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Facilitating students' critical transition capabilities in a first year nursing course

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Abstract: From the moment they participate in higher education nursing students undergo a number of transitions which are critical in terms of their capabilities to persevere at university. Their first year experience includes the processes of becoming familiar with, mastering and demonstrating mainstream university literacies. These include academic literacy and numeracy, communication and information literacies as well as personal, cultural and social literacies, such as reflective practice and critical self awareness. Apart from these transitions nursing students are also required to master discipline specific nursing culture with its various, and at times inconsistent, clinical, theoretical and research literacies. Nursing students' abilities to develop critical transition capabilities are therefore crucial if they are to persist and be effective, at university and beyond. This paper prioritises three key transition capabilities that nursing students can apply in undergraduate contexts – reflective, socio-cultural and critical practice – and discusses how they are prioritised and developed in a first year nursing course. The approach is underpinned by critical discourse, constructivist and cross cultural theoretical perspectives. The paper also reports the findings of a pilot study evaluating the approach's effectiveness in assisting students to develop and apply these critical transition capabilities.

Keywords: critical transition practices, critical perspectives, cross cultural communication

Introduction

This paper integrates research and theoretical perspectives exploring university transition and incorporates the insights gained to the learning/teaching pedagogy of a first year nursing course, *Communication: Key Concepts* (*Nursing*) (CMS1007). The paper first reviews transition literature to highlight the critical relationships between institutional and pedagogical policies/practices and students' perceptions. Critical discourse theory and constructivism are then consulted to inform these processes, along with cross-cultural theory. These theories underpin CMS1007 initiatives facilitating students' transition, both by informing curriculum design and by implementing strategies to assist students to develop three key transition practices. The paper also documents evaluative measures used, including the findings of a research project, Student Evaluation of Teachers Surveys (SETS) and course results.

The course

CMS1007 is an on-campus course that collaborates with two concurrent courses *Psychosocial Foundations of Nursing* (NUR1020) and *Introductory Nursing* (NUR2010) in the Bachelor of Nursing Program. CMS1007 incorporates a student-centred, facilitative-interactive learning pedagogy. The assessment is formative and summative (an article review/critique; a proposal/draft for a NUR1020 essay; and an essay analysing the critical impacts of culture).

Course evaluations

The research objective was to investigate how effective CMS1007 is in assisting students to demonstrate key university/nursing literacies and in facilitating students' development/ application of three critical transition practices. At the end of semester 2, students (n = 139) were surveyed by email and asked to provide open-ended feedback regarding the course's effectiveness in increasing their application of critical transition capabilities. The data was analysed using a thick layered approach (Martin-McDonald, 2000).

Research perspectives and course development

Whereas earlier transition research concentrated on barriers (Yorke, 2000) more recent research has acknowledged its complexity: that social and personal as well as academic transitions are involved (McInnis, 2003; Tinto, 2005). Tinto (2005) investigates the interactions between students and other individuals in the university community and how students' interpretations of these contacts affect their transition to the institution. A second theme investigates whether student outcomes can be improved when institutions adapt their cultures to meet their students' needs (Burton and Dowling, 2005). One strand argues that transition is influenced by students' perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued and accommodated and how differences between their cultures of origin and immersion are bridged (Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2003). Another strand prioritises institutional values and actions and the ways in which these not only create learning climates that affect learning but also adapt to the challenges posed by student diversity (Braxton and Hirschy, 2005).

CMS1007 integrates these understandings by recognising that there are inter-relationships between students and institutional and pedagogical factors which are critical in students' transitions. CMS1007 also appreciates that students' perceptions of these relationships are reflections of how well their cultural attributes are valued/accommodated and how well any differences between these and the university culture are addressed/bridged. To further inform these relationships CMS1007 draws on the theoretical perspectives of critical discourse theory (CDT) and constructivism.

Theoretical perspectives and course development

This section reviews CDT and constructivism and applies them to CMS1007 course design.

Critical discourse theory
CDT contributes three main insights. First CDT highlights the role played by discourses in HE. Luke (1999, p.67) argues that if the primacy of discourse is acknowledged then mastery of discourse can be seen to constitute a principal educational process and outcome. Transition is thus re-conceptualised as the processes of mastering key university discourses. CMS1007 integrates this understanding with its goal to facilitate students' engagement/mastery of academic, communication, learning and information discourses. Each is unpacked and made explicit. Assignment 1 is an article/review critique where students are asked to:

- select a research article from the academic data bases (after participating in information literacy classes conducted by library staff in two CMS1007 workshops);
- summarise the article (using learning skills made explicit in the workshops);
- evaluate its structure (after being introduced to positivist, interpretive and critical paradigms and qualitative/quantitative research methodologies – nursing students need to demonstrate both);

- critically evaluate the article (its authority, accuracy, currency, relevance, objectivity and stability); and
- reflect on their learning practices and relate them to mainstream university literacies.

Students reflected on CMS1007's effectiveness in demonstrating these literacies:

> CMS1007 helped to reinforce my familiarity with the languages of the uni, and I certainly felt more confident in using all avenues of the uni as a result.

> The assessments were significant in introducing us to facilities such as the library and databases, and to become adept in all aspects of academic writing, such as referencing.

> The course was like being given a formula to unlock academic language and writing. Your notes, assignments and advice will never be put in the recycling box.

Secondly, CDT provides insight into the impact of cultural diversity (Cope and Kalzantis, 2000), an insight which makes more transparent the crucial nature of the interrelationships between students' cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1999) and institutional discourses, as well as the consequences for transition (Burton and Dowling, 2005). CMS1007 applies this understanding by explicitly engaging cultural and linguistic diversity as a theme. In the first workshop, an ice breaker 'naming as a cultural practice 'exercise is introduced where students identify the social, cultural, linguistic and political assumptions underpinning the naming process. Students' reflect:

> I found that I grasped cultural awareness in a very different light, which I will incorporate in my nursing practice.

> CMS has made me analyse and re-think my pre-conceptions of people differently now. Although I thought I was sensitive to others' cultural differences, the course has made me much more aware of the differences between cultures and how culture can dominate the health aspects of a patient.

CDT also analyses the discursive practices that operate as power relationships in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality (Luke 1999). This understanding is critical in an academic setting where the power imbalances between institutional practices and students can affect student engagement and efficacy (Cox, 2003). CMS1007 integrates this understanding by making explicit, and critically reflecting on, power configurations operating, both in the hierarchical, individualist and competitive HE setting and in the future professional healthcare context. Assumptions underlying the deficit responses to cultural and linguistic diversity are targeted in assignment 3. The 2005 topic required students to develop a thesis in relation to the statement:

> Cultural competence in nursing must be based on a reflection on self (including one's own culture and profession, power imbalances, attitudes and beliefs about the 'other') and enhanced communication skills (Dowd, Eckermann and Jeffs, 2005:140).

Feedback confirmed that the course had increased students' awareness:

> I feel that the assignment on 'the importance of cultural awareness and communication skills for nurses' was particularly important in assisting me in gaining greater care and compassion. I learnt a lot about cultural diversity and the ways that mainstream culture can disadvantage people in the health care system.

Constructivism

Constructivism also informs CMS1007. Constructivism accommodates the Vygotskian paradigm of cognitive development within a social setting (Azzarito and Ennis, 2003). Its application raises awareness about how the social setting and culture influence the individual cognitive process, and thus meaningful learning (Plourde and Alawiye, 2003). Rickford (2005) notes that learners are influenced by socio-cultural factors embedded in their environment and that connecting academic content to their lives sustains student interest and involvement in difficult tasks. Constructivist assumptions underpin assignment 2 (weighting 20%), the plan/draft for *Psycho-social Foundations of Nursing* essay (weighting 75%). The NUR1020 essay asks students to consider five key experiences that have shaped their sense of self, discuss them with a partner, embed them in an appropriate research base and relate their reflections to their future professional practice. Assignment 2's objective is to assist students to master academic literacies (by developing the thesis, main points, introduction and first body paragraph for the NUR1020 essay). Students confirm CMS1007's role:

> CMS1007 really helped me to learn how to break down an essay question and how to easily write the essay in the correct style. While I was researching and writing my essays I referred to the notes from CMS1007 as much as the notes from the courses themselves. The words/phrases to use during referencing and the words to avoid in an academic essay were also invaluable!

Critical transition capabilities

Students, however, have responsibilities for their transition/perseverance (Krause, 2005). Lawrence's (2005) conceptual representation, the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*, outlines three key critical transition capabilities that students can incorporate to assist their transition: reflective, socio-cultural and critical practice. This section outlines how CMS1007 prioritises and fosters students' use of these practices.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice emerges from educational (Schön, 1987) and sociological (Giddens, 1996) literature. Reflective practice (see Lawrence 2005) gives emphasis to students' capacities to observe, to watch and listen to the socio-cultural practices occurring at the site. The development of students' capabilities for reflective practice comprises a key goal in CMS1007. Students reflect on the development of their learning/academic capacities at the beginning of each workshop and formative assessment/drafts are integrated to assist students to reflect on and improve their practices. Students reflected:

> CMS1007 made me seek ideas from outside sources, such as the cultural awareness educator I interviewed, which greatly impacted different ideas on me.

> I did not enjoy high school and because of my lack of interest, failed to understand how to structure an essay, reference properly etc. I actually finished school with an O.P. of 24 but am now sitting on a GPA of 5.73 at USQ.

Socio-cultural practice

Socio-cultural practice (Lawrence 2005) stems from cross-cultural communication theory (CCT) (Hofstede, 1997). CCT contends that newcomers need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream hosts. Integral is an individual's self-efficacy, the belief that he or she can successfully perform social behaviours in academic situations. Bandura's (1986) social learning model is the basis of a cross-cultural communication program, *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and*

Leadership Program (Mak, Westwood, Barker and Ishiyama, 1998) which enables newcomers to communicate effectively in the host culture. *ExcelL* not only emphasises the role of socio-cultural competencies, it also prioritises specific socio-cultural capabilities: seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing requests.

CMS1007 objectives prioritise the development of students' socio-cultural practice. The capabilities are made explicit and demonstrated in each workshop: through sample assignments; guidelines about structure and process; formative assessment, including drafts and proposals; and marking criteria feedback sheets which are clearly explained/linked to objectives.

The practices are also fostered by engineering opportunities where students are required to use them: through interaction, problem solving activities, reflective discussion points, group work and role plays; by posting issues for understanding, discussion and reflection; through interactive learning experiences, including self-test exercises and structured discussion groups; by being accessible for consultation – through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, and flexibility in contact opportunities; by providing opportunities for feedback – awarding marks for article selection and for a draft/plans; by encouraging students to seek out sources of help and information; and by encouraging re-submissions for failing assignments, as well as referrals. Students comment:

> CMS was really helpful in learning how to speak uni language…this helped a great deal as I could gather my information appropriately and get it checked, therefore knowing I was heading along the right path of my assignment. This is much better than my usual process of stumbling along with the subject hoping I had the right idea.

> I found your method of teaching excellent as it involved students and I could give my opinion freely. (SETS 2005)

Critical practice

Critical practice encompasses twin capacities: students' capabilities for self awareness of their own belief systems and cultural practices (critical self awareness) (to look within) and their awareness of power configurations impacting on them and the context (critical discourse awareness) (to look without). Kelly (2003, p. 3) suggests that critical self-awareness requires a "continued attention to the place from which we speak". It incorporates people's capacities for unpacking their own cultural perspectives and belief systems (their socio-cultural capital), as well as their readiness to challenge these and to transform them if the need arises. Critical discourse awareness differs from critical self-awareness in that it concentrates on the power configurations operating in the context or setting and underscores the role of social/cultural critique of the discourses operating at the site (Fairclough, 1995). This awareness includes students' capabilities for language critique including 'their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself' (Fairclough, 1995:1). Students' use of critical practice is developed in the workshops and assignment 3:

> CMS certainly made me think a great deal more about language and the ways in which we perceive and judge communication.

Course results

The course results (see Table 1) confirm that most students mastered and were able to demonstrate the literacies prioritised in CMS1007 assessment. That students were also able to replicate these results in parallel courses is supported by Jill Scanlan, leader NUR1020:

> Students in NUR1020 who are working in CMS1007 show consistently high levels of compliance in both writing structure and referencing style. The result for these students has been improved assessment scores.

Table 1: Course results, 2003-5

Grade	Cut off marks	2003 (210 students)	2004 (196 students)	2005 (138 students)
HD	85	118	113	94
A	75	61	43	23
B	65	11	15	6
C	50	5	4	2
F		8	15	8
FNP	Non participation failure	7	6	5

Conclusion

The paper integrated research and theoretical perspectives, applied them to transition and described how they were incorporated into the learning/teaching pedagogy of CMS1007. The integration of research and theoretical perspectives contributed to CMS1007's underlying goal of valuing/accommodating students' cultural attributes and addressing/bridging any differences between these and the university culture. The evaluative data confirms CMS1007's positive contributions to enhancing the relationships between students and the institutional and pedagogical factors critical in students' transitions as well as students' perceptions that they are valued. Both, according to the research (Krause 2005; Tinto 2005), are conditions necessary for improving student outcomes. The evaluative data also suggests that the course assists students to master/ demonstrate the literacies they encountered in their first year and that students' use of critical transition capabilities helped them achieve this mastery. Longitudinal research is needed, however, to investigate the effectiveness of students' use of the critical transition practices in their second and third years.

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