

Picturing the First Year Experience

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The transition to university is challenging and many students withdraw or fail in their first year (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), our conceptual thinking is fundamentally metaphorical and plays a critical role in how we experience and understand our world. Metaphorical analysis is therefore a valuable tool to access student understandings of their experiences. This poster reports on a subset of data from a project following 19 young university students through their first year at an Australian university. Midway through the second semester 14 students were shown 40 photographs and asked to

choose three or four to talk about in relation to their experiences at university. Photo elicitation is a valuable method that can “elicit implicit knowledge and self-identities in a way that other methods cannot” (Edgar, 1999, p. 198). The data – the photos chosen and the transcribed interviews – were thematically analysed with a particular aim of identifying the metaphors (in both the images and the talk) that students used to depict their experiences. The metaphors were clustered into six overarching themes that together paint a compelling picture of how students experience their first year at university.

Findings

The overarching metaphor was university as a journey; students talked about where they were going, pathways open to them, and experiences and challenges along the way. Some focused on the destination more than the journey, with university seen as a stepping stone. The end point was a degree, a “better job”, or a professional identity.

Rollercoasters depicted university as exciting but stressful and scary. Highs included social aspects and grades; lows were assignments and lifeload. Stress was depicted by fires and car wrecks. Students talked about having a grown up life with increased freedom but increased pressure.

Finally, students talked about course content. Knowledge was “stuff” that could be thrown or dumped by staff and that students had to take, get, or absorb.

These stories highlight the turmoil of the first year at university and the extent of the changes that students experience. Having a clearer understanding of that could help prepare new students for the year ahead. Equally, viewing the student experience through metaphorical images can help academic and professional staff to better teach, understand, and support students.

References

- Edgar, I. (1999). The imagework method in health and social science research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(2), 198-211.
- Edwards, D., & McMillan, J. (2015). *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* ACER
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Photos by Brent Seamer, Innovative Resources

Journey



Heidi: “Uni is a journey. You know, you come through turns and twists, like the different weather. Like it’s snowing. You go through those hard times, but I can see it’s kind of going up a hill so you would get to a point where you can see a view.”

Stepping stone



Alison: “It’s like a stepping stone to where I want to be in the real world. I have to do this.”

Rollercoaster



Matthew: “Honestly, it’s been loops and dives and then all of sudden highs and just – it’s been insane. You go from one high and then I’ve gone to the lowest of lows and then I’ve gone, shot back up again.”

Fire



Sienna: “Sometimes I feel like this. Like everything’s just on fire, it’s burning. It’s crazy with all the stress.”

Grown up life



Isaac: “Just forcing yourself to sort of grow up and, like you can’t really mess around anymore. This is life sort of thing. This is important and you’ve got to do it.”

Stuff



Tony: “Then there’s sometimes where I’m doing my anatomy and physiology readings and it feels like a mountain. Every time I turn a page like there’s more stuff that I don’t know.”