FYHE
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Implementing a Principal Tutor to increase student engagement and retention within the first year of a professional program

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Abstract

With ongoing changes to the requirements for professional registration, greater demand for professional services, and targets for increasing participation, universities must adapt quickly to ensure that the quality of accredited professional programs is continually improving. The problem of retaining students is particularly relevant in accredited professional courses where students often have unrealistic expectations about course content and the profession. In order to address issues surrounding student engagement and retention in an accredited psychology course, a Principal Tutor was appointed to a first year cohort. By using a transition pedagogy framework to support student engagement through incorporating administrative and profession-specific advice within and outside the formal curriculum, the program appears to have been successful in increasing student engagement. Indicators of student engagement were higher than national averages and retention rates improved. Implications for possible application of the initiatives included in this program elsewhere are discussed.

Student engagement

The training of future professionals has been an issue for ongoing debate internationally for a number of years, particularly in the allied health professions (see Aiken, Cheung & Olds, 2009; Kennedy & Innes, 2005). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008) has flagged the increasing demand for health services and trained health professionals as a "looming crisis." At the same time, governments in a number of countries are pushing for greater participation in higher education overall (e.g., see Australian Government, 2009; House of Commons, 2009; US Department of Education, 2006). Despite this, a significant proportion of these students do not make it past their first year (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009) and much of this may be attributable to their inability to engage with their studies and with their discipline (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008).

Student engagement is directly related to overall student achievement (Carini, Kuh and Klein, 2006) and the probability that students will finish their course (Laird, Chen & Kuh, 2008), while disengaged students are far more likely to withdraw from university (Kuh et al., 2008). Maintaining student engagement is a problem in first year classes in particular where the classes are much larger and the material is less sophisticated than at higher levels (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005). Furthermore, Lizzio (2006) argues that a sense of connectedness and purpose are particularly important in ensuring success in first year and are intricately linked to student engagement. These aspects of the first year experience are crucial in terms of the development of students' attitudes to learning and exert an influence on their decision to persist and complete their course (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

On top of these broader issues, engaging students is a unique challenge for psychology as a discipline, because psychology courses and majors generally draw a diverse range of (often mature-aged) students with little understanding of the actual content of a psychology degree (Wallwork, Mahoney & Mason, 2006). Although the material covered in first year is less sophisticated, these misconceptions remain an issue. There is much debate within the profession regarding the requirements for psychology degrees (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2006; Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2008) and what is required of graduates beyond graduation (Jones, 2007; Kennedy & Innes, 2005; Rossen & Oakland, 2008), which in turn leads to confusion amongst students. These issues have for some time had a negative impact on levels of student engagement and sense of purpose amongst first year psychology students and have been experienced at institutions in various parts of the world (e.g. Dillinger & Landrum, 2002 [US]; O'Connor, Hansen & Thorne, 2009 [Australia]; Rowley, Hartley & Larkin, 2008 [UK]; Wallwork et al., 2006 [UK]).

Despite these difficulties, many authors (e.g. Kuh et al., 2008, Trotter & Roberts, 2006) argue that institutions can have a significant positive effect on engagement and persistence by implementing holistic programs designed to directly increase student engagement. Moreover, Coates (2005) suggests that it is the obligation of the institution and staff to provide the best possible environment for student engagement. Enhancing the first year experience through increased student

engagement and by addressing sense of purpose and connectedness using integrated curricular and co-curricular approaches has been labeled "transition pedagogy" (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). Based on the growing research on transition pedagogies, the program presented here is an attempt to embed transition pedagogy within a broader process of curriculum renewal at an Australian university.

Background

In order to apply transition pedagogy and attempt to increase a sense of purpose and connectedness, a psychology department at a regional university in Australia implemented a pilot program involving a "Principal Tutor" for managing some administrative functions and implementing co-curricular approaches aimed at increasing student engagement. The institution enrols a greater proportion of mature age students, indigenous students and students with low socio-economic status than the Australian averages (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The sample is therefore representative of future student cohorts under the widening participation agenda. The two subjects involved in the program were on-campus core subjects for psychology students and students in a number of other disciplines such as sport and exercise science. The subjects include a survey of the length and breadth of the discipline covering the history of the profession, neuroscience, psychopathology, research methods and all of the profession's sub-disciplines. The Principal Tutor taught the majority of the first year tutorials and coordinated all tutorials—a feature that differentiates this program from other similar initiatives such

as that described by Burnett & Larmar (2011). The Principal Tutor also managed assessments and general administrative matters for all students enrolled in the two introductory psychology subjects, providing a reliable link between the students and the Department and thus aimed to increase the sense of connectedness. Bryson and Hand (2007) argue that the fostering of the relationships between teaching staff and students in this way has a significant positive influence on student engagement and that was the primary motivation for the implementation of the role.

In addition to managing some administrative aspects of the subjects and attempting to increase a sense of connectedness in students, the Principal Tutor also attempted to increase sense of professional purpose by contextualising the subject curriculum within the degree and the profession. This is something that is generally lacking from psychology programs and leads to many misconceptions amongst first year students (Wallwork et al., 2006). Flexible time in tutorial sessions was used to discuss issues concerning professional registration, course structure, options for further study beyond graduation and career opportunities. The sessions were set up so that students had the choice of working through self-paced exercises or to be involved in discussion of administrative and profession specific topics, which, where possible, related to the theoretical course material covered in the session. In turn, students developed a better understanding of why they were learning specific theories as opposed to just being encouraged to rote learn the material, a strategy that is common amongst first year students based on the types of assessment

tasks typically assigned to them (Biggs, 2003).

In an attempt to address a possible loss of a sense of a learning community among the students, a *Facebook* group and Fan Page were set up over the course of the program with the express intention of providing the students with a virtual space to get to know each other and collaborate. Research suggests that information technology can be used effectively to increase student engagement (Laird & Kuh, 2004) and social networking has specifically been promoted as a powerful tool for assisting in improving student engagement by increasing opportunities for collaboration (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009). Students have been found to have positive attitudes towards social networking being used by institutions in this manner (Lodge, 2010). Membership of the group was limited to enrolled students only and the spaces were used by staff to post news items of interest, to arrange social events for students and to send out informal announcements that would appear on their *News Feed*.

The last initiative was aimed at helping students feel like they are part of the university and to encourage them to believe that they can successfully complete their courses. The Principal Tutor conducted a follow up of the bottom 10-15% of students after each assessment item encouraging these students to persist and make use of support services. Students in large cohorts who struggle with course material seem to benefit considerably from personal feedback of this sort (Isbell & Cote, 2009). The Principal Tutor also made a point of knowing the name of every student studying psychology at the campus at all year levels.

The underlying philosophy of the initiatives included in this program is that small, simple modifications can make a big difference in terms of student engagement and retention when implemented in concert with curriculum renewal. It is not difficult to treat first year students as individuals and not as one on a list of student numbers nor is it difficult to present some information about the whole course structure, about the profession and about career opportunities within and complementary to the curriculum. This inclusion does not take away from the material covered in introductory courses but rather contextualises it, making engagement with it easier for students (see also Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz & Dahlgren, 2008).

Methods

An evaluation of the Principal Tutor program was conducted in a manner similar to large-scale studies of student engagement within a transition pedagogy framework. Ethics approval was obtained from the institutional Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct the evaluation. In order to assess the effectiveness of the program, and in line with previous research on student engagement, an online survey was created to obtain quantitative and qualitative feedback from students. Students were invited to participate via an email. In accordance with the recommendations of the university ethics committee, a hyperlink was included in the online learning management system used for the subject and became inactive after being used to ensure students only completed the survey once. It was also made clear to students that participation was voluntary and that their responses were anonymous

and could not be linked to their assessment in any way.

Students were asked to enter their degree and major, some questions about the quality of the teaching in psychology, some specific questions about the Principal Tutor program and about their engagement with their studies and with the university (based on the type of data reported in the Australasian Student Engagement Report; ACER, 2010) as well as some general demographic information. These survey questions were presented as 5-point Likert scales including values from "poor" through to "neutral" and up to "excellent" for attitude measures and 4-point Likert scales ranging from "very often" through "often" to "sometimes" and "never" for behavioural measures. Each set of questions included an option for additional feedback in an open text field after each block of questions.

Surveys were administered at the end of both years in which the pilot program was underway. The results of the surveys were amalgamated from both years to provide an indication of the effectiveness of the program across the two distinct cohorts. As with other surveys of this kind, percentages of respondents for each of the options in the Likert scales were calculated to allow comparison with national averages. Open-ended responses were coded by theme and mapped to corresponding quantitative data to allow representative comments to be extracted and reported.

Results

Respondent demographics

One hundred and twelve students completed the survey (59.6% response rate), 90 of the respondents were female and 22 were male. The age range of respondents was 18 to 51 years with a mean age of 25.9 years. Ninety four of the respondents were admitted into a psychology degree or were completing a psychology major; the remainder reported studying a range of other disciplines as their major including sport and exercise science, education and social work. This was a representative sample of the students in this cohort in terms of age, gender and degree admission according to records in the university's student information system.

The Principal Tutor

Overall, 92% of students were able to correctly identify the Principal Tutor. Of the respondents, 86% rated the ability of the practices associated with the psychology subject to make the students feel part of the subject/discipline as quite good or excellent. All but two students in psychology degrees and majors rated that the subject was quite good or excellent at making them feel part of the discipline. The majority of respondents also rated the psychology subject as quite good or excellent compared to other disciplines in the following dimensions:

- communication of academic (72%) and administrative (70%) issues;
- responses to enquiries (79%);
- availability of class tutor (86%); and

- availability of principal tutor (77%)

One student commented, "There is definitely a collective sense of psychology given. I think [the Principal Tutor] and [other tutor] are very good at promoting this. They are both easy to approach and very helpful."

Engagement data

There were several noteworthy results in terms of student engagement when compared to the national averages as reported in the Australasian Student Engagement Report (ACER, 2010). When examining how often students report working with other students during class, no students reported that they never worked with other students while the national average is 16%. The national average percentage of students who report that they never work with other students outside of class is 15%. Although there was a similar proportion of psychology students reporting that they do not work with students outside of class, 34% of psychology students worked with students outside of class often or very often. On average, 2% of first-year students nationally worked with a staff member on a research project outside class, 22% in this sample did so. Nationally, an average of 39% of first-year students discussed career plans with staff, 56% of psychology students in this sample did so, with 10% of students reporting that they did so often or very often.

Of more concern is that some students (20%) in this sample reported spending less than one hour a week preparing for class, however, only 1% reported spending less than one hour a week working on assignments with 78% actually spending the recommended 10 hours a week or more on their studies. A number of students (8%) reported spending 10 hours a week or more partying with substantial numbers of students working for income more than 10 hours a week (53%) or caring for dependents 10 hours or more a week (27%) reflecting the various conflicting commitments and priorities of students in this cohort.

Most students described their relationship with the academic staff in psychology as good or excellent with one student commenting that the academic staff were "very easy to get in contact with and [were] supportive." The tone was similar when students were asked to describe their relationship with other students—many claimed to have met good friends in psychology classes and described their relationships with other students as good or excellent.

Engagement with the *Facebook* group was also high relative to the total number of students studying psychology on campus. Student members of the group quickly rose to over 160 within the first few weeks of the group going live. A number of discussion board topics were started and several students commented in the survey that they used the social networking site to help them get to know other students. The vast majority of students indicated support for the *Facebook* group with only one student voicing a clear negative opinion of social networking and the use of online technology as part of their university experience (see also Lodge, 2010).
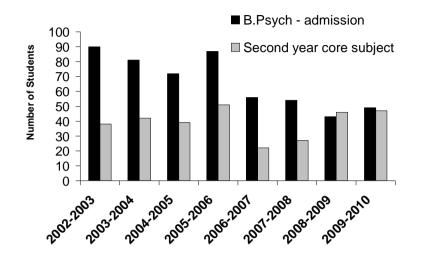
Legend: ■ B.Psych - admission ☐ Second year core subject

Figure 1   Retention of students from first year admission to a Bachelor of Psychology to second year core subject the following year

Retention data

Since the inception of the Principal Tutor initiative, there has been a marked turnaround in retention numbers. Figure 1 demonstrates the change in admission numbers in the psychology degree between first year and the second year core subject; which gives a clear indication of retention rates.

The second year subject included in Figure 1 is a statistics subject that is only attempted by students in accredited psychology degrees. These numbers have also been adjusted to account for varying failure rates in the second year subject and show only genuine first attempts. There is a clear turnaround between the first year

group of 2007 and the first year groups of 2008 and 2009, when this initiative began and on into 2010. There were more students in the degree in second year 2009 than first year 2008 and is due to many students changing from broad degrees such as arts or social sciences into the professional psychology degree based on their experiences in the first year psychology subjects.

Subject satisfaction data

When asked to rate the subject against others, respondents rated the psychology subject as good or excellent consistently according to the following criteria – teaching style (89%), ability to communicate with all students (92%),

appropriate use of technology (85%), organisation (95%), feedback in class (90%) and feedback in assessments (93%), with no students rating the subject as poor on any of these dimensions. One student commented – "[The Principal Tutor] engages us and finds lots of useful material. I really appreciate [their] help in this subject, and it is due to [them] that I have decided to change from a Social Work to a psychology degree."

Discussion

The feedback from students suggests that the Principal Tutor implementation has had a positive effect on student engagement and retention. As predicted by previous research (eg. Laird et al., 2008), the retention of students was not only nearly total but many students in other degrees and disciplines changed course to an accredited psychology program as a result of their experiences in first year psychology subjects. Students also reported that they found psychology to be more organised, more interesting and more appealing than subjects in other disciplines, all factors that are pivotal in ensuring student persistence (Pascarella, Seifert & Whitt, 2005). Generally high satisfaction levels were also evident in the survey and research suggests that satisfaction is a critical factor in ensuring the improvement of educational quality (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker & Grogaard, 2002). Overall, it appears that these initiatives have had a considerable positive influence on student engagement and retention. The following student comment reflects student feedback about the program:

> [The tutor] is fantastic as the principal tutor. [They are] very knowledgeable

[and] provides more of an in depth learning experience than those of the lectures. [Their] tutorials promote deeper thinking and enhancement of analytical techniques. [They] demonstrate passion for [their] field [and] that is highly motivating for students. [They] also provided the class with information of what is to be expected from coming years (expected workload, what marks we need to achieve to go onto honours, skills to manage the workload etc.). [They] have offered to give subject selection advice [and] guidance when choosing our second year subjects. [They] have been the only person on campus that I have come across to give detailed [and] constructive academic advice. [They] are an invaluable resource to the [psychology] faculty. (From the Student Feedback Survey, 2008)

The aim of the Principal Tutor program was to provide a central contact and consistent administrative, academic and career information utilizing new techniques and technologies to increase student engagement with the discipline and the institution in parallel with curriculum renewal. The role was therefore both responsible for administrative aspects of the subjects and for implementing a series of co-curricular activities, as described. In this respect, this program has been a success and the Principal Tutor position will continue in the school with ongoing investigation of implementing a similar role in other disciplines. It must be recognised, however, that apart from the success of this program potentially being inextricably linked to the individuals involved, there are several other factors that make explaining the results problematic and these will be discussed in terms of the generalisability of the program.

Despite the potential of this program, adapting it to another institution, particularly a large institution, poses several challenges. It is evident that first year students find psychology a challenging field to adapt to (Wallwork et al., 2006), there is no doubt that the inclusion of information about course structure, the broader career options available and the requirements for registration as health professional would be beneficial to any first year cohort in an accredited course regardless of whether this is done in a program similar to this one or not. In order to achieve this, however, successful implementation of these initiatives requires the appointment of an individual with extensive administrative and professional experience. The other main issue is that a replication of this program would require several principal tutors to be feasible in a large university and would therefore add an extra layer of coordination to ensure effective cooperation between the teaching staff. Again, considering the knowledge required for the role, it may be difficult to find a suitable candidate. These considerations aside, there is no reason why certain elements of this concept cannot be adapted to suit larger institutions with similar success whilst not being a burden on resources. Based on these findings, some additional training for sessional staff to allow them to integrate more administrative and profession specific information into small group sessions would be a relatively simple and cost-effective way to increase student engagement and sense of connectedness and purpose. The current findings also reflect the importance of the development of sound relationships between faculty and students. Ramsden (2003) suggests that this aspect of teaching is often overlooked despite being related to deeper approaches to learning. The evidence here suggests that the ability to develop rapport with students can have a significant impact on their level of engagement.

Amongst the other initiatives implemented here, the adoption of online strategies for engaging students is very promising with research indicating that social networking in particular could prove beneficial in helping students engage with each other and with the institution (Lodge, 2010; Pempek et al., 2009). The pilot data included in this study indicates that students are quite positive about the use of *Facebook* as an additional communication channel outside traditional modes of contact. Social networking aside, modern "Web 2.0" technologies such as wikis, discussion boards and other online interactive tools are also providing new avenues not only for delivering course material but for the development of a learning community and connectedness that increase opportunities for engagement within and outside of the online environment (Laird & Kuh, 2004). This sense of community is something that is no doubt being lost as more students opt for flexible course delivery and with more professional programs becoming available through distance education. This is unfortunate as it is clear that learning communities have a positive influence on student satisfaction and involvement with their studies and the institution (Buch & Spaulding, 2008). The ability to build these communities online and to integrate more information about the profession into the first year experience is virtually limitless and, with students demanding greater flexibility, virtually unavoidable.

In order to keep up with the future demand for health professionals, it is imperative that consideration be given to making sure

that students who commit to an accredited professional course are given every opportunity to engage with the discipline in their first year at university. This program has highlighted some simple strategies that may go a long way to ensuring that those who have the potential and aspiration of becoming professionals do not become unnecessarily disenfranchised in their first year of study by getting maximum benefit from the ever decreasing time students interact with academic staff. A little effort at the coalface can contribute a lot to student retention and completion levels when done so across a school in concert with curriculum renewal.

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