Encouraging engagement in enabling programs: The students' perspective

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Abstract

Student retention is a key concern in tertiary education enabling programs with research showing that early engagement leads to higher completion rates (Hodges et al., 2013). But how do students new to university education learn how to engage effectively? This article outlines an engagement framework that foregrounds Guidance, Encouragement, Modelling and Structure (GEMS) as a holistic approach to facilitating effective student engagement. This framework was developed from qualitative data gleaned from students enrolled in the Preparing for Success Program at Southern Cross University, New South Wales, Australia. The findings from the students indicate that the GEMS framework activates student potential and enables them to use existing knowledge and experience to not only deepen and broaden their learning but also successfully prepare for further study.

Introduction

Tertiary enabling or bridging programs have the transformational power to assist people, who may not otherwise have had the chance, to realise their potential by providing an opportunity to access tertiary education (Chesters & Watson, 2016; Pitman, Trinidad, Devlin, Harvey, Brett, & McKay, 2016). The literature on enabling programs, however, often focuses on retention, and the challenges and barriers students may face in completing an enabling program (Whannall & Whannall, 2014). The issue of retention in enabling programs is one of significant concern, as noted in Hodges et al.'s, (2013) comprehensive report of five enabling programs across Australia. The large number of students failing to complete enabling programs – up to 50% (Whannall & Whannall, 2014) - is attributed to reasons including: those who do not show up or come only for a short period of time before deciding tertiary study is not for them; students with complex health and personal issues or with challenging family and/or community circumstances, as well as those with financial difficulties (Hodges et al., 2013, Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). The focus of this study, however, was on student success and students' perceptions of what helped them engage in an enabling program.

Student success is often linked to the concept of student engagement (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2013) described by Kuh (2009) as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). Kahu (2013) provides a comprehensive review and critique of what she notes as four dominant perspectives on student engagement: the behavioural perspective, with a focus on student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological perspective, which sees engagement as an individual psycho-social process; the socio-cultural perspective, with a focus on the critical

role of the socio-political context; and, the holistic perspectives, which have a broader view of engagement and "recognise the need to consider the student's own motivations and expectations" (p. 758). Crucial to activating students' motivation are tutors who set high expectations and standards that challenge students (Zepke & Leach, 2010). However, for tutors to perform such a role effectively, institutions also need to be supportive and provide the necessary resources (Thomas, 2013). Zepke and Leach (2010) also highlight the need to consider external, enabling environments, such as family and community support. For students in enabling programs, these can be pivotal to their ability to participate in their studies (Habel, Whitman, & Stokes, 2016; Zepke, 2013).

A sense of belonging among students and between students and tutors can play a key role in helping students engage in their learning. Tutors, who display warmth and respect for students, help foster a sense of belonging in students' teaching and learning experience (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Nelson, Clarke, Kift, and Creagh (2011) explain the importance of embedding interactive learning opportunities within the curriculum and assessment practices to provide a purposeful context for students to actively build learning communities. There is a significant body of research that shows that a sense of belonging to a learning community is important to students in terms of their perception of the learning experience but also in terms of improving their learning outcomes (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014). Thomas (2013) calls for a "partnership approach" (p. 8) where the responsibility for engagement includes students, tutors and the institutions. Other empirical evidence supports the notion that establishing a sense of belonging can impact positively on student retention (Krause & Armitage, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014).

In spite of the extensive literature on retention and engagement, the student voice does not

emerge strongly from this literature. Consequently, the aim of this article is to focus on students' beliefs and perspectives of their enabling experience. The research moves away from a "remedial pedagogy" (Grubb et al., 2011, p. 5) to ensure that students are partners in the discussions about which pedagogical and technological tools encourage participation, enhance their sense of learning community and contribute to better learning outcomes.

Background to the study

The program

The Preparing for Success at SCU Program (PSP) is a 12-week, fee-free, enabling program at a regional university in northern New South Wales, Australia. The program is specifically designed to equip students with the skills to successfully transition into tertiary study. Students are required to be 18 years of age or over and have completed Year 10 (completed secondary schooling to 15 or 16 years of age) or equivalent. The program can be studied online or on campus at three locations, Coffs Harbour, Lismore and the Gold Coast and students can choose to study part-time over one year or full-time over 12 weeks. The program is offered three sessions a year, each session of 12-weeks' duration. The program consists of four subjects, three of which are compulsory, focussing on teaching effective study skills, writing an academic essay and applying basic numeracy concepts. The fourth subject is an elective, either arts- or science-based. Successful completion of the program guarantees students a place at Southern Cross University (SCU), not necessarily in the program of their choice but nevertheless a pathway into tertiary study at the university. The PSP is the third largest program in terms of student numbers at the University and consistently achieves the highest rating of student satisfaction in the University's end-of-session feedback reports.

The students

The students come from many walks of life and diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. They are between 18 and 60 years of age. Some have completed Year 12 (secondary schooling to 17 or 18 years of age) but have not achieved the entry requirements for the course of their choice, while the majority have completed Year 10 (secondary schooling to age 15 or 16 years of age). Often students face challenging circumstances such as caring for elderly parents or autistic children, dealing with complex health issues and the need to work to support family and/or their community while studying, as noted similarly by Habel et al. (2016). Most students are highly motivated to pursue what May, Delahunty, O'Shea, and Stone (2016) have termed '"a passionate career"' (p. 2). Students indicate in classes that they start the program unsure of their ability to study in a university environment as for most of them, it is a long time since they have studied and previous study has not necessarily been a positive experience as reported similarly by Boyle and Abdullah (2015). Indeed, past experience of educational institutions where they felt incompetent and unable to perform the tasks required is common amongst these students.

The tutors

The tutors came from a range of backgrounds and experiences and all have relevant post graduate qualifications to teach in an enabling program.

The authors

The authors both teach in the subject EDU 10445 *Managing your Study* and have wide experience teaching at the tertiary level as well as teaching in the PSP.

Limitations to the study

The online focus group was conducted by the external tutor and co-author so possible bias in

student response is acknowledged. Another possible limitation is that the on campus focus groups were conducted by the Academic Coordinator of the program and co-author and so students may have felt predisposed to respond in a particular way.

Methodology

The study was conducted over Session 2, 2014, the second of three yearly offerings of the program, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach is inductive with theory developing from the emerging categories from the collected data from the students (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The use of open–ended questions on a questionnaire, an online survey and in focus groups offered the students the opportunity to voice their opinions about their experience of the program and what helped them to engage with their studies in different fora (Creswell, 2013). Using a mixed method approach allowed for triangulation of the data and for the data to be viewed from numerous vantage points to provide a detailed picture of student experience at different points in the program (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Walker, 1990). The study was approved by the University's Ethics Committee and followed all required procedures.

Data analysis followed the protocols of thematic analysis (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 2002). Broad themes were identified in the initial analysis undertaken by individual scrutiny by each member of the project team, as reported similarly by May et al. (2016). The responses from each data source - the questionnaire, the online survey and the focus groups - were read and re-read several times. In keeping with grounded theory principles, each member of the project team coded the data into a classification system of recurring themes which were identified by key words and phrases that later formed a checklist for the project team to use for comparison and coding (Patton, 2002). These themes and subthemes were cross-checked via

fortnightly Skype meetings with the project team to help reduce possible bias. The process was iterative until four distinct themes emerged (Creswell, 2003).

Stage 1: An open-ended, anonymous questionnaire was administered at the end of the Orientation session on all three campuses at Coffs Harbour, Lismore and the Gold Coast and was designed to elicit broad responses about how students experienced Orientation and the impact on their preparedness to start university study (Creswell, 2003). These data were numbered with a notation of Q (for questionnaire) and a participant number, for example Q 1. Each questionnaire was read and re-read and classified into key themes and subthemes, which were then later compared with the data from the online survey. There were 215 respondents to the questionnaire giving a 97 per cent response rate.

Stage 2: In weeks 3-5, both internal and external students of 361 students enrolled in the core subject, *Managing your Study,* were invited to participate in an online survey posted via the Announcements page of the learning site where all resources and information are located. Students were asked one open-ended question about what they were enjoying about the program to discover how they were experiencing the program. The responses were numbered with a notation S (for survey) and a participant number, for example S 1 for easy coding. These responses were read and re-read and classified into broad themes that were compared with the responses from the questionnaire. There were 152 respondents to the online survey giving a 40 per cent response rate.

Stage 3: Later in the session, in weeks 9-12, follow-up focus groups of one hour duration were conducted with 15 students online and 15 on campus students at one location at Lismore to capture what Kahu (2013, p. 760) describes as the "dynamic and situational" aspects of student engagement. The focus groups allowed

for deeper probing of the students' perceptions of what helped them engage with their studies and gave them the opportunity to voice their views about their experience of the program from their own perspective (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This stage gathered in-depth, reflective qualitative data. The 15 Lismore student participants were divided according to student availability into two focus groups, one with twelve students, the other with three students. The one online focus group took place after the online tutorial in the same virtual space. Students were asked broad open-ended questions about their experience of teaching and learning, aspects of teaching that were most beneficial to them, and the main thing that helped them engage and participate. Students were emailed a transcript of the focus group and all agreed it was a true record of what was said. All participants' responses were then numbered with a notation F for focus group and a participant number, for example F 1. These responses were then classified according to key themes and compared with the responses from the questionnaire and online survey.

All data were read and re-read, classified and analysed by identifying key words and phrases that were coded into key themes and sub-themes. The data from the questionnaire, online survey and the focus group responses were cross-checked with the project team several times. After analysis of these data, four distinct themes emerged.

The Findings:

Underpinning all the student responses was their perception of the instrumental role their tutors played in supporting and encouraging them in their studies, providing them with opportunities to engage with their peers and learn through purposeful and meaningful activities.

Theme 1: Guidance

> I am enjoying using my brain again. I have been working in the same job which

while it is highly demanding, is also quite repetitive and so my thought processes are not being challenged. I'm finding the PSP is pushing me out of my comfort zone and is making me think again which is very refreshing. (S 139)

The tutors' guidance and respect for their ability were highlighted in students' comments about their tutors whom they saw as challenging their thinking and supporting them to go beyond their comfort zone, as indicated in the quote above. The attitude and approach of tutors who provided inspiration and knowledge was consistently referred to in comments by the students in all the data across the three stages as being key to their engagement with their learning. Comments from the online survey indicated they enjoyed the respectful interaction with both tutors and peers typified in this comment, "Treated with respect by fellow students and tutors alike" (S 25). This idea was reiterated in comments from the focus groups where students reported they liked being "treated like an adult i.e. not like school" (F 5). Student responses clearly indicated they recognise their potential being activated as well as their belief in themselves typified by this personal comment, "It's giving me self-confidence and purpose. I'm also seeing how proud my young son is of me which is very special" (S 102).

Guidance, the first gem, is then about facilitating students' activation of their own creativity and intellectual capacity (Hattie, 2008). As one student commented, showing an awareness of being involved in academic life: "I love the university culture, and the idea of having to back up your opinions with evidence" (S 35). On a relational level, guidance is about showing students how to approach learning and how to relate to others in a learning environment; for example, tutors are accessible in order to demonstrate to students how to relate to others in an academic environment. One student reported: "I really enjoy the atmosphere of the classes, they are very friendly, low pressure

environments" (S 31). Rather than being treated like they had been at school, the students saw their tutors as working with them to facilitate their learning in supportive environments where they were respected as adults.

Theme 2: Encouragement

Encouragement was the second main theme to emerge from the data. Words from student responses that linked to the theme of Encouragement were: confidence, supported, tutors' language, approach, attitude, feedback. Comments from the orientation questionnaire foreshadowed the importance of encouragement to the students in their later study; for example: "the information gave me the confidence I needed to get started" (Q 12) and "The tutors were there and answered my questions without making me feel stupid." (Q 188). The positive attitude of tutors and the use of specific tools were consistently referred to as encouraging them to reach their potential as typified in this comment on the survey: "The realisation that I can actually do this with the tools I have been given" (S 87).

Connecting with their peers in activities that required interaction is a key strategy that students reported helped them build a sense of belonging which in turn helped with their learning as one student commented: "I like the idea of helping each other, proof-reading each other's work" and "meeting diverse people" (F 6).

Theme 3: Modelling

> It was great to have things demonstrated with clear examples and then practical exercises that the tutor did first. That way we learned by seeing how the tutor did the exercises (F 11).

Heather Coffey (2016, para. 1) describes modelling as "an instructional strategy in which the teacher demonstrates a new concept or approach to learning and students learn by observing". The students' responses indicated

they found it helpful when the tutors taught in what Hattie (2008) describes as "a most deliberate and visible manner" (p. 23) which included showing them how to do a particular skill, for example how to reference, which they then practised. This definition reflected how modelling, the third theme to emerge from the data, was seen by the students. The words from student responses that linked to the theme of Modelling were: *show*, *demonstrate*, *professional*, *examples*. The responses from the questionnaire at orientation clearly indicated that students appreciated being shown how to navigate the learning site. As one student noted: "it was great that the tutors showed me how to use BlackBoard and even showed me how to post something on the discussion forums" (Q 49). This response indicates that this student had already identified how valuable modelling would be to them in their learning journey. Students consistently commented on how important being shown how to do tasks was for their learning. Other responses highlighted the importance of tutors breaking down information as in this response, "I am enjoying the learning process of Uni and how the Lecturers break down the information so that you get a better understanding of what you're trying to achieve" (S 45).

In both the survey and focus groups students noted that one of the things they most appreciated about the PSP was the way lecturers *showed them what to do*. This response was an explicit acknowledgement of the benefit to students of modelling.

Theme 4: Structure

> This course is well-structured and provides a perfect first step into the academic world (S 31).

The above quote from the online survey encapsulates the students' recognition of the importance of the well-organised structure of the program as an introduction to the academic community. Responses from the questionnaire

also indicated the importance of the accessible layout of the program that helped students feel more confident about starting tertiary study, as evidenced in this comment: "Seeing how organised the online sites were and how easy it was to find things like study guides made me feel better about being an external student" (Q 160). This recognition of the value of an accessible and consistent structure to their learning was a major theme as evidenced in other student comments on the online survey, including: "All the content of tutorial and other helpful information is available to us online so I can be prepared and read ahead to help with my understanding in class" (S 26). Students in both the online survey and focus groups also noted the importance of a flexible structure in terms of completion of work, with one student writing: "I can do PSP at my own pace. There is a lot of support available" (F 11).

Underpinning the four themes of Guidance, Encouragement, Modelling and Structure were students' perceptions of the crucial role accessible, supportive and respectful tutors played in motivating them to engage and challenge themselves in the program. The four key themes of Guidance, Encouragement, Modelling and Structure provide a window into the students' perspective on what worked for them in engaging in an enabling program.

Discussion

The findings reflect the key role tutors, supportive classrooms and the organisation of the program play in student engagement as noted in the literature (Thomas et al., 2014; Zepke, 2013). Instead of being treated like they had been at school, students reported they liked learning in a respectful partnership with tutors who modelled what was required within a structure that was easily accessible (Thomas, 2013). Importantly being treated as adults who were encouraged to learn from each other via interactive and purposeful activities, was key in helping them build a sense of belonging that enhanced their learning (Lisciandro & Gibbs,

2016; Nelson et al., 2011). This sense of belonging where they felt inspired by tutors who clearly believed in their ability and wanted them to succeed was, they reported, pivotal to their successful completion of the program.

Out of these four themes of Guidance, Encouragement, Modelling and Structure came what we have called the GEMS model, which highlights four specific "gems" that students reported facilitate and enhance their learning in an enabling program.

- Guidance, the first gem, relates to students being guided in how to approach their learning, how to relate to others in an academic context, and activate their own resources. Importantly, they saw the tutors' respectful attitude and approach as in direct contrast to their previous schooling experience, and it was this difference that motivated them to engage with their learning (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Thomas, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

- Encouragement, the second gem, was reported as a highly motivating strategy, where tutors set high standards and challenged students to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve their potential. The tutors' approach, which was described by students as both inspirational and professional, was seen as instrumental in supporting their understanding of key concepts and belief in their ability to achieve (Thomas et al., 2014).

- Modelling, the third gem, is demonstrating by example that helped the students to understand tasks and complete assignments. It is not surprising that students, who have not experienced a tertiary academic environment before, need explicit modelling of what is expected so that they can fully engage with the requirements of the tasks. Yet, there appears very little in the literature on

enabling programs on the use of this strategy.

- The final gem referred to by the students is Structure. The structure made information and learning materials accessible, as they were easy to locate and logically organised. The students reported that the program structure facilitated their learning (Thomas, 2013) and increased their confidence to engage with their studies.

These four "gems" assisted students to invest in their learning and to view their tutors and the program as providing a rich and useful learning experience in preparing them for successful transition to tertiary study.

This study reveals the importance of the respectful and supportive attitude and teaching approach of the tutors that was effective in assisting them to engage with the studies. It provides a unique and easy-to-use framework for tutors in enabling programs to engage students in their learning and enhance their learning experience. It is important for the student voice in the literature on enabling programs to be heard so that enabling programs can accurately meet their needs (Zepke, 2013). The GEMS model offers a window into students' perceptions of what helps them participate in their learning, particularly the need for them to be partners in the learning experience supported by tutors who build a sense of a learning community and challenge them to reach their potential, all of which contribute to better outcomes for students in an enabling program.

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