I don't even know what her name is: Considering the challenge of interaction during the first year

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Abstract

First-year students have a need for connection with their peers and or teaching staff in their learning environment during the first year. This paper reports on research findings related to challenges related to first-year students' experience of interaction with staff in tutorials and with other students through group work. These findings are then discussed in the current context of the teaching and learning of first-year students and suggest that more attention need to be paid to creating conditions that enhance students' interaction with each other and teaching staff.

Introduction

A changing higher education sector

Research into issues for first-year students has developed considerably over the last decade in the U.S., the U.K., and Australasia. This can be seen as indicative of the changes that have occurred since the early 1990s, especially massification (Scott, 1995) and diversification of higher education. This has given rise to an increased interest in how first-year students can be supported and retained.

The idea that first-year students should be supported, however, is not uncontested. It could be argued that one of the central issues is whether universities acknowledge a role in helping students to get used to new learning and teaching environments. McInnis, James, and McNaugh (1995, p. 3) argue that institutional responsibility for helping students to adapt is the central problem: "The central problem for teaching and learning in the face of increasing diversity in the student population is that of aligning institutional goals with individual needs." Although they add that this does not mean that the first year should be without intellectual challenge,

> ... universities and academics have a responsibility to respond to the problematic nature of the transition process, especially in the face of the wider range of student abilities and experiences following the rapid expansion of the higher education system. (McInnis, et al., 1995, p. 3)

I too argue that universities need to assist students to become familiar with academic expectations, culture and conventions of academic discourses. In this article I will focus in particular on supporting first-year students through enhancing opportunities for connection with other students as well as staff.

Theoretical support for the importance of connection between students and students/staff can be found in research related to 'student engagement' and 'collaborative learning.' Student engagement research "focuses on the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes" (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 493). It has been recognised that engagement and connection with staff and other students is important for first year students (Krause & Coates; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and needs to be considered as a focus of action to enhance the transition and academic experiences of students during the first year. A high level of engagement with staff or other students facilitates access to help and support, and assists first-year students in becoming integrated in new communities. Collaborative (or cooperative) learning can broadly be described as active engagement of students in small groups for the purpose of completing tasks. There is a considerable body of research that emphasises the academic benefits of students learning from each other through working together (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Fowler, Gudmundsson, & Whicker, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Kagan, 1994; Ladyshewsky, 2001, 2006; Nelson, Kift, Creagh, & Quinn, 2007; Sharan, 1994; Topping, 1996). Collaborative learning activities are informed by theories such as cognitive development theory (Johnson, et al., 1998; Ladyshewsky; Slavin, 1991, 1996) and Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective (Johnson, et al.; Topping & Ehly, 2001).

These theories draw on the idea of socio cognitive conflict whereby students realise their differing understandings of their shared knowledge base. This 'conflict' can only occur in situations where students are interacting (Ladyshewsky, 2001). Krause and Coates (2008) emphasise that research on student engagement is also informed by the constructivist view that education is "fundamentally about students constructing their own knowledge" (Krause & Coates, p. 493).

In summary, there is clear theoretical support for the argument that academic activities where students engage with staff and other students are more likely to enhance first-year students' experiences and lead to better learning outcomes for students.

The research project

In my institution, a medium sized New Zealand university, a number of research projects reflect the increased interest in the first-year experience. The aim of these projects is to identify what initiatives may be considered to enhance first-year students' experiences. One of these research projects sought to map the first semester academic challenges of students new to the university. For one of the projects on which this paper reports, two data sources were used. The first source was data from a survey carried out in May 2004 amongst students enrolled in 100-level courses (n=1967). The second source was data from interviews conducted with first-year students in the same year (n=27).

The data were coded to increasingly abstract levels, similar to Carney's conception of a "ladder of analytical abstraction" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In coding the survey data I also drew on the Grounded Theory Method (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

A data-mining approach was used to interrogate both the coded data sources. I also performed additional searches on selected key words, and engaged in a process of repeated reading and annotation of the survey and interview data. The term 'data-mining' as an approach to creating knowledge from data sources, is often used in the context quantitative analysis and statistical operations on large databases (Castellani & Castellani, 2003); however, this approach is now also used for qualitative analysis (Castellani & Castellani; Simoff & Maher, 2000). The term data-mining is used in different ways. Simoff and Maher describe data-mining as knowledge discovery and a process of "... examining a data source for implicit information and recording this information in explicit form, in other words, the extraction of a high-level knowledge from a low-level data" (p. 5). Hirji (2001) argues that data mining "... represents an umbrella or catch-all for a wide variety of techniques that aim at examining large quantities of data" (p. 87). Data mining in the context of my project can be described as the selective use of data sources with particular research questions in mind.

I will report on the project findings related to one particular academic challenge, i.e., first-year students' experience of connecting and relating in the context of the tutorial environment, and their experiences in working together with other students in groups. I will briefly describe some of the specific challenges related to these two areas and provide illustrative quotes from the interviews.

Findings

The findings suggest that attention to personal connections were lacking in two particular areas. First, students reported that not all tutors seemed to value personal connections or peer relationships in the context of tutorials. Second, in the context of course-related group work, many students reported that tutors left them more or less to themselves to make their groups work; in many cases little guidance was provided.

In high school, teachers usually knew students by name. In tutorials in university, students did not always experience this. In some tutorial groups students and tutors introduced themselves; in others this did not happen. Two interviewees provided some good examples of these different levels of connection.

Emily[1] compared the tutorials for three different subjects:

> We have tutorials for [course A] and [course B]. They're pretty good because … they made us get in groups of three or four and we had to get to know each other. So it's like you get to know everyone in the tutorial.

The tutor also joined in this:

> She introduces herself, tells everyone a little bit about herself.

In another tutorial she also had good experiences of a tutor who wanted to be known by name:

> She makes time to make sure that she sees everyone within the allocated time um whether they need help or not she makes the time to

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[1] Not the student's real name; pseudonyms have been used when referring by name to interviewees

> make sure that she sees them and she makes sure we all know her
> name.

The tutor also tried

> to get to know us, and she's just very helpful and very friendly, and
> that makes you just want to go there.

In another course this did not happen:

> she told us a bit about herself. She didn't expect everyone to get to
> know everyone else because you don't have to go apparently.

What Emily seemed to suggest here is that because tutorial attendance was not
compulsory, personal relationship may not have been considered important by the
tutor.

Sally's experience provides another example of how a more personal approach to
tutorials was appreciated by students. In one of her tutorials there had been formal
introductions, and 'getting to know each other' activities:

> My [course A] tutorial's really good and so is my [course B]. [In] my
> [course C] the tutor just basically stood at the front of the class and
> just told us what to do. So that wasn't so fun … like every other
> tutorial I've been to you've introduced yourself. Like I don't even
> know what her name is.

Sally was not very happy with this tutorial. There was little interaction and students
often left as soon as they could, that is, as soon as the questions were answered.
Sally speculated why this was so:

> ... he never did introductories like the other, like no one, no one talked
> … Like everyone just sits there not talking to one another. And when
> you're in a strange environment where you don't know anybody
> you're less likely to say anything, and so no discussions really take
> place anymore.

What was striking was that Sally did not really like the 'getting to know each
other' activities; however, she had experienced the value of it:

> Much as I hate having to do the whole introductory thing, it's really
> necessary, like nobody talks to one another at all. Whereas say [course
> B], which I have before [course A] every night, we're like, we discuss
> things and we talk and like we'll get into class before our tutor gets
> there and we'll all sit there discussing the lectures and stuff. Whereas
> in [course A] everybody just sits there and stares at one another. It's
> really weird.

The relational aspect, then, had an impact on how students became familiar with
the tutorial teaching environment. Students generally appreciated tutorials where
they were 'known', and where they knew each other. Sally's experience illustrates
that the relational aspect can positively impact students' engagement with the
learning material. Emily's comments suggested that it may also impact attendance
of students.

Another opportunity for students to interact with each other was outside the
classroom in the context of group work. Students in various courses had to engage
in group work, including some large health science and business courses. Because
the survey questions specifically asked students about practices related to lectures,
tutorials and laboratories, not many comments surfaced about group work. In the

interviews, however, this was regularly mentioned. The main issues related to unequal participation and the composition of groups.

Explicit guidance in group dynamics or group processes was seldom provided. Brad, for example, commented:

> It was pretty strung together.

Emily mentioned that their teachers had touched on the issue of group dynamics, without going into too much detail. They had:

> a lecture on what to do if we had serious problems but other than that they said just stick it out, there's nothing you can do really.

Whether or not Emily accurately reported her teacher's remarks "just stick it out", neither she nor other interviewees could remember much more about intentional instruction related to working successfully in groups. Another interviewee, Harriett, talked about role division in groups:

> They said, you know there was a leader, and they were appointed and if you had a problem with someone you were to see them, or you went to see the tutor if you have problems in your group with someone not pulling their weight.

Other interviewees too mentioned that they could ask their tutor for help; however, this offer did not easily translate into students actually using this avenue of help. Bob's course was the exception in that group dynamics were acknowledged as playing a part in effective group work:

> they gave us readings in the library which we could go find … the particular one that I read wasn't particularly helpful … we're left on our own to do it.

He too mentioned that they had the tutor's email address in case they needed help.

The general paucity in explicit induction could possibly explain the frequently reported unsatisfactory group work experiences. Students reported both 'general' dissatisfaction and more specific issues. General dissatisfaction, for example, was expressed about having to do group work at all, and students preferring to work by themselves. Another reason was students not knowing each other in the class. When Emily, for example, rationalised why group work was difficult, she mentioned not knowing each other as a factor that did not seem to have helped her group. In Kate's case, the issue was choosing the 'right' group:

> like you have to pick these hard core groups like that get 20% of your whole years mark and you all get the same mark and you just don't know anyone, you don't know what they're really like, they could be real slackers.

Unequal participation within groups emerged as a significant reason why group work was experienced as negative. This was a major source of frustration in most groups. One mature-age student, who was keen to do well and carry out all tasks that were required, was particularly annoyed:

> I've done a lot of work and a couple of the other guys have done a lot of work. But the other guys haven't done hardly any.

He saw the benefit of group work as being able to achieve more than they would be able to as individual students. However he felt his group did not get to that point; those who had worked on the tasks were too busy bringing other members up to the same level of understanding.

Different explanations were suggested about why not all students contributed equally. Kylie thought that

> unless you manage to get three people that are all good workers, it would not work. She did like her group members, but they were less driven to do well; they were just there for a pass and I wanted to do better than a pass which meant that I'd have to do the work myself.

Emily felt that she was the most organised and therefore ended up doing more work. In Harriett's group, members had different degrees of being relaxed about the project:

> we [were] all sort of laid back, just some of us like me and [group member] really wanted to get it done, but they [two other group members] were just a little bit more laid back than us.

Kate mentioned that in her group members were not really motivated to do well:

> it's all come back on me to do it all which I really don't like, you know I don't think that's very fair but I don't know.

Getting her group members together was the major problem:

> They just sort of make excuses, and when we had group meetings and stuff, they never turned [up] on time, and didn't turn up at all, and don't do the work.

The challenge of unequal effort of group members was often resolved by some students carrying out more of the required tasks than other members. In most cases students did this because they did not want to be penalised in their mark. Brad and a few other group members, for example, ended up doing the most work:

> So we go to the group meetings that we set up ... and basically what we … end up doing is teaching these other three people that don't know what they're doing … what we've already just done.

Students reported that they often felt that they had to deal with this by themselves. Few students considered involving tutors in this. The ways in which tutors sought to deal with the issue of unequal participation were often considered ineffective by students.

Although some tutors had told their groups they could discuss concerns with them, none of the interviewees seemed to have followed this route. When I asked one interviewee whether he had talked to his tutor before they decided to by-pass the 'free-loaders', he answered:

> we've worked around it, we've decided to do something about it ourselves.

Another one felt she could not really

> nark on them or whatever, try and get their marks taken down, that's just not me.

Later on she repeated

> I wouldn't have gone and dobbed someone in ... And no one else would have done the same.

She was adamant that this view was shared by other students, that they would not 'dob in' or 'nark',

> I think most people were kind of in that same boat so there's not really anything the tutor can do unless someone's going to tell them there's a problem and most people wouldn't be likely to do that.

Another way some tutors dealt with unequal participation was peer or group evaluation. One interviewee, for example, mentioned they had to evaluate each other's contribution:

> at the end of the semester you're supposed to do a rating of like how everyone in the group, how much work they'd done.

She felt, however, that the process was flawed:

> You do it all sitting beside each other, so you're not exactly going to go ahh I'm going to make you lose all your marks and put you down this end of the scale.

In another case, students had to write a joint peer evaluation together. The group members decided to write their own paragraph and collate it:

> I had to type them into the computer and I wasn't allowed to change anything they typed or wrote, and then we all had to sign it afterwards and everyone was complaining about everyone else pretty much.

The one area where most tutors seemed to play an active role was in constituting groups. Nearly all interviewees commented on tutors' involvement in this process. This involvement mainly consisted of deciding how groups were formed. In the simplest case this consisted of splitting students in the room arbitrarily in the desired group sizes. Other tutors seemed to take this aspect very seriously. Harriett, for example, mentioned that

> They made a big deal about the groups, they're like you know you've got to pick the right sort of people … people that are motivated and you know people that aren't late and people that you think you'd work well with.

Identifying these particular students was easier said than done. Kylie commented on the element of luck in being in a good group. She commented that not everyone was lucky however:

> I hear of so many horror stories from people you know of their groups and stuff.

Two interviewees mentioned they were happy with their group. In both cases, students were free to choose their own group; in both cases students chose group members who lived in their own residential college. Both Rita and Matthew considered this logistically advantageous:

> I've got a friend from my hall which is really good because it means I can talk to him all the time (Rita),

> I decided it would be quite handy because if we need to call in a group meeting or anything we're all living together so it's quite good (Matthew).

Kate mentioned that in her tutorial group a lot of students knew each other from their college, and decided on working together. As she did not live in a college, she formed a group with others who were not in a college:

> there was like just a few of us who sort of didn't really know anyone, and we ended up going together and that was the biggest mistake ever.

Overall then, the assumption seemed to be that students had to respond to the challenges of group work by themselves without much guidance. There were few indications that students had understood that teaching staff might have had deliberate intentions or learning objectives associated with group work in mind. The various ways in which tutors sought to mitigate the issue of 'free-loading', then, were in the experience of students mainly ineffective. Students seemed reluctant to point at fellow group members who did not work as hard. Overall they seemed to consider the involvement of tutors in sorting out ineffectual group work to be limited.

Discussion

The importance of staff/student and student/student interaction in teaching environments is well-known and clearly linked to the retention of first-year students (Haggis & Pouget, 2002; James, 2001; Krause, 2006b; Kuh, 2003; Wilson, 2004). Krause (2006a) comments on the world-wide interest in student engagement in the higher education sector. James, too, points to the importance of more intensive interaction with first-year students in the early part of the year. Haggis and Pouget suggest that we cannot ignore the importance for first-year students of connection and support within their courses. For the students in their study, they say, this was not "... something 'extra', provided by a learning centre detached from their mainstream courses, but the way in which tutors both taught their subjects, and interacted with the students on an individual level" (Haggis & Pouget, p. 333). Wilson (p. 60), in focussing particularly on the needs of 'millennial' students, emphasises that "One important step in building relationships with students is to know them by name and seek informal contact with them." In drawing on research that suggests that just over a third of first-year students felt confident that they would communicate regularly with faculty, Wilson (p. 60) advocates that "... faculty may need to take the lead in establishing norms that facilitate connections with students." Some publications resulting from a New Zealand project on student outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2007; Zepke, et al., 2005) also report on the importance that students attach to personal connections in tertiary education classes.

With regards to beneficial interaction between students, the data show that students were provided with little guidance on how to make the interaction and collaboration in the context of group activities work. It could be argued that this in itself is normal, and that this could prepare students for group work beyond university. There did not seem to be many intentional processes to help students make sense of problematic situations, and help students to solve problems constructively so that they would learn something from this. Students experienced group work as something they had to do, not necessarily as something that was deliberately organised so that they would learn something from the process of group work.

Most research and writing on group work has in common an understanding that group work does not just happen, and that successful implementation of group work demands intentional processes. Research by Taylor and Bedford (2004) conducted into staff perceptions of students' non-completion in higher education suggested that there was some awareness of the importance of assisting students in group work. Staff recognised that the extent to which they assisted students to work effectively in groups could be a contributing factor to completion or non-completion. Three recent Australian publications (Caspersz, Skene, & Wu, 2006;

Fowler, et al., 2006; Nelson, et al., 2007) also reflect concerns in universities with the haphazard way in which group work often is organised.

It is interesting to note that two recent Australian publications were funded in recognition of the need to improve group work practices in tertiary settings. A publication by Queensland University of Technology (Nelson, et al., 2007) was funded through a project to enhance first-year transition; a Griffith University publication (Fowler, et al., 2006) through a strategic improvement grant. The QUT publication (Nelson, et al.) recognises the problematic practice of group work, and the particular importance for a deliberate approach to making groups work in the first year. The guide originating from Griffith University (Fowler, et al.), in its introduction to teaching staff, argues that teachers "... often set group work without giving consideration to the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to work effectively in groups" (Fowler, et al., p. 3). The authors continue by saying that teachers often "work under the assumption that students will know how to negotiate and organise themselves" (Fowler, et al., p. 3); they consider this approach to be ineffective. Students, they say, need to be guided in this and have opportunities to develop the skills required in teamwork.

Overall, then, the findings suggest that tutors' effectiveness in facilitating or enhancing interaction between tutors and students, and between students in the context of group work, was variable. Students did not always experience the nature of engagement in tutorial or group activities as conducive to personal connection, and feeling connected to the course or other students in the course. Students' reported experiences suggest that not all tutors had a sufficient awareness of the importance of effective interaction, i.e., interaction that enhances students' academic experiences and contributes to quality learning outcomes.

The issue of the variable quality of tutorials in higher education is not unique to the University in my study. Massification has led to a growing use of casual teaching staff to teach ever increasing numbers of more diverse students (Barrington, 1999; Kift, 2002; Stewart, 2004). Many of these casual/sessional teaching staff are tutors. Tutors are often undergraduate students who are at a more advanced level in their studies than those they are teaching. Many tutors have not received any 'training' in facilitating small groups, and often are not obliged to do so. A report by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (2003) points out that training for tutorial staff is problematic in Australian universities. The effects of untrained tutors could be inferred from the experience of some students in my study. One of the interviewees also mentioned that her department had halved the number of tutorials because of financial difficulties. Another mentioned that class sizes impacted on students feeling able to participate. As James (2001) suggested, if universities are serious about retaining first-year students, they have to accept responsibility for the impact of reduced opportunities for personal contact, and increased class sizes

Considering the importance of active engagement and personal connection in teaching/learning environments for first-year students, it is surprising that this is not reflected in the deployment of well-trained staff for first-year courses. In many courses, tutorials are the one 'formal' teaching/learning environment where first-year students have an opportunity to engage and interact at a more personal level with staff and other students. Furthermore, considering the known benefits of collaborative or peer-learning, it is surprising that awareness of facilitating effective group work is not more evident.

It could be suggested, therefore, that, to improve the experience and transition of first-year students, institutions should consider making a strategic decision to front-load resources to enhance students' experiences of interaction with their tutors and other students. This would entail a greater emphasis on the staff development of tutors. A training programme for tutors would include a focus on strategies to enhance interaction and personal connection in tutorials and effective facilitation of group work. Furthermore, institutions could consider creating more opportunities for students to interact with each other and learn from each other. Programmes such as Peer Assisted Study Sessions Programmes (Lewis, O'Brien, Rogan, & Shorten, 2005), based on Supplemental Instruction programmes in US universities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Prebble, et al., 2004), have been shown to be effective in both facilitating student interaction and enhanced learning outcomes. Where resources are scarce, programmes such as these provide not only an alternative to more expensive tutorial programmes, but are also theoretically sound and effective. Teaching staff and course coordinators, then, could actively encourage development of these programmes and as such contribute to enhancing the quality of learning in their first-year courses.

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