

What Kind of Student Am I?: Transition Talk and Investment in Learning

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Abstract

The transition from 'fresher' to graduate has been widely conceptualised as a 'learning journey'. This paper is an attempt to apply a broadly discursive approach to the study of the transition from school or college to the first year of university teaching.

The aims of the project were twofold: to generate a clearer perspective of the specific needs of first year students, identifying implications for induction, student support and teaching methods and to contribute to the growing number of studies theorising student learning. The paper is based on a small-scale ethnographic research project carried out at the University of the West of England between February and April, 2006.

The research process made use of use of focus groups, which are thought to be by far the most effective method for eliciting 'ordinary conversation', as opposed to the more official-seeming and less 'rich' questionnaire method. Our interview schedule included five broad areas of discussion (expectations, reflection, learning and teaching, assessments, well being).

Overall we found that students are in the main active rather than passive in their approach to university life and that it is often university structures and methods that prioritise the former rather than the latter approach amongst them. We conclude with some suggestions for further research.

Introduction

This paper discusses the findings from a series of interviews with the 2006 cohort of first year students at the University of the West of England. This particular piece of research emerged from growing concerns that students were finding the transition from school and college to university problematic and challenging, not least the 'jump' from more structured timetabling to independent learning. Whilst the negotiation of different modes of learning was central to our questioning, we were keen to let students talk about and define the transitional experience in their own words, and to give them the opportunity to express their own views on what they felt were the key aspects of that experience.

For this reason this paper discusses students' 'transition talk' – the ways in which students talk about their expectations and experiences of living and learning at university in their first few

weeks on campus. In consequence we have set the out the three key themes of transition talk that our research identified. Those themes are: the experiences of induction week; the processes of identifying and establishing communities and investments in modes of learning.

We took the idea of 'transition' from Clark and Crome who define it as: 'any period in the education process when individuals move from one stage or sector to another' (2004, 6). Perry and Allard (2003) point out this transition can also be viewed as 'a movement from the known to the unknown' (Perry and Allard,+9 75). Whilst the move may be primarily focused on learning, it also includes change of habitus: for new university students, this involves the first move away from the family home, moving to a new environment, often an unfamiliar city¹ and the particular process of developing a student identity (*cf* Grisoni and Wilkinson, 2005). We also took the opportunity to consider whether the thinking among many lecturers of the student experiencing the transitional phase as a 'passive consumer' is a simplistic misreading of current student culture.

Literature review:

Recent thinking in this field is not optimistic. Grisoni and Wilkinson for example argue that students increasingly see themselves as 'consumers of services and staff as providers of service' (2005:4). They go on to argue that, 'this view drives out creativity, complexity, ambiguity and ultimately all learning as...both staff and students collude with a cultural norm which tends towards instrumentalism and strategic approaches to learning' (Tait and Entwistle, 1996, in Grisoni and Wilkinson, 2005,5). Whilst we will go on to argue that students *do* adopt particular learning strategies, this does not necessarily need to be seen as a downward trend to passive consumerism in academic learning.

Ballinger has argued that the major difference students experience between university and A-levels is 'one of expectation' (Ballinger 2002,103). Local data indicated that the most common reason students leave in the first year is that university isn't what they were expecting. Smith and Hopkins (2004, 306) point out that this 'mismatch' of expectation involves both modes of learning and life transitions, and echo Ballinger and others in their assertion that the change from intensive structured learning to independent study is perceived by students as '*the* major difference between A-level and uni'. They conclude that 'subsequently students arrive with little experience or understanding of the demands of working independently' (2004,309).

¹ 12 of our students come from villages in S. Wales (3), Somerset (3), Devon (3), and Cornwall (2), Dorset (1).

Ballinger goes on to develop this point: by learning in such a structured way, students at A level are 'alienated' from their own learning, 'struggling to find a voice' within social and institutional practices (Ballinger 2004,105).

Marland (2003) reviews Clerehan's (2003) point that transition is both vertical (ie from school/college to uni) and lateral (from one discipline to the next). Marland argues that there is insufficient awareness about how students make the choice of subject, on what they base that choice, and what knowledges are available, noting that 'English literature' at A level is not the same as the university course of the same name, a problem Marland argues (2003, 8) is particularly pertinent to Arts and Humanities.

This is picked up in our interviews: our students talked in detail about their own learning strategies and their investments in and experiences of 'finding a voice' as we shall go on to see.

This mismatch of learning experiences can be exacerbated by the 'vague exhortations' (Clerehan, 80) from lecturers as to what is expected from students. Smith and Hopkins (2005, 316) discuss how lecturers perceive there to be a gap between school learning mode (perceived as passive, very structured) and university (independent, 'learning for life').

How lecturers perceive the gap is significant- in reviewing a number of these studies, Marland suggests the fact that lecturers don't do more to 'mind the gap' is inverse snobbism – students are traditionally expected to 'just get on with it' (2003, 4). Ballinger also notes that first year teaching can be seen by some lecturers as 'the lowest priority' (2002,99). Following this, Tinto paints a picture of students alienated and uninvolved in a 'show and tell' teaching environment which does not encourage participation and is ultimately 'uninvolving' (Tinto, 2000,1). Noting that 'it is all too easy in a lecture silently to drown', Smith argues that the hour long lecture is the 'most unfamiliar aspect' of uni learning, bringing with it the challenge of learning selective note taking (2004, 83). Subsequently, lectures 'can very easily reinforce the image of the learner as passive recipient, and, if the student is floundering, s/he can easily switch off and daydream' (Smith, 87).

Again, in our interviews students talk about their perceptions of the lecturing community, and how those perceptions impact on their own investments in learning and their definitions of effective learning experiences. In terms of lectures themselves, we will be arguing that the strategies and investments in learning complicate this picture of the passive lecture audience.

Ballinger again has pointed out that ironically introductory material can be too detailed and overwhelming, and contribute to the all too common feeling of being 'disorientated and demoralised' in the crucial introductory weeks (Ballinger, 2002, 100). Ballinger's research stresses the importance of small groups and tutorials as a space in which students can find their own critical voice (105). Likewise, Drew (2001, 323) also notes students prized tutorials most highly for feedback and support.

Smith and Hopkins suggest particular strategies for 'minding the gap' between school/college and university: they argue that eliminating the gap is impractical and undesirable: instead, foregrounding the newness of the gap makes the transition more positive 'not so much by abolishing any sense of it as 'new' but by making explicit the nature of its novelty' (2004, 315). They go on to suggest – as do others in this field (cf Smith and Hopkins, 2005; Clerehan, 2003; Marland, 2003)- other coping strategies such as writing skills workshops, personal tutoring and mentoring.

Whilst such strategies are laudable and deserve full discussion elsewhere, our paper explores the possibilities of a discursive approach to analysing the transition experience. By analysing students' talk, we focus on three points along the transition which students themselves identify as key to the transitional experience. In discussing these key points, we aim to suggest new directions for further research, and ways in which we can develop effective conceptual frameworks to inform such strategies.

Methodology:

These findings come out of a small-scale ethnographic research project carried out at the University of the West of England, February to April, 2006. Using focus groups and one-to-one interviews, and drawing on existing studies into the student induction process and student learning experiences (Ballinger, 2001; Smith, 2004; Clark and Crome, 2004) we interviewed 28 HLSS students from a wide range of disciplines including Drama, English, History, Media Studies, Sociology and Politics, 13 males and 15 females, including some mature and overseas students, and two students repeating their first year.

In aiming to get students talking about their experiences, we initially drew on Drew's (2001) study on the key factors students feel affect their learning. Drew attempts to map out what she

rightly argues is the 'messiness' of the student experience, the jumble of detail' (2001, 327). She sets up three contextual areas influencing how and if they learn: course organisation, resources and facilities; assessment; learning activities and teaching. Set within that, are the ways in which students make use of those contexts. She identifies four ways: self management; motivation and needs; understanding; and support (2001, 311). Our study's question schedule drew on this, with questions organised to focus on these broad themes. Rather than take Drew's assumption that these 'interlock' in any particular way, we aimed to use this model as a springboard to generate students' talk in their own words. In other words, following Smith and Hopkin's intention *not* to 'provide a totally consistent picture of the transition process' but to 'reveal different aspects of it' and to understand and interpret those differences. (Smith and Hopkins 307, 2005).

Initially, we set up two pilot focus groups, in order to establish a start in networking for participants and so that we could refine our initial question schedule, if necessary. Focus groups are thought to be by far the most effective method for eliciting 'ordinary conversation' (Bloor et al, 2001), as opposed to the more official-seeming and less 'rich' questionnaire method. This method seemed most suitable for a project aimed at gaining insight into students' own experiences of the transitional experience, in their own vocabularies. Likewise, where practical we wanted to follow less 'official' methods of recruiting (via lecturers, for example) and instead used friendship networks (see for example (Hermes, 1995) and posters advertising how respondents would be entered into a draw for an iPod if they participated.

Whilst friendship networks were more successful than posters as a recruitment method, due to time and funding limits we did end up recruiting via lectures, where we would give a short, informal talk on the project and ask interested students to sign up. The majority of our respondents were thus self-selecting students who attended lectures (once, at least!), and wherever possible, existing friendship groups. We also carried out some one-to-one interviews, when an existing friendship group was not apparent, as we were sensitive to the fact some questions could elicit very personal talk about homesickness, relationships back home and so on.

Our interview schedule included five broad areas of discussion (expectations, reflection, learning and teaching, assessments, well being). Unlike set questions, our informal interview schedule enabled students to introduce their own take on the topics, as well as being sufficiently focussed on the key themes. This way, conversations could be generated which we could not have anticipated, such as for example a heated debate about the impact of coming to uni 'through clearing', which is discussed later.

Where our study differed from Drew's, is that we adopted a broadly discursive approach to our findings (see Brooks 2002, Jackson et al 2001, Barker and Brooks 1998). We wanted to 'map out' the ways of talking about student experiences, noting key areas which recurred across interviews, and the discursive constructs students drew on and referred to (such as the notion of 'slacker culture' which we go on to discuss). In this, we follow Peat *et al*'s (2000) thinking that qualitative-based analyses can 'allow the subjects themselves to bring forward the issues to be examined' (2000, 295).

We also share Grisoni and Wilkinson's belief that working from an interpretive position acknowledges that whilst 'precision and completeness might be impossible' it is nevertheless valid and appropriate to generate theory from qualitative findings (Grisoni and Wilkinson, 2005, 7). Like Grisoni and Wilkinson, we were not aiming for a representative study (if such a study were possible) but a range of types of talk and responses. As with all such research projects (cf Jackson et al, 2001) we did not achieve as diverse a range as we would have liked. Thus, again as with all such projects, our findings should be read as offering suggestions and insights as opposed to stating statistically valid answers.

We read and reread transcripts, grouping responses according to thematic content, and arriving at three key areas of 'transition talk': the experiences of induction week, the processes of establishing and identifying communities, and the investments in modes of learning. Each of these is discussed below.

During the project, focus groups and single interviews took place during the day in the campus café, as a relatively 'neutral' (if often noisy) space. We carried out seven focus groups and seven single interviews. All participants were encouraged to email us later if they thought of anything else they wanted to add: a couple of students took us up on this. All of the students were living away from their parental home, two of them already lived in Bristol with partners.

Findings: Three themes of transitional talk:

(i) Experiences in induction week,

- 'At induction I was so scared...but everyone was really friendly...'

- 'The lecturers took us into town and we had to find our way back.....great way to meet people and discover the city'
- 'We all met in a bar... it gave you a chance to meet lecturers...everyone really friendly'
- 'Our flat flooded [before we arrived] so we were put in this empty hall...so we missed out on all the Fresher things....we just used to run up and down these deserted corridors! And we didn't know how to get anywhere! No-one told us how to get to the site!'
- 'The transition was hard for me...I wasn't really prepared or organised...like my fresher's week was rubbish and everyone else had an awesome one'
- 'They totally don't get what we have to get through in our first few weeks! When you've just left home for the first time, it can be a real shock.....working out the buses in Bristol takes about a week, it's a really steep learning curve...And I'm going into lectures with my head spinning already.'

We found that a positively experienced induction can have a long term impact. Students who talked about having a 'good' or 'lucky' induction week variously went on to describe themselves as 'happy', and 'sorted' and generally 'confident...supported and motivated'. They were less likely to go on to talk about feeling lost and bewildered in the first few weeks of term, or unhappy with their course in general. Negative talk about induction week involved talk about feeling: 'alienated...confused...demotivated'.

Orientation week itself is generally the most visible effort universities make to assist students through the potentially stressful time of transition. Orientation, induction, or to use the popular term, Freshers' week, is the 'rite of passage for first year students in which they find their way around the campus, make new friends, join clubs and societies' (McInnis et al quoted in Clark and Crome, 2004, 2). Clark and Crome, and others, have noted that friendships formed in this first week can 'help turn a potentially stressful time into an exciting educational experience' (2004, 3)

However, Ballinger, Perry and Allard and others have argued that these early weeks of being 'strangers in a strange land' (Perry and Allard 2003, 79), overwhelmed by new experiences and new information about courses, timetables and so on can leave students feeling anything but integrated and informed. We would also argue that it is not only adapting to academic deadlines and the mysteries of timetabling which can be potentially stressful for new students, but the intensely social nature of 'Freshers' week' which needs addressing. Studies into how youth 'make

a spectacle of themselves' through the 'commodity selection of publicly stated taste preferences' (Hebdige, 1997, 401) are well documented. Whilst Hebdige was observing young people were 'converting themselves into objects...immersed in style...completed only through the admiring glances of a stranger' (1997, 402) before the current cohort of students were born (Hebdige 1979), more recent research has noted the ways in which students talk about their 'experiences of recognising they are a student' (Grisoni and Wilkinson, 2005 6). In addition, it is worth noting that students were voicing concerns about their identity formation in the social context of Freshers' week. It is interesting to note here that this nascent formation can be coloured by a positive or negative participation even at this stage.

(ii) Establishing communities

There were three distinct (but interrelated) ways students talked about community: firstly, community was discussed in terms of lifestyle, in particular, the student drinking lifestyle.

- 'I thought there'd be much more of a community...I was like, 'is this it? Oh dear...';
- 'I am lonely and homesick [for Ethiopia]...it was such a culture shock, the drinking culture'.
- Students are quite cliquey...if you don't go out drinking you can be quite isolated....
- 'At 6th form we had a big common room, I was expecting that kind of thing here'

Moving away from the family home, usually for the first time, to settle in with strangers in a new home in an often unfamiliar city, can obviously be extremely stressful and hugely impact students' well being and sense of belonging. We would argue that if students do feel disorientated in their early weeks this has as much to do with leaving home and the challenges subsequently faced, as it does the learning material with which they are presented:

- 'I'm like – God! I have to buy random stuff like a fruit bowl! A hole puncher! Envelopes! Things you've always assumed are round the house somewhere! And work out how to replace a Hoover bag!'

Our findings suggest current conceptualisations of the transition as primarily, if not totally, academic are unhelpfully narrow in their definitions.

Secondly, community was discussed in terms of a learning community. At UWE, almost all the focus groups mentioned the perceived need for personal tutors. Typical quotes were:

- 'it is frustrating we have so little contact time',
- 'it would really help if we had personal tutors...someone who'd notice if we weren't there and someone we could go and ask questions'
- 'I think it'd be better if we had someone we could query things with...it'd be nice if you thought someone might get in touch with you and say get your arse out of bed'.

Positive accounts of learning communities involved like-minded friends:

- 'if you're not lucky enough to have decent tutors, a good friendship group really helps'
- 'After lectures we come in the campus cafe and have really long debates, it's really good...it's not like college here where you had your geeks and your popular people, everyone is really laid back'.

However other students felt differently,

- 'I'm swimming against the tide of 'being cool'
- 'I thought the geeks would prevail here! But there's still that 'too cool for school' culture'.

We return to this perceived cultural clash later, although it is worth noting here that this is one example of how the notion of 'passive consumer' is too simplistic: students here seem to be actively making sense of, and investing in, campus culture in a variety of ways, and as we will go on to argue, acknowledge this range of possible investments in their talk.

Thirdly, students discussed what they thought of the lecturing community:

- 'The lecturers themselves don't have much connection between each other'
- 'The trouble is the lecturers themselves don't always know what's going on, there doesn't seem to be much structure between them'.
- 'My seminar tutors, they don't always know what the lecture was on, which is bad'
- 'I don't like having VLs², it's not that I don't like them, cos they're usually really keen and enthusiastic, but they tend not to know as much about the course as the module leader, and that's a real worry'.

² Hourly Paid Lecturers, known locally as Visiting Lecturers.

Some students appreciated the pressures lecturers were under, even if they did feel it impacted on their learning: 'I feel it is frustrating we get so little contact time...I feel that the lecturers and tutors are frustrated too, like they could do more with us if we had more time'.

Finally, in terms of community, we need also to take into account the spatialities of dispersed campus sites, the 'geographies' of learning and lifestyle. Students can experience 'little more than a fleeting connection with their institution, from the car park to the lecture theatre and home again' (Perry and Allard, 2003, 76) a point echoed by one of our respondents: 'It's easy to just feel alone, like no-one cares...you just come in and go out again.'

At our campus, there were criticisms of the bar as the central meeting place, describing it as smoky and 'like an old man's pub'. This led us to consider how uni campuses can be defined as 'paradoxical spaces' (Rose, 1993) in that they are ostensibly a space for learning, in which the SU bar is a central meeting place and posters advertising cheap alcohol nights are prominently displayed. They are private spaces belonging to the university, but usually open access. Such paradoxical spaces can involve complex spatial negotiations by the various student groups and subcultures who use and interact within them, particularly when they are both a place of work and home, public and private, in the case of on-site halls.

- 'I don't think people understand the added stress of living with people you don't know, I don't think tutors understand that, I was really stressed out...when you get home and there's an atmosphere, it's rubbish'
- In halls, the room inspectors let themselves in...there was no appreciation of our privacy or independence'

We ask a lot of students. We ask them to move home leaving friends and family behind and to move in with strangers, we expect them to quickly learn to look after themselves without those supports, whilst engaging successfully with new modes of learning. It is a tall order.

One aspect of our students' talk we had not anticipated was how students felt about the clearing system, and how that impacted on their transitional experiences. We found that students' expectations differ greatly when talking to those who had come to university 'through clearing' compared to those coming to their chosen uni. Students who had come through clearing were distinctive in their negative attitudes to the transition. One student felt lecturers 'assume you know about the course and you're already interested', which she felt did not take into account

the clearing experience. Coming through clearing also had accommodation implications, which impact negatively on one's sense of community and well being:

- 'I came so late I didn't get into uni accommodation.. I feel so out of it'
- 'I came through clearing, I just didn't know what to do...there was no room left anywhere...'
- 'I came through clearing so I hadn't even seen UWE, I didn't know the area of anything or anything about the course...they assume you know all that and you really want to be here'.

A moment's thought should make this easy to appreciate. The positive initial choices of course and location have in whole or in part been nullified. It is not surprising therefore that it is likely that students recruited to their second or lower choices may well be less able to withstand the rigours of transition identified in this paper. As we are arguing, further research needs to address the ways in which one is accepted onto one's course, as well as one's experiences in the initial week, and how the form of the induction processes, can impact both on sense of community and in the modes of investments into learning students choose to adopt.

(iii) Investments of modes of learning

Our students talk indicates that the picture of the 'passive', 'consumerist' student obscures the immense investment that students put into their practice as students.

Our research suggests that students mobilize a range of investments in turning up to seminars, a point which has implications for the range of retention strategies universities develop. Our students' talk showed that students turn up at seminars for a variety of different reasons, which in turn impact on how they interact in the seminar, and how they relate to the tutor. Whilst we would agree that there is an undeniable shift towards the commodification of higher education as we have noted we would not be so quick to assume this inevitably results in the student experience becoming one of instrumentalism, in which students learn to 'manage their learning efficiently without engaging fully or deeply in the processes of learning' (Tinto, 2000, 5).

Instead, we would argue that our findings start to suggest that students can and do engage actively with the learning experience, investing creatively in a range of relationships and investments with tutors and their student colleagues which both complicates the simplistic

'scholars versus consumers' dichotomy (cf Furedi 2003). This in turn raises questions about how we as tutors make sense of and work with those investments.

Our findings suggest four interrelated dominant strands of talk. Firstly, students talked about their expectations of modes of learning, in terms of timetabling. Secondly, there was a significant amount of talk on effective and ineffective seminar experiences. Thirdly, students talked about strategies of attendance, and finally, students talked about lecturers and the lecture experience.

Firstly, most of the students we interviewed talked about their surprise at how few hours they were expected to attend university. Students tended to talk about this aspect of uni life in particular as contrasting with their expectations:

- 'I thought the academic side was going to be more pressing...harder...and I was going to be busier, I thought I'd be doing more things'
- 'I was a bit surprised at how little I've got to do'
- 'I'm only in for a few hours Monday and Friday, the rest of the time I lie on my bed listening to music'
- 'I'm only in two days a week and it's really hard to motivate myself...I wake up and think, 'I haven't got anything to do today'
- 'I know it's ironic because I'm such an aimless slacker but I do think more work would be good, because then I'd have to get on with it and I'd come in more'
- 'It's easy to forget you're a student'

Almost everyone we spoke to had expected more hours' contact time and more of a sense of student community. As we've argued, current research positions the mismatch of expectation between modes of learning as one of the key flashpoints of the transitional experience. Tinto for example warns of how students who 'typically take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another in both content and peer group' seem, not surprisingly, 'so uninvolved in learning'. He concludes that this is because 'their learning experiences are not very involving', and that the experience of learning in higher and further education is – despite recent innovations and research – 'still very much a 'spectator sport'' (2000, 10). However our findings suggest that a student does not operate in isolation but with reference to other modes of investing in learning, a point noted (but not developed) by Grisoni and Wilkinson who similarly identify a 'tension...between students' expectations that they will have to work independently...and students' demand for guidance to achieve results' (2005, 14).

Secondly, our research appears to support Ballinger's (2002) argument that seminars generate confidence and a feeling of belonging, which in turn fosters co-operation between students' finding their way round uni campus and culture and generated 'a sense of we're in it together' (Ballinger 2002,105). Drew (2001, 323) also notes students prized tutorials most highly for feedback and support. Grisoni and Wilkinson argue that identifying with a group not only helped learning but helped generate a sense of belonging and understanding, enabling students to develop a sense of self which helped them cope with the anxieties and insecurities of their new situation.

In our focus groups and interviews, students were invited to discuss what they felt were effective and less effective seminar experiences. Generally good seminar tutoring practice was seen as:

- Using different methods to make it interesting each week,
- Having smaller groups: 'then you can bond and have really good discussions',
- Encouraging interaction: particularly if the tutor encourages you personally, by knowing your name and encouraging shyer members to speak, 'then they draw everyone in and you get a discussion going, that's great'
- Friendly but focused: whilst tutors were praised for being 'friendly', 'you also want to come out feeling you've learned something'
- Involving debate
- Clearly linked to the lecture/what other colleagues were doing and to assignments
- Pitched appropriately.

Ineffective practice involved:

- Repetition: the same format every week: 'you do get the impression some lecturers are just going through the motions'
- Large groups: 'I thought there'd be discussion groups, but there's only seminars and they can be really big so it's hard to get a discussion going'
- Mini lectures and passive learning/patronizing attitude: 'one of my seminar tutors, she just talks at us for 40 minutes and then runs off'
- Lack of structure: 'I get annoyed when we end up chatting...we are paying for this!'
- Not connecting with the module: 'sometimes there's not much connection between seminars and lectures, then it does feel like going is a waste of time' Treating all students as having the same background: 'I don't think he appreciates it's not just the top really intelligent people who go to uni any more...we're more diverse'; 'In my

seminar there's a couple of loud intellectual people and the tutor just talks to them all the time and assumes because they understand it everybody else does'; 'Sometimes you're with people who haven't done the A level and basically end up doing the work for them'.

We see this picture of diverse learning experiences as having significant implications for the ways tutors engage with the student cohort. Clerehan (2002) for example is typical in finding that students prefer seminars as a more effective learning experience and as promoting sense of belonging. Clerehan and others talk about 'good' seminars with 'skilled' tutors who encourage interaction and effective learning practices. What needs to be answered now via further research is firstly, what kinds of things does a 'good' tutor do? What do they bring to the seminar? In our research, students talked positively about 'laid back, encouraging' tutors:

'It's really important that the lecturer knows your name, so they can say things like, 'what do you think, Jen? You feel much more comfortable to talk.'

One student had emailed her tutor about missed work due to illness, her tutor had replied signing off with 'I hope you feel better soon':

'I know that's a really small thing but it absolutely makes the world of difference'.

Marland (2003) argues one problem of the 'transition' is the low priority first year teaching has, and the fact that the least experienced, often part time, hourly paid tutors do most of the first year teaching, although Ballinger (2002) disagrees that this is problematic, arguing they are more likely to be sympathetic and approachable, as at least- in the case of a typical Phd student - they can recall what it's like to start uni. Anecdotal research suggests conversely that such tutors can also be struggling with student life themselves, typically feeling isolated and unsupported. As we have argued above, students are aware of, and can feel their learning is undermined by, the possible lack of communication between full time and part time tutors.

Thirdly, our findings lead us to suggest that we also need to consider students' strategies regarding attendance. In our students' talk there were two contrastive themes concerning the impetus to attend. Students tended to take up one of two perspectives: either they felt seminars should be firstly and foremost about prepared debate, or they felt justified in turning up regardless of having done the work as it was their choice to do so.

- 'Because I come to seminars having done the reading and with questions and like, if they haven't done the reading I really think the tutor should just send them home, because..what's the point of them coming'
- 'I feel really bad for lecturers, they come in prepared for a proper discussion, but no-one's done the reading and no-one says anything so they all just sit there for an hour while the tutor bleeds answers out of them...it's disheartening'
- 'It's so annoying, you've done the reading and everyone else just sits there and the tutor has to do something so you have a very superficial session'.
- 'The worse seminars are when you're all just sitting there and no-one done the reading'.

Which can be contrasted with the following strategy:

- 'I like to attend seminars even if I haven't prepared or read anything because I always think I'll learn something...it might inspire me to do the reading^
- 'I'll learn more than I would just sitting about drinking tea!'
- 'I like to turn up and I do talk even if it's out my arse'
- 'In seminars I'm a passive student, I just don't get it so when she asks a question I do just sit there with a blank expression on my face'

Even the comments of the least enthusiastic students do speak of an engagement with learning if not of any great consciousness of how to do it. Discursively, our findings start to tentatively suggest there is a discourse of 'slacker bravado' which needs further unpacking. Common talk in most groups positioned themselves according to a discursive construct of the 'slacker culture', either defending themselves against it, or identifying with it, as with the student earlier who identified herself as a 'geek', compared to the student who cheerfully announced that 'I never read books...I just get titles off Amazon and write them down [as a bibliography]. Everyone does it!'

- 'There's definitely a slacker culture here, but I don't get bothered by it myself. I just try and get a good balance'
- 'The majority of students are so apathetic, just sitting round drinking tea all day, I can't do that'
- 'I feel I am definitely in the minority, people say 'why aren't you going out you boffin?!' But I don't care!'

- I write notes or queries and you go to seminars and no-one's debating with you or agreeing with you, it's just not worth it
- 'the most important things at uni-coffee, red bull and pro plus...I often go to lectures still drunk...but it doesn't seem to make any difference!'
- 'We sit about, drink tea, watch telly...I am such an aimless slacker'

Further exploration into what makes good practice in teaching and learning could include discussions into how such good student practice could be spread amongst students themselves. One suggestion is peer mentoring, although current research such as Budney and Pauls' peer mentoring study (2004), focus on the creation of supportive friendship groups to enhance belonging, rather than specific mentoring in order to promote 'good' student learning practices. Again, what seems to be needed here is a conceptual framework including the transitions in lifestyle and social identity, as opposed to the less useful view of the transition as primarily academic.

Linked to this talk on attendance and non-attendance, was 'consumerist' talk on education. One student defined 'good students' as 'unquestioning blobs....you pay your money and don't think are you getting your money's worth'. It is interesting that the student clearly has formed the view that the University's version of a good student is the blob! Some were critical of the 'slacker' mentality:

'I don't think of myself as a 'consumer' of my course, only in the sense that if you're being slack and not turning up for stuff it's stupid because you're paying for it, so that's what motivates me'.

When tutors were absent, this was seen by some as 'short changing' the paying student:

- 'when they cancel a seminar, that's it, they don't find a replacement...we said to [our tutor] we'll have to catch up and he's like, oh yes we will somehow but it's unsatisfactory really, we *are* paying for this'.
- 'I do think about what it costs and what I get out of it'.

It is worth asking just what message students receive from the attitude of lecturers to their own position, to what extent the relative importance or unimportance of certain practices, such as seminar talk, is constructed by teaching staff?

Fourthly, as we have discussed, current research cites the lecture as the most unfamiliar and thus potentially problematic aspect of uni learning. Certainly, some of our respondents echoed this:

- 'Lectures just kill me...they drone on and on'
- 'I've counted the tiles on the walls..the chairs...if it's over my head I've got no concentration span'

However our findings so far generally seem to contradict this notion of lectures as a key problem. Students in the main talked very positively about lectures, the use of visual aids such as PowerPoint and the online support of lecture guides and notes.

Taking issue with Tinto's somewhat gloomy picture of isolated individuals engaged in the passive consumption of lectures, we would argue that there are times when it is entirely appropriate that learning is a 'spectator sport'. Generally, our students talked very positively about 'well organised' lectures and lecturers as 'approachable', 'enthusiastic' and 'friendly', suggesting that to spectate an effective teaching performance is a positive form of investment in learning, as long as the connection between the lecture and the seminar discussion is made clear.

Our research so far supports other papers' conclusions that one of the most significant factors affecting the transition is the clash of expectations. Thus in practical terms, this paper adds to the general call for more preparatory work to be done at A level, raising students' awareness of course content and teaching methods. We would propose that a strategy based on independent learning, life skills and study skills would be helpful.

One of the problems with current types of induction and orientation strategies, Clark and Crome argue, is that whilst 'activities are planned in great detail by faculties and departments....[they] do not embrace the change from a pre university life to a university lifestyle' (2004, 6). Neither do they acknowledge that the induction processes of Freshers week are themselves potentially stressful times which students need to feel prepared for, as we have argued. In our research, talk about managing expectations was linked to the perceived need for personal tutors. As one student argued:

'We're left to get on with it too soon, it's good to learn independence and we need to do that, but we could do with a bit more hand holding first'.

Preparatory work at A level ties in with Marland's (2003) suggestion that introductory workshops for first years should 'demystify' uni culture, practices, and discourses and so on. Such support could come in the form of tutorials: Perry and Allard for example describe tutorials in which students explore their feelings and anxieties about the transition, recommending such tutorials form an 'integral part of the first semester' (2003, 80). Clerehan offers a similar suggestion, setting out strategies for helping students engage with the 'distinctive discursive mode' of essay writing from a study skills perspective. These strategies echo Smith and Hopkin's point made earlier about foregrounding the 'newness' of the transition (2004, 315).

Perry and Allard's inclusion of lecturers in their transitional research is pertinent to our argument. Further research is needed to examine lecturers' discursive constructions of students: is it accurate to say there is a lingering mythology of elitism – seeing the 'problem' of transition as the students' responsibility, and a tendency to see teaching first yrs as low priority/status? Students themselves, particularly those with little or no second-hand hand experience of university (i.e. graduate parents/siblings) maybe share this 'mythology' that academic life is about 'being clever' – which is why students get so confused about not just writing their own opinions in essays, and find it a challenge to develop their own critical voice. This may be why students choose to reject this mythology outright, choosing to describe themselves as 'thick' or 'slack'.

Thus 'students in transition...need to read the culture of the new setting, and ...seek out culturally appropriate ways of participating' (cited in Perry and Allard 2003, 75). Perry and Allard suggest conceptualising the process (and communicating this conceptualising to the students themselves in the form of workshops and introductory modules) as involving both transitions and connections. They argue that students need to be encouraged to make connections with other transitions in their personal history, with others around them and with the new culture of which they are now a part. Their strategy included getting students to write autobiographical pieces about their feelings in the first few weeks of term, which helped the students reflect on their transitional experience, make connections with other experiences they may have had (and thus aid them in managing the situation). These pieces were passed on to tutors, providing them with an insight to how overwhelmed and anxious most students felt.

In terms of developing a conceptual framework for understanding students transitional experiences, we would argue for a more complex mapping out of a range of investments into

student life and learning, than is currently the case. We would argue that defining current university culture as involving a shift towards an instrumentalist attitude to learning and the commodification of higher education, is too simplistic a picture of scholars versus consumers.

So something we could explore in further research is this possible 'transitional' tension between the myth of 'Being clever' and the more constructivist current reality of '*Doing* clever' – learning how to integrate, and develop, one's own critical/intellectual voice into the existing institutionalised social practices and discourses of uni learning, what Clerehan talks of as 'genres of learning'. In other words, the appropriate cultural capital to make the various transitions necessary to effectively engage with university life - specifically, to make the most effective investment choices when it comes to engaging with learning.

Conclusions.

Overall we were impressed by a sense of how students presented themselves as prepared to act but found the environment, the university's structures and even issues such as late arrival or the disappointments expressed in clearing as inimical to an active role as a student. In fact we would go so far as to say that the expression of a 'slacker culture' particularly when expressed in the talk on learning expressed a necessary adaptation to the challenges of the transitional situation. In other words the self-identification as a slacker or indeed, a 'geek' to some extent seemed to derive from the need of students to express an active choice rather than appear to be the victims of circumstance.

Obviously, this is a small scale project of mostly self selecting interviewees, and considerable further work needs yet to be done to make sure a wider range of students gets heard, particularly those who do not tend to go to seminars and lectures and are therefore difficult to contact. Whilst our findings offer some tentative practical suggestions, set out below, the focus in this final part of this paper is on the implications our discussion has for future research.

Our research has tentatively shown that students talk about and invest in their new habitus in various connecting ways. Taking their point that 'we need to understand more about how to further deepen the connections students make' (Perry and Allard, 2003, 14) during their transitional experience, we would argue that further research plans could consider mapping out these investments and connections, in terms of:

- How students connect past (6th form) with present experiences
- How students connect with uni culture (traditions of learning)
- how they connect lifestyle with learning (how do they manage living away from home, jobs etc)
- How they connect campus with everyday life/their surroundings/home
- How lecturers connect with students (knowledge transfers and exchanges).

Making such connections is not only a practical tool for student self management. We would argue that within this field of study we too should aim to connect current practical research with a wider theoretical framework. We need to conceptualise the transition not simply as primarily academic but involving investments in lifestyle and identity as well as learning. Ultimately, as teachers and researchers we need to connect the notions of 'scholar versus consumer' in more complex and productive ways, ways which engage with and integrate our increasingly diverse student population.

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