Finding the calm in the storm: Addressing retention issues through an understanding of first year ‘at-risk’ students’ metaphors of survival

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The context
- regional Australian university

Student population:
- rural and geographically isolated areas, low SES backgrounds
- ‘first generation’ students
- ‘second chance’ learners

Issues:
- retention and progression

Learning Circle approach
- weekly meeting – 2 hours
- no set agenda – problem-solving
- transition issues – academic and social?
- critical reflection

- tried to remember students’ strengths
- positioned ourselves as life-long learners
- ongoing problem-solving
- collaboration

Context-agency model for conceptualising a Learning Circle

Initial progress
- informal discussion
- sharing of experiences
- sharing of strategies

- ‘Well ladies, what can we do for you?’
- setting up a research project

Metaphors
- Robyn – the door, the rope
- Heather – the sanctuary
- Erica – a space

References:
Finding a source of help: What to do when you don’t know what to do

When excitement wanes and reality hits

Robyn: Finding calmness

- To actually be able to go in that room and shut the door, it’s like you can send the whole uni away. And you’re in this little protected environment where nothing’s actually expected of you … you didn’t have to perform to your best standard like you do for the rest of the uni. That’s what I liked about it. I could just be myself.

- It’s just a calmness. As I keep mentioning, once that door was shut … When the door was shut it was just the world was removed and it was just a real calmness in there.

Finding a haven

Heather: A sanctuary

- … like a sanctuary. A safe place where you could go and talk about what was going on, not just in uni life, in your everyday life as well, and know that people were experiencing similar, or had experienced it, and weren’t going to judge you.

- It was just a normal classroom but the atmosphere in there was like, we all left the stresses at the front door and we walked in there and we just relaxed. It was like, I mean, we didn’t have cups of coffee or something like that but it was just like a really good get together where you could say anything and everyone could participate without any pressure of, oh I’m being judged here, I’m saying the wrong thing here. It was great.

Erica: A space … a breather
Robyn: Wanting to flee

Student or me?

The highway

Heather: It was a lifesaver

Robyn: I had to go there to survive

Robyn: You were my rope
A breakthrough for Robyn

What to do when you don’t know what to do

Heather: Traffic lights

Heather: Stop, go and wait

How did the program work?
- a space/place for social support
- sharing strategies
- safety to talk about what is working and what is not
- finding like-minded students and support
- finding ways of transferring strategies used outside of university
- knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do

The next version
- Integrating social and academic support
- Involving other academics, learning and teaching support staff and library staff
- Preparing professional development materials for academic staff
- Preparing an online site for remote students
- Further research