

A New Conception of Thriving

Martin Harris

University of Tasmania, Tasmania

Abstract

This study provides a framework and template for the design and implementation of transitional programs to higher education by identifying the characteristics and process that allow individuals to thrive in challenging circumstances.

There is a generally accepted view that there is a linear process of transition to higher education involving a disruption of old patterns, a period of uncertainty, and then a new beginning. My research, however, explores the evidence of such a dislocating challenge, and describes a new cyclic model that identifies the stages of the transition and the key characteristics within each stage. This research describes a suite of 16 prevailing themes and attributes the themes to the four process stages of the 'thriving transition cycle' (i.e. preparation, encounter, adjustment and stability).

This research provides a unique, dynamic and detailed framework for the examination of the transition process; and indicators for timely, effective interventions.

Introduction

Understanding the complex nature of a transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar requires an integrated approach. This research initially examined the transition experience of young men recruited to the Australian Football League (AFL) and, more recently, the school-to-work transition experience of apprentices. It examined the characteristics and processes that allow individuals to thrive in challenging circumstances and offered insight into the design of meaningful programs of support. Until now, most of the literature in regard to transition has focussed on the problems associated with the disruption of settled patterns.

This research identified the processes of the transition 'well resolved' and the personal characteristics of individuals who manage change well. There is confidence that the outcomes from this research will inform programs of support for other young people in transition.

Transitions

Transitions are those personal adjustments involved in change from the familiar to the unfamiliar and can be seen in three parts (a) the change between the old and the new, (b) the contrast in the internal frame of reference for the change, and (c) the surprise in the difference between the expectations and the reality (Bridges, 2004; Schlossberg, 1989; Selder, 1989). This adaptation requires individuals to:

- (1) Make sense of the challenge and identify the demands and constraints involved;
- (2) Decide on the required changes to best adapt;
- (3) Act on these decisions to adapt to the transition; and
- (4) Manage the stresses that emerge from these negotiations.

The time when the individual is committed to the new environment (and there is no turning back) represents a critical phase of the transition. An awareness of this 'tipping point' is important to the motivation to search for new meaning, and to begin the process of mastery of the new environment (Bridges, 1980, 1986; Nortier, 1995; Taylor, 1989). Selder (1989) describes this transition experience as a disruption of an existing reality that requires reconstruction, and consequently the resolution of uncertainty that "... bridges from a reality which has been disrupted to a newly constructed or surfacing reality" (p. 437).

Nicholson (1990) describes a model that encompasses the full range of experiences rather than being normative or prescriptive, and uses three guiding principles: (a) recursion: (i.e. stage 1 is also stage 5), with one cycle of the transition leading to the next; (b) disjunction: where there are distinctive qualities/characteristics at each stage; (c) interdependence: where the dynamic antecedent nature of one stage leads to the next. The tasks, successfully achieved, are enabling.

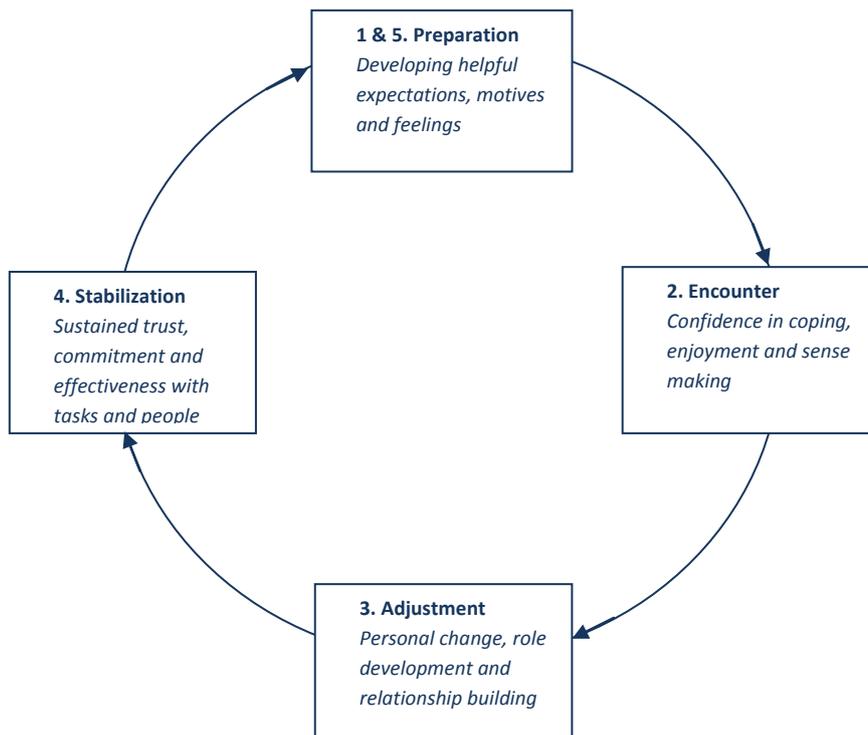


Figure 1: The Transition Cycle (Nicholson, 1987)

This complex, comprehensive model provides a framework for the exploration of the transition in four stages – preparation, encounter, adjustment and stabilisation, and to explore this experience from the organisational perspective as well as the psycho-social impact on the individual.

Thriving

Similarly, the ‘thriving’ literature (e.g. Ickovics & Park, 1998; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) indicates that successful adaptation is determined by the learning process rather than a passage of time. This ‘sense-making’ is the individual’s attempt to return to a state of equilibrium, provides meaning to the experience, and a frame of reference to interpret and understand events in the new environment. A shared transition can be experienced with a considerable range of variability: it is the personal adjustment made towards the new role, over time. Thriving is a response to challenging circumstance rather than adversity, and has a focus on learning and growth, rather than recovery (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Thriving is concerned with circumstances that are sufficiently destabilising to require the individual to re-examine the self (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

For educators, the potential for students to thrive will be contingent on their ability to manage the circumstances surrounding the transition. Until recently, the transition to an unfamiliar education setting (e.g. university or college) has been seen as a challenge of ‘orientation’.

This linear understanding does not acknowledge the complexity of the transition process and the individual challenges. An individual who thrives:

- (a) acquires skills and knowledge that can be applied to the next stage of a challenge;
- (b) develops confidence making future decisions based on the reflective awareness of what worked;
- (c) strengthens social networks through the successful mustering of support to negotiate the challenge; and
- (d) masters strategies to account for the disparity between expectations and experience. Consequently, thriving leads to positive outcomes through the effective mobilisation of resources.

The Investigation

In this investigation, a suite of valid and reliable instruments was used to determine the homogeneity of the participant groups. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experience of the transition and the process of thriving. The interview framework was designed to explore the characteristics and processes of thriving in the transition, i.e.

- The pre-transition experience;
- The congruence between the known and the expected;
- Awareness and confidence about the transition;
- Demonstrated engagement and involvement;
- Degrees of independence and autonomy;
- Levels of perceived support;
- Meaning attached to change;
- Markers for stability;
- Awareness and confidence during the transition;
- Management strategies for transition;
- Self-concepts and sense-making;
- Timeframes and milestones.

The thematic content analysis allowed for the clustering of data in the stages of the transition, and for the identification of the prevailing themes from the literature. The final 16 themes provided the opportunity to identify the participants at different categorical points and who might be described as:

- (a) Thriving;
- (b) Surviving; or
- (c) Languishing.

The emerging form is the Thriving Transition Cycle (Harris, 2009) that provides a developmental/sequential model for thriving in transition. This model ascribes the 16 themes to the stages of the cycle and provides evidence for the identification of participants within

the cycle. The opportunities for timely and focussed intervention are identifiable within the themes, especially when the individual transition is examined. This model appears below in Figure 2

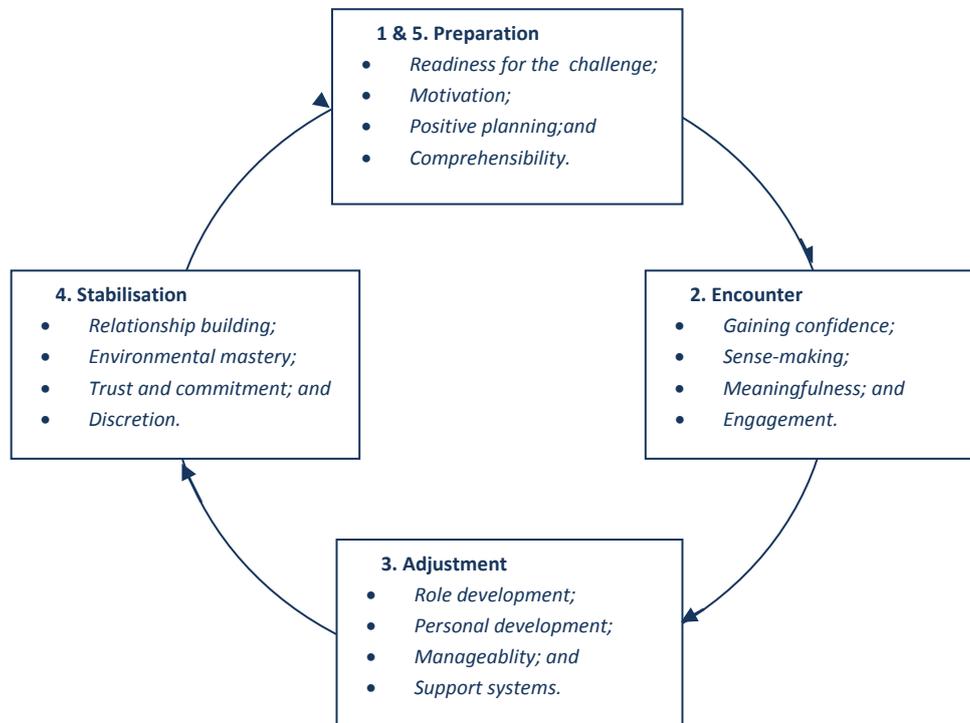


Figure 2: The Thriving Transition Cycle

Stage 1:

Readiness for the challenge examines the ability to engage the challenging transition in a purposeful way. Those who thrive are purposeful, aware and selective. Their readiness is formed by astute reasoning and purposeful investigation and they are able to identify features of the transition that are familiar. Those who survive are broadly aware of the challenge ahead but find difficulty in defining it in any meaningful way. There is often a lack of congruence between their expectations and the experience as they struggle to visualise a transition pathway. Those languishing at this early stage are unaware of the tasks that confront them, nor the strategies that might be usefully devised or applied.

Motivation provides an indication of willingness to engage in the dislocating transition, and particularly whether their approach was tentative or confident. Those who thrive are confident, optimistic and have proactive coping strategies. Those surviving are less confident and inclined to be overwhelmed by the challenge to move from the known to the unknown. They find it difficult to identify the priority tasks, and are motivated by the excitement of the occasion rather than an awareness of the strategic opportunity. They are

less likely to seek feedback, and the influence of feedback is often confusing and sometimes counterproductive. Those languishing are bewildered by the experience and find little assistance in the guidance offered to them. They are excited by the prospect of the transition, but unable to motivate themselves in a way that is productive.

Positive planning presents an indication of the ability to negotiate and plan personal pathways. Those that thrive are assured, have positive detachment, and confident in planning. They are able to execute their plan and learn from the experience. Those surviving are more guarded about the experience and feel their way through the process. Their expectations are often coloured by observations within the new environment and they struggle with the competing interests. Those languishing are often confused and struggle with the new responsibilities; they are consumed by fears of failing, rather than seeking support from others.

Comprehensibility describes the ability to grasp concerns in the transition process, particularly a clear, ordered and structured understanding of the imminent challenge. Those that thrive have a positive vision, and an understanding of what is required. They are aware of the process of transition and make specific requests for information and the timeframes involved. They are positive about the experience and not deterred by a lack of information. Those surviving are less clear about the tasks ahead and are inclined to follow the example of others rather than to understand the personal nature of the journey. Those at risk of languishing have little understanding of what is required of them and are only able to engage in the transition process in the most mechanical of ways. They struggle with the process from the outset, and information designed to be facilitating and supportive is often confusing and bewildering.

Stage 2

Gaining confidence focuses on the ability to negotiate the transition experience, particularly the disparity between the anticipated pathways and their experience. This 'gained confidence' is the product of the learning process and those that thrive have strong self-concepts, a capacity for recovery, and learn what is required to negotiate the transition. Survivors are less confident about the transition and search for direction. Their learning is haphazard and it is difficult for them to apply information and resources to the tasks they face. Those languishing find it difficult to describe a frame of reference for their transitional journey and become locked into strategies that do not serve them well and, as a consequence, their opportunities for productive learning are very limited.

Sense making describes the ability to make sense of their transition experience. Those that thrive have clarity of purpose, meaningful engagement, a commitment to the process, and a willingness to leave the old and embrace the new. Those surviving struggle for clarity of direction and have difficulty in applying knowledge. Further they are inclined to see the transition and the challenge as a single entity rather than a suite of demands. Those languishing are confused and struggle for direction. They grasp at any opportunity and mimic others to try and make sense of their experiences. They often become frustrated as effort and resignation become polarised positions and they become increasingly unable to have meaningful engagement.

Meaningfulness illustrates the ability to identify the components of the challenge as worthy of engagement. Those that thrive can recognise the significance of parts of the challenge as opposed to a bewildering whole, and a rational strategy for engagement. They are inclined towards a 'goal-learn' orientation (Porath & Bateman, 2006) where they are able to attach meaning to their efforts to negotiate the transition and devote the appropriate resources to the task. Those surviving are less able to identify the reasons for the engagement other than an amorphous expectation of the organisation, but one they were keen to fulfil. They are inclined towards a 'goal-prove' orientation (Porath & Bateman, 2006), but have difficulty in finding meaning in the efforts and attribute the dedication of resources as an external requirement. Those that languish are inclined to a 'goal-avoid' orientation (Porath & Bateman, 2006) and find it difficult to attach meaning to any aspect of the transition. They are absorbed by the risk of error and disabled by the process. In the most part they regard the transition as a series of important, albeit meaningless, activities.

Engagement explores the commitment to the transition, particularly the ability to be meaningfully engaged in the adjustment tasks. Those that thrive are able to make the transition to the new environment with an open and receptive 'mindset'. They are optimistic about their ability to negotiate the dislocating challenge and able to calculate what is required of them to succeed. Those surviving are more likely to be overwhelmed by the transition and wrestle with the competing emotions of leaving the past behind and engaging with the new environment. Those that languish struggle to break with the old environment and are beleaguered by the apparent volume of tasks. They keep their old life 'on hold' and make tentative and weak overtures to engage with others in the new environment.

Stage 3

Role development is a reflection of altruism and competitiveness in the context of the evolving role-fit relationship. Those that thrive are able to select strategies that are 'stage

appropriate' and likely to advance their adjustment without compromise. Those surviving have less insight into their opportunity to select strategies and are more likely to conform to group expectations irrespective of their suitability. Those that languish are often confused mimicked others. They resign themselves to the outcomes that flow from their efforts, rather than reflecting on the transition, their emerging role, and what has or has not worked for them.

Manageability describes the ability to meet the demands of the challenge, particularly the balance of competing interests. Those that thrive have an acute awareness of the component parts of the challenge and are able to allocate resources accordingly. They are able to accommodate the pressure of dislocation with a balanced approach and a sense of the manageability of the requisite tasks. Those that survive are more likely to see the transition as a 'whole' rather than the component parts and are less able to access the resources or strategies to assist them. Those that languish struggle to manage the transition and are often overwhelmed by the apparent magnitude of the experience. They are confused and inclined to embark on strategies that are instinctive rather than connected to a frame of reference.

Support systems are an indication of the nature and availability of information, social companionship, tangible resources and emotional support. Those that thrive can identify and access support systems (including their immediate friends, family and supporters); and new systems in the form of structures and routines. Those surviving can identify support systems around them, but find it more difficult to access them in a timely fashion. Those that languish have difficulty identifying sources of support and are troubled investing trust in them. They are often consumed by the challenge and cling to the dislocated support systems in an effort to survive.

Personal development is an indication of an ability to process the experience of the transition in a meaningful way and to learn from the experience. Those that thrive are able to identify development pathways and the learning experiences that characterised the process, e.g. seeking feedback to allay concerns. They are comfortable with the demands made of them and are able to derive substantial satisfaction from the progress they make. Those that survive are prepared to work hard towards their goals, but are less able to glean understanding from the experience. Those that languish are more likely to feel a sense of personal stagnation; they are unable to identify particulars from general praise, and are disabled by criticism.

Stage 4

Relationship building provides an indication of the ability to form meaningful and sustained relationships after the transition. Those that thrive show genuine warmth towards others and are active in their search to engage with others. By contrast, survivors are able to appreciate the camaraderie that exists but less sure of the lessons learned from the experience that might allow them to thrive. Those that languish struggle with relationships and are disturbed by the transient nature of the friendships that are formed. They find it difficult to invest their trust and learn from the experience, and are reluctant to sever the relationships from before the transition in case their need for them reappears.

Environmental mastery describes the ability to control and influence the environment. In particular it involves the mastery of strategies to account for the disparity between expectations and experience. Those that thrive have a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the new environment and are able to access the necessary resources to establish a satisfactory level of mastery. They are not concerned with the separation from the old environment and are more likely to attribute their success to clarity of direction, rather than luck. Survivors have a blurred sense of the new environment and lack the self-confidence to attribute their competence to anything except luck. They lack a sense of direction and are inclined to resign themselves to the requirements of the new environment, rather than to take stock of what is required to thrive and develop mastery. Those who languish struggle with the new environment and have few strategies to deal with the new challenges. They cling to old habits and lack the confidence to depart from patterns that have become familiar. They articulate consistent concerns that they 'feel outside' of the new environment despite being part of it, and struggle to find a place where they feel included and in control.

Trust and commitment is an indication of levels of assurance in the negotiation of the transition and confidence in the future. In particular it is the ability to navigate the time-bounded aspects of the transition in a meaningful way. Those that thrive have a vivid impression of their journey since the dislocating moment and a clear agenda for the next stage. They are able to 'let go' of their concerns and are receptive to the challenge of embracing the new environment. They feel reassured by the 'solidarity' of membership of the group and do not feel susceptible to the pressures that surround them. The survivors are less assured and the dislocation is still a poignant reference point for them as they contemplate the next stage of the transition. There is significant hesitation in their willingness to commit to the next phase of the transition; a legacy of their uncertainty. Those languishing experience difficulty in balancing the experience of the transition with a future

agenda, and they cannot discriminate between strategies that have been useful and those that have not served them well.

Discretion is a reflection of the scope to determine the content and scheduling of the transition, i.e. to plan personal pathways. Those that thrive are aware of the dominant structure of the environment, but are able to act autonomously and appear to have the freedom to make decisions and choices. Those surviving are more constrained and lack the confidence to exercise their independence. They struggle to interpret advice and feedback and are more inclined to follow the lead of others than to exercise discretion. Those languishing are unable to make important decisions, and are limited by the perceived constraints of the new environment. They are dependent on the structure around them and resigned to the pathways outlined for them.

Conclusion

This investigation describes a model of transition that provides detailed 'scaffolding' for programs of support for students in periods of transition.

The themes at the Preparation stage, when well resolved, provide a platform for success as the transition continues, i.e. thriving is a process that is forward focussed, clear, ordered, and purposeful; and where students are confident, pro-active and self-assured. Students will have positive detachment from the emotions of the challenging task and be able to use selective techniques to resolve concerns. Those students who survive are only broadly aware of the tasks associated with the dislocating challenge. They experience difficulty in visualising the journey and struggle to connect the immediate expectations with the organisational 'blueprint' for their future. They fail to thrive because they cannot link their opportunities with their struggle for orderliness. They experience difficulties with priorities and are confused by the feedback they receive, especially separating 'information' from 'expectations'. Those students who languish lack awareness and cannot readily identify or access the resources that might support them. While there is some comfort in being valued for the skills bring to the experience, they often feel trapped.

Students thriving at the Encounter stage have launched themselves from a successful preparation, and as a consequence are focussed, purposeful, confident and pro-active. Their 'encounter' experience is facilitated by this structured engagement and the trajectory for adjustment is positive. They now have clarity of purpose; they are committed to the process and conscious of the array of components that contribute to the transition experience. They have positive self-concepts and are ready to learn from the experience. Thrivers are able to link with others to strengthen their position and provide a shared

learning experience. Surviving students search for direction and have a more haphazard approach to the tasks. They are self-conscious and reluctant to disclose concerns; this contributes to a lack of confidence and disconnectedness. Those that languish lack a frame of reference for this stage of the transition and their trajectory is already compromised. Their ability to learn from the experience is predicated by their unwillingness to abandon the old environment and old strategies.

Those students thriving at the Adjustment stage continue to consolidate their position and as a consequence they are focussed, committed, confident and purposeful. Their adjustment experience is strengthened by this clarity of purpose and attachment of meaning to the transition tasks. They are able to demonstrate a vivid awareness of the transition tasks, identify the transition pathways and respond appropriately to the demands of the transition. They continue to learn from the experience and are securely connected; they can identify broad networks of emerging support and access them appropriately. Survivors experience difficulty selecting strategies to take them forward and are inclined to conform to pathways of least resistance. They are keen to please and unlikely to exercise discretion that might involve criticism. This lack of understanding hampers help-seeking behaviour and they resort to old strategies, or mimic others to try and obtain some advantage. Those languishing struggle at this stage of the transition and their trajectory is often substantially compromised. Their journey in the transition cycle becomes acutely asymmetrical; they are disconnected and resigned to the direction given by the organisation.

Those students thriving at the Stability stage display the characteristics of a transition 'well resolved'. They are prepared for the demands of the organisational structure but behave independently and with a degree of autonomy that reflects their understanding of the structural constraints in the new environment. They demonstrate trust in the system and in those around them and do not feel threatened by exposure to new relationships. Thrivers control complex activities with strategic insight and are receptive to future changes that mark their mastery of the current transition cycle and their readiness for the next. Survivors become trapped in the tasks at Stages 2 (Encounter) and 3 (Adjustment) with little advancement. The consequential instability makes it difficult for them to resolve the tasks with any confidence. Those languishing are disturbed by the transitions and lack the strategies to cope. Their adjustment strategy is limited to replication and they remain as 'outsiders' and are unable to discriminate between what did and didn't work. They fail to thrive and their prospects for recovery are limited.

Educational organisations have the capacity and opportunity to develop these actionable themes in the delivery of their programs of student support more effectively and confidently. The themes and stages of transition provide points of reference for timely and directed intervention, and for the provision of more universal programs of support.

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