

Supporting the first steps to lifelong learning: The CommUniTI (Community-University Team Initiative)

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Abstract

The proposed project trials a fourth generation approach to the first year experience at higher education for students at the Gympie campus of the University of the Sunshine Coast. This approach values the strategic and important role that the students' sociocultural capital plays in their successful transition to higher education and engagement in learning and draws upon the support and wisdom of parents, friends, and community members in developing strategies and resources that are specific to the student and community context. It is underpinned by concepts of responsiveness, respectfulness, and transparency and is characterised by a Community of Practice.

This paper describes an innovative pilot project to support the transition and engagement of first year students at a regional campus of the University of the Sunshine Coast by drawing upon and actioning their sociocultural capital. This pilot project trials the fourth generation approach to the first year in higher education proposed by us in 2014 (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014), that is, an approach to the first year experience characterised by a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998). This project is in three phases and will be undertaken over 18 months. Approximately 50 students, 6 teaching and administrative staff at Gympie campus and 8 Gympie community members will be involved in the project.

Fourth generation first year experience (FYE): Community of practice.

In 2010 Kift, Nelson and Clarke argued for a third generation approach to the first year experience saying that it was “when first generation co-curricular and second generation curricular approaches are integrated and implemented through an intentionally designed curriculum by seamless partnerships of academic and professional staff in a whole-of-institution transformation”, identifying it as a *transition pedagogy* (p. 1). A student's journey into higher education is rarely a solitary venture. Teachers, school counsellors, friends, family, neighbours, and often the University itself through its media promotions have influenced the student's decisions and choices leading to enrolment. Our proposed fourth generation approach recognises and values the strategic and important role that these community members have played in the student's journey and utilises their support and wisdom to develop first year transition strategies and resources that are specific to the student cohort and community context (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014). Consequently, the fourth generation approach is underpinned by concepts of responsiveness (linking with the student's social and civic communities - family and friends, school, local community), respectfulness (of the knowledge and social and cultural capital that students bring with them) and transparency, “opening up our institutions to new audiences” (Spanier, 2004, p. 8).

Central to the fourth generation approach is a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). A CoP consists of a group of people who work collaboratively to develop a repertoire of

practices about things that matter to them (Wenger, 1998). It is characterized by three concepts: *a domain* of shared interest with community members having a commitment to the joint enterprise; *a community* where members develop relationships through engagement in shared activities, discussions, and information; and *a practice* where those involved in the community “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice” (Wenger, 2011, p. 2).

Informing research

Our proposed project is informed by several recent Australian projects. The Teaching and Support of Students from Low SES Backgrounds Project (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012) focused on providing teaching and support strategies for students from low SES backgrounds. The project team advised that institutions should actively foster opportunities for students’ families and communities to engage with the institution. In a project that commenced in 2009, The University of Adelaide, Flinders University and the University of South Australia, funded by an Australian Learning and Teaching Grant, aimed to understand the transition to university of high school students (McCann, Brinkworth, Burke da Silva, King, Luzeckyj & Palmer, n.d.). The thrust of this First Year Student Expectations and Experiences Project was to form a community beyond the university boundaries into the secondary schools consisting of school teachers, university academics and professional staff. This South Australian project provided a broad horizontal picture of the first year transition across metropolitan central universities and programs. Our objective is to add to their findings and resources by providing a vertical picture of a rural campus and its community, family, friends, and teachers. The Belonging Project (Carlin, Clarke & Wilson, 2014) at RMIT points out that it is essential for successful transition for students to feel that they belong; not only to their immediate discipline and program of study but to the school and the university and to the globalisation of their careers. Our proposed CoP also carries this intention but extends the support provided by the inclusion of non-traditional education partners such as friends, family and community members.

Current FYE and community projects at USC

The University of the Sunshine Coast has adopted a third generation, whole of institution, approach (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010) to the first year in higher education specifically in the form of the Student Engagement Program (StEP). This program is designed to particularly engage and retain “at risk” students. Furthermore, there are a number of community-focused programs currently operating at the University of the Sunshine Coast, most of them being focused on building young people’s and adults’ tertiary aspirations that will hopefully translate into future student enrolments into USC.

Our proposed project builds upon the current range of community focused and FYE strategies being undertaken by USC by focusing a community lens on a recognised issue of strategic importance (FYE) to higher education. This aim of this project is to initially develop and implement community developed resources/strategies to assist the transition of students in the Business, Commerce, Nursing Science, and Primary Education programs at a satellite campus and also to trial the fourth generation approach to FYE. It is proposed that this model of practice will then be rolled out at the Logan campus of Griffith University and evaluated for its applicability to and sustainability for larger campuses.

The pilot project – The CommUniTI

Our project takes a fourth generation approach to the transition and retention of first year students being characterised by collaborative partnerships between the local community and its university. Integral to this approach are the principles guiding a Community of Practice informed by Wenger (1998). There are three phases to this 18 month project, investigation, implementation and evaluation.

Phase 1: Investigating the connections

In Phase 1 of the project we investigate how the first year student, Gympie teaching staff, the programs and the Gympie campus are connected to the Gympie community. A literature review is undertaken on first year students' social and civic connections in general; a student questionnaire on the same topic is administered to first year students (approximately 50); individual student interviews and student focus groups are conducted; and individual interviews and focus group interviews conducted with teaching and administrative staff (approximately 6 staff) at the Gympie campus to ascertain community connections.

The research question driving this phase of the project is: What is the extent of the connections between the Gympie first year student, teaching staff, the program and the local Gympie community?

Phase 2: Establishing and actioning The CommUniTI

In Phase 2 of the project we draw upon Phase 1 data to identify key community-based and University personnel for the neophyte FYE CoP called The CommUniTI (The Community-University Team Initiative). This group provides specialised knowledge in their areas of influence and strategize the development of transition strategies/resources that align student FYE needs, community knowledge and expertise. SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals will be used to help facilitate the process.

Recruitment of members for the CommUniTI will be undertaken through a form of Social Network Methodology, that is, through networking. Initial discussions will be held with USC staff who already have connections with the social and cultural community of Gympie to identify potential stakeholders who share an interest in, or desire to see the success of first year students at USC Gympie. First year students, through the surveys and focus groups, will be asked to nominate roles and if possible individuals who might contribute (such as Scout leaders). Civic documentation and media reports will be searched to ascertain other active community groups who may be interested. These people will be approached on a personal basis and may well indeed suggest others to contact.

While it is not possible to accurately predict what strategies/resources will be developed by the CommUniTI it can be safely assumed that they will address key known emphases in the FYE such as fostering connectedness (Lizzio, 2006): academic (e.g. families of graduates mentoring first year students and their families), social (e.g. localised community group speakers and social events), professional (e.g. adopt a local primary class) and institutional (e.g. inclusion into academic research projects) and psychosocial wellbeing (Donnison, Opescu & Penn-Edwards, 2013) (e.g. online, telephone or face to face lifestyle counselling from a community elder). Realistically, because of project resourcing and timeline limitations we imagine that a limited number of strategies/resources will be developed and implemented initially.

The research questions driving this phase of the project are: How has The CommUniTI developed and negotiated their Community of Practice? and How has The CommUniTI developed a shared practice (shared repertoire of FYE resources: experiences, stories, tools)?

Phase 3: Implementing, trialling, refining, embedding and evaluating

In Phase 3 of the project the project team implement, trial, refine and embed first year transition and support strategies developed in Phase 2 at the Gympie campus through undertaking a Cyclical PIRI process (Plan-Implement-Review-Improve). Ongoing evaluation of the strategies/resources and their impact on student transition and retention will be undertaken. During this phase evaluation of the CoP in terms of its purpose, effectiveness, sustainability and future resourcing is also undertaken using student/staff and community members interviews and focus groups. The evaluation will seek to address the following:

- How appropriate is a CoP for FYE transition and engagement?
- What is the life cycle of this form of CoP?
- If appropriate, how transferrable is this model across sites and disciplinary contexts?
- How sustainable is this model in terms of funding/personnel and resources and what additional resources/funding is required to sustain this model of practice?

The research questions driving this phase are: How successful are the CommUniTI developed strategies for the transition of first year students at Gympie? and How do we develop and implement a sustainable model of FYE practice characterised by a Community of Practice across other sites?

Conclusion

The purpose of this project is to not only develop strategies to assist first year students but to also evaluate the fourth generation approach to the FYE as a first year transition model of practice. If successful it is imagined that the model of practice will be extended to other programs, campuses, and institutions.

Conference discussion questions

1. Can conference members recall who influenced/supported their own first year at higher education?
2. As friends or family of higher education students what wisdom might they have to share?
3. What experiences do conference members have of connections to the community of their own institutions?
4. Do conference members believe that there is a place in the FYHE experience for non-institutional advisors?

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