors, corporate systems, data, information & technology, faculty-based initiatives programs, activities & roles, etc that are generally referred to as transition tools for the purposes of this project.

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