

***Presence as a dimension of first year in higher education:
Measuring the value of strong affective relationships***

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Abstract

For many university students, the commencement of university study is often fraught with difficulties. Whilst family and paid employment commitments sometimes compete with study time, some students worry that they do not have the wherewithal for tertiary study or that they may not be successful in their new venture. This paper sets out to investigate some of the concerns experienced by a group of first year students participating in a weekly context-specific support program. In contrast to the traditional approach of offering academic support to students, this program emphasises social support and the development of a learning community as essential to academic success. The notion of presence as a key indicator of quality of learning is applied to the critical reflections of students as they engage with tertiary study. In providing a time and a place for students to meet with a group of academics on a weekly basis, the program operates with no fixed academic agenda and positions students and academics as life-long learners. Through the adoption of an enabling pedagogy, authentic presence is achievable for academics and students.

Introduction

The massification of higher education in Australia has seen an increase in the diversity of student populations in universities. Additionally, in the current economic rationalist climate, there is considerable pressure within universities for faculties to ensure that students remain enrolled for funding purposes. Retention and progression issues, therefore, are given high priority. As a result, many universities have expended substantial energy in the design and implementation of programs to support students in their transition to tertiary study.

It would appear that many of the efforts to provide support for students in higher education have been aimed at helping students “fit the system” of university. There is considerable evidence that “add-on” academic skills courses, which aim to improve the academic abilities of first year students, have remained a popular way of dealing with the perceived problems of at-risk students (Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Tinto, 2001). Such practices, however, tend to construct students as deficient, locating potential solutions to students’ deficiencies in study skills courses and other remedial programs offered by universities’ learning support mechanisms (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005; Henderson & Hirst, 2007). However, such approaches offer a narrow view of the factors that may impact on the ability of students to make the transition into university study and to be successful students.

With this context in mind, this paper begins by describing a student-responsive program that has been developed at a regional university in Australia. This program, underpinned by an enabling pedagogical approach that promotes social capital, takes account of the multiple social contexts and experiences that students bring with them to university. This paper begins by describing the program’s approach to student support. It then uses transcribed, digitally-recorded student narratives to illustrate the ways in which presence is understood as developing over time. It also identifies the positive contribution that participation in the support program makes in terms of students’ awareness of themselves as successful learners in the tertiary context. Finally, the article reflects on possibilities for furthering our understanding of caring presence in the first year of higher education.

Setting the scene

The First Year Infusion Program (also known as FYI) was commenced in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland to provide support for first year students as they make the transition into university study. The program operates outside of the courses that students have enrolled in, by providing a space or place where students can go to discuss the challenges that they are experiencing with their study – regardless of the particular courses they are enrolled in or whether the challenges are academic or social in nature. Whilst initially the focus of the program was on the agency of ‘at-risk’ first year Education students, this work evolved into the First Year Infusion

Program which makes opportunities, knowledges and skills available to all students (not just those who consider themselves at-risk).

The First Year Infusion Program privileges the importance of a decanting space or commons, where undergraduate education students, academics and faculty support staff meet on a regular basis. The FYI Program offers a space and place (a teaching room) for a particular 2 hour time-slot each week. First year Education students know that they can turn up at the specified time and place and that a group of academic and support staff will also be there. Within this learning space, students are able to 'plug in' to sustainable social networks for working together beyond the boundaries generated by enrolment in particular courses. In other words, the FYI Program focuses on the 'spaces' between courses and brings first year students together, regardless of the courses they are enrolled in.

The FYI uses the Learning Circle as a pedagogical approach that builds on students' strengths and provides opportunities for students to develop connections between their outside-of-university lives and their lives as university students. By engaging in problem-solving discussions about their study and the difficulties or challenges they are experiencing, the students learn to develop a connectedness between the multiple contexts of their lives.

Students reflect on their week in the supportive environment of the Learning Circle (Aksim, 1998; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005; Riel, 2006). They talk about their experiences. The supportive environment offers a space within which they can confront and deconstruct the difficulties they have had. Problems become shared problems, regardless of whether they are personal problems that the students are trying to deal with or whether they are academic issues that are directly related to university study.

Through the supportive environment that is provided (including the support of academic and support staff), this approach helps students to develop strong social networks, as well as academic literacies, information literacies and subject-specific knowledges. Students are encouraged to use their strengths – their personal resources – to problem-solve any difficulties or issues that they are experiencing. To assist that process, the

range of academic and support staff who attend have expertise in a range of areas. They assist students with 'just-in-time' information about academic issues, subject-specific knowledges and skills, information literacies, study skills and so on. At the same time, they also offer empathetic and supportive responses to whatever the students decide to discuss.

The program sets out to enable students to engage actively in a cycle of learning and critical reflection. It fosters an explicit exploration of interpersonal skills and 'groupness' that relate to the issues that students identify each week as important in their lives as students. Amongst the variables that most strongly correlate with student satisfaction and reported learning, are student-faculty staff and student-student interactions (Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2003). It is believed that this focus on the interpersonal is essential as it supports students' academic achievement and can help them to develop the values, attitudes, dispositions, qualities and skills that are essential if they are going to be successful with their university study. Students leave the program better able to think critically, to analyse information and to construct knowledge that is professionally informative as well as personally relevant. This framework then is examined through the lens of presence and in relation to the importance of the interactions and relationships that develop for these students.

Understanding presence in context: 'Belonging' to the network

The term presence is concerned with the subjective feeling of existence within a given environment (Bandura, 1997; Van Manen, 1991; Zahorik & Jenison, 1998). It is an existential state of 'being' (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003; Fredriksson, 1999) and understood to be a multi-faceted concept worthy of further investigation within the context of the FYI program. In this study, the notion of presence means that individuals can perceive themselves, objects and other people as not only linked to the physical or external space of the FYI, but importantly, they can see themselves immersed in a socio-cultural web that connects them through interactions and relationships that extend beyond the physical space. Therefore the aspect of *causal interaction* as an element of presence becomes an important one.

The FYI space is then understood to be a socio-cultural environment that is always mediated. It becomes a network in which academics and students construct themselves

mutually (Cole, 1996; Mantovani, 1996). By examining presence from this hermeneutic perspective – exploring the social negotiation and cultural mediation perceived by the participants – we are able to develop insights into the reality that students construct. Heeter (1992) described three distinct types of presence that contribute to the experience of ‘being there’: subjective personal presence, social presence and personal presence. Each requires a process of assimilating new experiences and current concerns with past experiences (Gibson, 1979) and involves information exchange and socio-emotional responses.

Understanding how students make meaning of the FYI experience and how they understand the impacts of ‘belonging’ to such a network, in terms of successfully navigating the learning journey in higher education contexts, emphasises the significant virtue of the idea of, and discourse on, social capital to bridge divides between students and academics in ‘doing university’. Therefore, when looking for evidence of presence, we are focused on social-information processing in terms of empowerment and how capacity is built through participation in the FYI.

The learning community: Unpacking the narratives

As explained earlier, this section of the paper examines some of the concerns experienced by a group of first year students and how the notion of presence assisted them to successfully navigate their transition to university. During the first two years of the program’s operations, students who participated were invited to be interviewed about their first year experience and their perceptions of the impacts that this approach had on their learning journey. The data presented in this paper were drawn from the semi-structured focus group interviews that were conducted and recorded on digital video.

In analysing the students’ narrative accounts where they talked about meetings in FYI, we looked for evidence of the features of presence expressed by the students. It became apparent that we could create two distinct categories of presence within the data: cognitive presence and social presence. Cognitive presence was distinguished by the extent that students were “able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse in a community of enquiry” (Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2003), in this case, university. On the other hand, it was also possible to identify a further category of social presence that was taken as “the ability of students to project themselves socially and

affectively into a community of inquiry” (Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2003). In discussing their concerns of ‘becoming university students’ it was apparent that the depth of their reflections went well beyond the traditional student satisfaction measurements conducted at university.

Notions of cognitive presence

The focus on what the students ‘know’ and their perceived feelings and attitudes towards adjustment to their new environment helped to heighten their awareness of how to deal with different cognitive aspects of their university experience.

You get to look at your strengths and the small steps that you are taking are a focus ... that is a really important thing, that is empowerment just in itself ... we learned ‘what to do when you don’t know what to do’ – giving us those strategies of well uhm – how you going to work problems out – you guys actually helped us work out real quick how we could help one another too.

Students highlighted challenges faced in terms of learning how to interpret and understand the various unspoken norms of university life that reach far beyond matters under immediate examination.

Any help is worth accessing and the support you can build with other people working through it at the same time makes you think its not all that bad ... FYI has given me a different way of looking at things and how to put it all in perspective. Instead of this overwhelming thing in front of you – just little by little you break it down ... it was a space where you could sit down and think about other things and what we were doing this week ... to look at how everyone was going with their assignments without discussing subject content.

Successful adjustment to university includes learning how to communicate effectively within the context. The students were challenged to develop mental processes to enable them to assimilate new experiences and current concerns with past experiences.

I think for me working out the rules of engagement (a military term, that’s my background) finding out just exactly what it is about assignments that the markers require. I’ve used FYI for that purpose because at times it feels like there’s a bit of a hidden agenda or you’re not quite sure about the wording or you just have no idea about what on earth it is that you’re required to do. And trying to refine and work out what the requirement is so that you can then meet it is what I’ve used FYI for.

Students highlighted how participation in the FYI program inspired their engagement in learning and how this approach supported them to embrace the learning challenges that they faced.

With FYI, I suppose the thing that's being most important for me to succeed this time around is that I'm finding out that there's not a problem asking for help or acknowledging that, yes, there may be things in our past that are affecting study, and probably are still going to be hurdles ... and this sort of helped me find other ways around it or over it. So it helps me this time to succeed enjoy the journey ... and finish the course.

The tacit dimension of cognitive presence at university was apparent to these students. Clearly they valued the importance of trusting and respectful interactions with academic staff and welcomed the opportunity to engage in personal inquiry.

I think that we're all, personally, I think that we're all quite proactive. You know, the way that we go about learning about our assignments and so on. And I think that we go out and actively seek out that information but it can be really difficult to find and I think that the FYI is a place where it's a balance. You can go there and you can come away kind of reassured slightly because you've communicated with your peers and perhaps your course leader who would have the final say on particular things anyway. And if worse comes to worse then you go over and you say that you've spoken to them and that's where you get your back-up from if you go ahead with things. It's a shame that things aren't always so clear.

At the same time, it was clear that students did not always attend FYI with conscious issues that they wished to have addressed. Instead, they saw value in simply being in the physical space and engaging with others.

Peer wise there's, like other people have questions in FYI that, while you're in that setting you're also keeping an ear on what's going on with them and you pick up other things and learn some other things about StudyDesk, accessing information, that sort of thing. Just because you're in that sort of environment and that's happening at that time. So you don't just learn about your question you learn about other people's questions and you gather information from that as well, that personally benefits you.

Students saw value in peer assisted learning. Equally, they saw engagement with a range of academic staff concurrently as strengthening their cognitive presence at university. Their sense of being successful in this environment was generated through meaningful information exchange with academics and peers in tandem with positive

socio-emotional responses to positive and immediate feedback to their issues in real time.

Generally I learn a lot just from the people who go there, so my peers, and then secondly, as you say, it's lecturers that I don't see every day. It's a different perspective on things. And especially when you've got your head of year there, I think that's a huge, as a student for you to be able to communicate with them it puts you very much at ease. It's like, oh right, okay, I'm speaking to the person who really makes those decisions. So once you've communicated with them with some of the difficult problems you have as a student it really does allow you just to carry on with your study comfortably.

The cognitive presence that continued engagement over time could bring was also clear. The students expressed an ongoing commitment to remain involved in the FYI beyond their first year of university study. Clearly engaging with future cohorts in FYI was understood to be mutually beneficial.

We can help them because we have been through that experience ourselves - by showing them we've done it – this is how it worked – do you need any help to get there? We can help scaffold their journey in terms of giving them that real experience – right here right now just live through it? ... they are coming in straight out of the world so their eyes have been focused on different things to what we have been focused on while we have been at Uni. So they can bring in and share things that we may have missed too ... because we now know from (academics) you learn from people every day and if you stop learning then you are doing something wrong.

Through their engagement in FYI, students perceived a growing sense of cognitive presence at university. Importantly, this informal support program enabled them to construct and confirm meaning in terms of 'doing' and 'being' a university student. The development and maintenance of authentic partnerships and relationships are keys to the transformation of student support in first year transition. A focus on cognitive presence in understanding first year student experience enables consideration of the multiple realities that characterise success on the learning journey (Moss, 2003; Wenger, 1998) and therefore drive an enabling pedagogy to inquiry.

Notions of social presence

The establishment of social relationships at the outset of the student learning journey began serendipitously through student's choosing to attend the FYI. While skills of friendship are transferable from other contexts, the student highlights the ways in which these relationships at university assisted them to be able to deal with their emotional responses to the unfamiliar context of university. While the FYI is not characterised by dense, intimate, emotional bonds as evident in strong friendships relationships, it is clear that students developed a sense of collective efficacy:

It felt good to know that we came to care about one another and that we could actually help each other.

The maintenance and establishment of long term social networks for the students in this study were seen as a 'means of succeeding' and building their social capital in the university context. It is clear in the following statements that students need to feel socially connected to their university context:

I think that each one of us values one another. Well, it has certainly felt like that for me. I now think that I have knowledge that is worth sharing and that I don't just have to follow what someone else has done ... When we talk about our stuff and we listen to others talking about their own issues, you come to realise that you are not alone and that, even though you think you are lost, you can actually do something so small like suggest meeting somewhere just to walk in together – it is the little things that we can all do that can make a difference to how someone feels about coming back time and time again and getting to feel comfortable here at uni.

There is clearly a need for students to feel a sense of 'belonging' in the university context. These students came to understand that they had individual rights as well as collective responsibilities; that they had a choice to participate (or not), and that over time they developed a sense of belonging to the group. Through this initiative and the privileging of interactions and relationships, they were able to make connections with others and challenge initial notions of subjective personal presence. FYI enabled them to re-imagine themselves as successful university students, rather than marginalising themselves as otherwise.

You don't feel belittled or that you're being judged, they all just find ways to help you. It felt really bad in the beginning, but now you don't really even think about it, you just know it will be okay and that the group is here to support you however

you need ... I guess now it just feels like you are more a part of it ... you feel as though in a sense, you belong here and have earned the right to be here.

Presence is understood to be synergistic, emphasising the significant virtue of the idea of, and discourse on, social capital to bridge orthodox divides between students and academics:

That (names of the academics) are actually interested in what I think is also remarkable ... it is good to know that we aren't just numbers on a page, that we matter

Being able to come here and know that this space is ours for two hours, that it is just us and (academic staff) coming together to see how we are all going, to take care of each other and to check up on how we are all going along. I know that each week when we open the door again and go back out to the 'uni world' that it is only a week at a time – in the beginning just getting through a week at a time was a challenge. It's different now and I look for other things, but the sense of security of having this space is still really important to me.

No-one is really in control and we just all help each other out. (Names of the academics) made sure we all got our turn in the beginning; that we were all included, but we do that for ourselves now.

There is an acknowledgement of involvement and engagement, as well as interdependence. It is evident that the social relationships of power shifted over time, with the FYI enabling both individual and collective responsibility.

Deciding to come to the group and find out what it was going to be about was a big step. I knew I wasn't coping, but to come to FYI meant that I was letting others know. Surprising though, it was the best thing that I did. It made me realise that there was no shame in not fitting in and there were others in the same boat anyway.

The FYI team taught me the importance of working problems through with others, because it did become a tight little group. It felt really nice. The support they gave to keep everybody up was really really great.

The students in FYI measured the quality of their learning experience in terms of the value of meaningful interactions and relationships with staff and students within the university context. The academics' capacity to be responsive to students' immediate concerns contributed significantly to the quality of the learning journey and to students'

ongoing engagement with the tacit knowledge required in terms of knowing, being, experiencing and acting as university students.

Conclusion

If presence is tantamount to successfully supported action in the environment (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998), the challenge is to find ways to blend academic and social support that promote a caring and connected social presence at university that is not simply focused on cognitive presence. The data presented here highlights the student learning journey in terms of “struggle and resistance” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 631). FYI, along with all that it has come to symbolise for the students, enabled them to understand their sense of agency and it provided them with opportunities to reimagine and reshape their identities as university students (Noble & Henderson, 2008). Unless new university students can feel that they have presence at university, then their chances of being successful students are likely to be diminished.

For students to develop agency within the university context then, it is clear that cognitive and social presence must be interlinked. This requires making visible understandings about the emotional labour (Goodfellow, 2008; Nelms, 1996) involved in successful navigation of the first year learning journey in holistic ways. What is evident is that academics cannot simply focus on content- specific ways of knowing and being (Gee, 1996) or the technical, but must also be cognisant of the personal in teaching (Lefstein, 2005). Academics need to ensure an integrated approach to address aspects of transition and account for socio-cultural contexts and their influence on all aspects of ways of working in higher education. From the standpoint of presence, it is important to consider and reflect on the particular contexts and social networks that lead to student success. Focusing on the development of cognitive and social presence at university through FYI clearly offers a way forward in terms of enabling students to navigate towards positive dispositions as lifelong learners.

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