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Director's Note

As the first-year experience (FYE) movement gained traction in the United States, interest in this concept also grew across the globe, resulting in scholarship and promising practices on student access, learning, development, transition, and success in postsecondary or tertiary education. Canada and South Africa, along with countries in Europe and the Pacific Rim, have organized these activities into professional development events and networks dedicated to FYE issues. Throughout its history, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has engaged in partnerships with international colleagues in pursuit of its mission "to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education." As part of this ongoing commitment to first-year students in the United States and around the world, we are pleased to introduce a new international feature to *E-Source for College Transitions*, which will highlight the context, activities, challenges, and success of our colleagues in other countries dedicated to the access and success of new college students.

—Jennifer Keup

Enhancing Student Performance in South African Higher Education

Since the South African transition to democracy two decades ago, a series of reforms has sought to transform the higher education system. Institutional mergers have reduced the number of universities to 23, governance of the system has been strengthened, and greater equity in access to higher education has been achieved.

Despite these positive advances, numerous challenges remain. Higher education persists as a "low participation, high attrition system" (Fisher & Scott, 2011): the intake is about 18% of 20-24 year olds, and 55% of these students never graduate. At the same time, participation in higher education in terms of race, although improved, remains highly unequal: the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) for White students stands at 57% compared to 14% for Black students,

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and White completion rates are on average 50% higher than for African students (CHE, 2013). In short, “under 5% of African and coloured youth are succeeding in any form of higher education” (CHE, 2013; Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007) because of complex financial, academic, and sociocultural factors (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey, & Wickham, 2008).

While numerous social and cultural factors have contributed to this disastrous outcome, *disadvantage* and *underpreparedness* have long been highlighted. These themes emerged 35 years ago when some of the formerly segregated South African universities first registered limited numbers of Black students. Today, in an open higher education system, the majority of students, regardless of race, still are considered underprepared, but the universities, too, remain deficient in responding to the needs of their students, with academic development generally positioned at the margins of teaching and learning and more emphasis given to research. Specifically, academic development has hitherto largely failed to have the necessary impact on student performance primarily because it has not become mainstreamed. In Tinto’s terms, South African institutions are still largely “tinkering at the margins of institutional life” concerning student academic development (Tinto, 2012).

Although meaningful transformation of the universities has yet to be achieved, some institutions have made more progress than others, especially the University of Johannesburg (UJ). Founded in 2005, UJ was formed when three former universities merged. Mergers often lead to disruption of settled ways, attitudes, and academic inertia, which can be destructive. At UJ, however, joining the institutions energized and engaged staff and created new ways of thinking and approaches regarding both research and teaching and learning. These efforts began simply with the challenge of unacceptable student underperformance and dropout—and the idea of a project. The University’s intention was to improve students’ academic success (i.e., the number of individual modules¹ or semester courses that students pass) by strengthening the focus on teaching and creating a conducive learning environment. To achieve this goal, UJ needed to engage teaching staff and enhance their awareness and expertise, a direction that required incentives to make the new commitment to teaching worthwhile. The approach adopted was two-pronged and complementary: (a) a broad, practice-oriented First-Year Experience (FYE) project and (b) a growing focus on teaching and learning at the leadership and policy levels.



¹ A module is a semester or yearlong course with a full study load generally consisting of four or five modules per semester.

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Building a First-Year Experience

UJ's FYE project was conceptualized as a

holistic programme which encompasses all aspects of first-year student experience in the context of an invitational and equitable institution. It comprises both curricular and extra-curricular initiatives, and is far more than a single event, programme, or course. It attempts to establish an ethos and a way of life, through which all first-year students will experience the transition into university life. (University of Johannesburg, 2009)

All nine faculties (i.e., colleges) implemented the project in 2010 with the support of a University FYE coordinator and committee. An initial two-week orientation and registration program kick-starts the FYE, during which students are introduced to UJ's academic expectations, activities, and values. An extended orientation that involves embedding themes from the initial orientation throughout the first semester follows. Themes include academic development (literacies and learning skills), introduction to the library, and an orientation to learning with technology, with the goal—increasingly being met—of integrating these elements into the core first-year curricula. Safenet, an ongoing program tracking performance, ensures early identification of students who seem not to be engaging and, therefore, may be, or are, at risk. These students are referred to appropriate interventions and support (including psychosocial interventions) during the first semester and before end-of-semester examinations.

Considerable financial and educational capital has been invested in faculty tutorial programs, including comprehensive training for tutors and rollout of support for teaching staff, to ensure that tutorials become properly integrated into the curriculum. An academic excellence program in the student residence halls seeks to create an optimal learning experience for the relatively limited numbers of students who live on campus; this approach currently is being extended to first-year students in approved off-campus accommodations in the vicinity of UJ. While cocurricular activities (e.g., organized sports, clubs, societies, cultural activities) were included in the original FYE conception, this theme has had only limited success because the majority of students depend on public transportation and cannot attend after-hours activities.

FYE is fully acknowledged as an institutional program at UJ and receives strong support from senior leadership. Nevertheless, buy-in from and within faculties still varies and depends primarily on faculty and departmental leadership. Attempts to engage students in the development of FYE have been challenging (not least because of the size of UJ, which enrolls almost 50,000 students on four campuses), but student input is now being successfully solicited at the faculty rather than at the institutional level.

Different types of institutional research have been associated with FYE. Importantly, Student Profile Questionnaires, completed during registration, not only generate information for teaching staff about the makeup of their first-year classes but also have begun to provide fairly robust socioeconomic predictors of student success, which allow for

“FYE is fully acknowledged as an institutional program at UJ and receives strong support from senior leadership.”

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immediate identification of entrants who are potentially at risk of failure. Similarly, an Initial Student Experience Survey, completed after the first six weeks of the semester, has confirmed gradual improvement in the student experience. A comprehensive evaluation of the FYE program in 2012 (including inputs from teaching staff and students) foregrounded the need to focus on future sustainability to ensure that the program is embedded yet more rigorously into faculty structures.

Rewarding Teaching Excellence

Academic leaders at UJ have been decisive in growing a focus on teaching for learning, and members of the teaching staff have echoed the commitment. At the same time, teaching for learning (of which FYE is a substantial component) has been anchored by appropriate institutional structures, policies, strategies, and, importantly, budgetary allocations. Increasingly, teaching and teaching excellence are acknowledged and rewarded through institutional policies and structures, including

- Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Awards, providing a substantial three-year stipend;
- UJ-funded Research Chair on Teaching and Learning, which will drive the scholarship of teaching and learning;
- promotions policy offering teaching-focused staff a pathway to full professor; and
- Teaching Innovation Fund, which supports (and funds) innovation in teaching practice.

Also, substantial strategic funding has been committed for assistant lecturers—the next generation of academics, who will have been introduced to teaching as a core activity. Lastly, during the past five years, UJ has initiated a comprehensive and very intentional focus on the practices of teaching and learning, with progress regularly monitored. Single workshops increasingly are being replaced by continuous professional development (including mentoring), which addresses specific needs of individuals within the broader context of their discipline. From 2015, this program will be framed by a postgraduate diploma in higher education, available on a regional basis.

Producing Positive Results

Five years later, this concerted focus on teaching for learning has produced tangible results: module success rates, which link with graduate output, have risen each year and are now above the national target of 80%. However, while performance of Black students has risen from the low to mid 70% in 2009 to firmly above 80% in 2013, the differential in performance between Black and White undergraduates has only converged slightly and persists at around 6%. Twelve years of impoverished schooling are not being overcome during three years at college.

“Lastly, during the past five years, UJ has initiated a comprehensive and very intentional focus on the practices of teaching and learning”

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During this same time, UJ's research output more than doubled but, perhaps more importantly, teaching and learning have been repositioned vis-à-vis research, and both have been acknowledged as complementary core institutional activities. Research may still generate more prestige and higher incentives, but the rewards available to excellent teachers are gaining significance. Perhaps it is not coincidental that these two core activities have grown in maturity simultaneously. The questions for UJ now are (a) Can this enhanced performance be sustained? and (b) Can the University move toward more equitable first-year performance and completion rates?

As indicated above, this synergy of focusing on teaching and learning and creating a new university has substantially impacted student success at UJ, considerably improving pass and degree completion rates. Regular surveys of student attitudes also confirm growing satisfaction with the student experience. Not all teaching staff have, as yet, committed to these approaches, and work must be ongoing; but a change in institutional mindset—bringing teaching and learning from the margins—does appear to have taken place.

Coming National Curriculum Change?

UJ's success was possibly the outcome of a serendipitous coincidence of personalities, institution, and the moment. Prospects for taking this approach to scale across the national sector of higher education, however, may not be strong, and policymakers appear to share this opinion. An emerging line of thinking in South Africa is that the crisis in student performance can be resolved only by addressing serious structural deficiencies in the undergraduate curricula, and the Council on Higher Education recently announced the *flexible curriculum proposal*, an alternative to the current three-year degree model (CHE, 2013)². Undergraduate curricula, both degree and diploma, at all South African universities would be extended by one year (a) to allow for more time on task; (b) to address the substantial articulation gap between secondary school and first-year curricula; (c) to enable the development of core skills, such as academic literacy; and (d) to give an opportunity to rethink and reshape current curricula and accommodate 21st century learning outcomes. Such restructuring should, of course, not stand alone to promote student success but be accompanied by a strengthened focus on teaching and learning as implemented by UJ. Fast-tracking would accommodate the 27% of entrants who presently do not complete their programs in the regulation time.

² South African education retains the qualifications structure established during the colonial era: 12 years of schooling are followed by three-year degrees or diplomas, with some professional qualifications (e.g., law, engineering, accountancy) requiring four years of study. As a comprehensive institution serving a wide spectrum of entrants, UJ offers both degrees and diplomas, with diplomas being more applied in nature and generally catered to less well-prepared entrants.

“This synergy of focusing on teaching and learning ... has substantially impacted student success at UJ, considerably improving pass and degree completion rates.”

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Higher education and other stakeholders currently are considering this proposal, with a ministerial decision expected in 2014. As yet, little clarity has emerged within the South African higher education community for support of the proposal. At UJ, where a University seminar was called to explore implications, attendees voiced cautious support—but they were primarily teaching staff already well versed in such debates. At the same time, concerns around implementation were raised: (a) Would it be feasible to roll out this project at all universities simultaneously? (b) Is adequate curriculum expertise available in South Africa to implement a project of this magnitude? and (c) Would it indeed be possible to devise a fair and objective means of allowing a limited number of entrants to be fast-tracked while maintaining institutional autonomy? Student opinion has still to be tested; an initial response from one group voiced concerns about the (mistaken) assumption that students would necessarily pay more for their qualifications. Clearly, preparing for implementation (i.e., reworking all undergraduate curricula) would put serious strain on ongoing institutional activities. Would this stress be wise in a higher education system that has already undergone major destabilizing changes in the past two decades? Might not a pilot project (in all faculties of science, for example) be advisable before full implementation? The final decision, as to whether to proceed with this initiative, will, therefore, need to weigh these various concerns against the continuance of a status quo that clearly is not succeeding in addressing the interests of students in achieving their qualifications. e

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Facilitating Intercultural Interactions Through a Personal Narrative Assignment

My story is important not because it is mine, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours.
(Hilder, 2005, p.174).

Fostering meaningful intellectual and interpersonal connections across diverse social groups within and across campus contexts has become increasingly important at community colleges and large research universities alike. From a retention standpoint, providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their cultural, social, and academic perspectives translates into a greater sense of connection among themselves—beginning to know and understand one another—and of belonging at the institution (Anderson, 2008; Jehangir, 2008; Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2009). From an intercultural competence perspective, research suggests that repeated, deliberate engagement with diversity and platforms to reflect upon these interactions are critical to the growth of higher-order cognitive skills, such as cooperative, intergroup behavior and openness to entertain alternative views (Hurtado, 2001; Gottfredson et al., 2008; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007). To demonstrate how shared interactions engage students with one another, a personal narrative assignment was implemented across multiple sections of a required first-year experience program for 430 students in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota. This article describes students' perceptions of how this assignment impacted their initial intercultural learning and development.

Context

Incoming students in the CEHD are required to enroll in a four-credit, writing-intensive first-year seminar focused on the question, How can one person make a difference? The annual incoming class is racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse compared to the larger institution and to other primarily and historically White institutions. In a typical cohort, at least 40% of the students are Pell-eligible; approximately 65% identify as White; approximately 35% are the first in their families to attend college; and at least 12% are recent immigrants.

Personal narrative assignments are well established across a range of disciplines, particularly composition and writing studies (Lee, Poch, Shaw, & Williams, 2012). In the context of the CEHD program, these assignments have been shown to lay the foundation for successful interactions among students in each of the first-year seminar sections (Lee, Williams, & Kilabera, 2011). The personal narrative usually had multiple components: (a) a low-stakes writing assignment, (b) an in-class presentation, and (c) reflections on presentations and/or the overall assignment. In each section, students wrote a short essay based upon a personal experience or object and its significance in relation to the topic of the seminar and then presented it orally to classmates. In most courses, students were given

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the option to read the written text or do a more informal talk. The presentations typically ran 3-4 minutes. Faculty solicited feedback and questions from the class about each student's presentation.

In the last part of the assignment, students responded formally to their peers' presentations, usually by providing written feedback or responses that reflected on the impact of a given story and its significance. This formal process was designed to facilitate and demonstrate the value of active, critical listening and to establish it early as a core practice in the course. Faculty typically participated in this assignment by completing and sharing their personal narratives alongside the students. Many students described their participation as impactful.

For the purposes of this article, the authors used students' reflective journal responses from three years of first-year experience cohorts (2009-2011) to examine the impact of the personal narrative assignment. These responses focused on students' perceptions of their learning and development at two different times in the semester. In each section, these assignments were implemented in the first four weeks of the semester. The authors analyzed 111 student reflections of approximately 400-700 words each, examining how the personal narrative assignment supported and facilitated their interpersonal interactions and intercultural understanding.

Establishing Trust

In reviewing students' reflective journals, the authors discovered two consistent themes. The personal narrative helped establish trust and led to the development of reciprocal knowing. Students' reflections supported Burk's (2001) claim that, "Experiential pedagogical tools, such as storytelling, may help students develop the trust in themselves and in others through classroom interaction" (p. 5). Sharing their personal narratives in class created this trust among students and established an environment that supported intercultural interactions and connections. Students described respecting their peers for their willingness to share their deeply held beliefs even though they did not know and could not control how others in the classroom might perceive them. As one student described it,

In listening to others' stories, I grew personally. ... Whether I related to them or not, [they] made me reflect on all the places I have been. ... I feel that spurred an internal growth. ... In sharing my story, I felt a connection to the group. I was a little nervous to talk about things so important to me, but knowing everyone else had done the same thing gave me comfort and made me realize how a part of an actual group I am.

This assignment encouraged students to go beyond the surface-level attempts, such as where are you from and why did you come to the University, at getting to know their classmates and set the stage for more substantive peer interactions throughout the semester. One student described that connection,

In one day, my classmates went from strangers to me to walking testimonies. I will never forget that day because it allowed me to connect with my classmates in a way

“The personal narrative helped establish trust and led to the development of reciprocal knowing.”

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I wouldn't have been able to without that opportunity. . . . I believe that hearing other people's stories about what is important to them was a bonding moment for the class. It really made me feel more connected to the other students.

Reciprocal Knowing

From first-year students' perspectives, crafting and sharing their narratives built a sense of knowing and being known by their classmates, which they noted as critical in their initial formation of relations with peers whom they perceived as diverse. This sense of coming to know and be known by classmates was articulated as students talked about how their understanding about each other shifted. One student wrote:

Anytime I am able to listen to a person explain something about themselves, I immediately become engrossed in thoughts of who the person is, what makes him or her unique, and what makes the person "tick." Hearing my classmates' stories gave me a personal connection to them I never knew I had.

Another said,

After the (personal narrative assignment), I found out that I share a lot of experiences with my classmates. . . . Because of us sharing experiences, we are connected as a community. It is really hard to prejudge someone when you know something personal about them, and in this class, I feel that I know most of my classmates.

Although the personal narrative assignments did not require dialogue or interaction, the structured presentations required students to listen to their peers without interruption, and many described this experience as novel and important. Many also cited actively listening to peers present their personal narratives as a catalyst in helping them reconsider existing stereotypes or suspend judgment. One student wrote,

The whole time I had to pay attention since at the end we had to write about a few of the objects, but I'm glad that I had to. Learning about things important to other people made me feel as though now everyone can talk and get along better because we all shared something deep and personal about ourselves.

As another student explained,

Everyone really listened to each other speak, and it made it reflect on our own lives and the world. Everyone got a chance to talk, so there was no need to interrupt or raise your hand to try to be the next speaker. I just got to listen . . . without interruption


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Conclusion

The open design of these assignments supported students' engagement across diversity and subsequently their interaction with one another's presentations and experiences. Sharing their personal narratives allowed students to develop trust in an environment that supported an open exchange of diverse perspectives. Developing connections and comfort with their peers gave students the confidence to participate in future unique situations that might be outside of their comfort zones. This assignment demonstrated one flexible approach for faculty and instructors that can be used not only in first-year programs but also across different disciplines, such as biology, literature, history, or mathematics, to facilitate the development of a classroom primed for further engagement with diversity. 

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Successful Transitions: Creating an Integrated Approach to Transfer Matriculation

Meeting the diverse needs of transfer students can be complex. These savvy consumers seek guidance at each level while transitioning into their new academic communities and create unique situations for the staff who work with them. Slippery Rock University (SRU), a premier residential institution within the state system of higher education in Pennsylvania, has developed a multifaceted approach to help transfer students adjust, combining traditional services and new and innovative practices. To meet the needs of a transfer population two thirds the size of the incoming first-year class, SRU uses purposeful recruitment planning, comprehensive academic services, peer-focused marketing strategies, and first-year seminars and workshops, yielding seamless matriculation that results in meeting enrollment goals and higher retention rates.

Recruitment

Recruitment focuses on high-yield institutions, mainly regional but also national community colleges. Because half of its annual transfer enrollment comprises students from these two-year institutions, SRU has devised strategic goals, initiatives, and support activities to capitalize on this trend. Travel efforts are aligned with conventional recruiting events coordinated by local community colleges each season. As a budget-saving measure, efforts at two-year schools outside the region focus on other marketing techniques, such as radio promotions, college newspaper ad campaigns, standard mass mailings, and web resources as opposed to staffing programs that typically generate few potential recruits and are expensive to cover. Ultimately, student interest from these nonlocal schools remains consistent whether or not a representative from SRU visits these campuses. Regardless of their locations, all prospective community college transfers have access to online curriculum planners and course conversion guides that allow for a proactive college search and establish a self-sufficient recruitment culture.

Enrollment

Combining admissions and articulation within one office, SRU's unique, centralized enrollment service promotes a one-stop shop that proves advantageous in transfer recruitment. This thorough process involves making admissions decisions,



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evaluating class credits, and staying current on policies concerning transfer credit and common core structures presented through and then mandated by the state Board of Education. Students appreciate this convenient structure, which creates a positive first connection and a productive initial relationship with SRU. Admissions counselors, nonfaculty representatives of the University, exercise flexibility in applying credits towards liberal studies requirements to best benefit students. Occasionally, collaborative discussions with department chairpersons are needed to review new coursework and adjust existing articulated equivalencies. This team endeavor guarantees a successful transition for students and maximizes the credibility of degree offerings, allowing SRU to remain competitive in the local market.

Advisement and Registration

After completing the preliminary phase of their transition, students meet with advisors and register within individual academic departments to promote relationships with respective faculty members. This contact establishes the advisor's critical role in helping students meet degree requirements and clarify their career goals and promotes professional development opportunities. New transfers are eligible for course registration based on credits earned. Although early registration is a purposeful recruitment strategy that occurs midsemester, the formal transition process culminates with an orientation program before the beginning of each term. Orientation provides academic department overviews, addresses practical needs, formally solidifies relationships with the incoming class, and finalizes admission to the University.

Peer Involvement

With considerable growth in its transfer class over the past several years, SRU evaluated its services and implemented innovative practices to meet the needs of its current and prospective population. Through annual assessments measuring effectiveness, new transfer students provided feedback about their experiences from recruitment to matriculation. They consistently ranked peer influence as their most frequent source for acquiring university information as opposed to gathering facts and figures from traditional publications and college fairs. This documented finding inspired fresh ideas on how to incorporate students in the recruitment process. Staff from both admissions and orientation then formulated a Transfer Transitions Team, representing key demographic characteristics of SRU's existing transfer population, to support enrollment activities most strategically. Current transfer students, who were fully engaged in their transition to campus, were invited to become team members.

Once the pilot team was appointed, SRU created a comprehensive training program to ensure student leaders were fully prepared. Foundational admissions knowledge became the core of the team's structure, allowing members to respond to common inquiries comfortably. In addition, students participated in group discussions and activities highlighting impactful leadership, guest-centered customer service, and strategies for

“ They [transfer students] consistently ranked peer influence as their most frequent source for acquiring university information

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maintaining consistency with the University's branding message. Principal responsibilities of SRU's Transfer Transitions Team include assisting with an annual visit day event, mentoring prospective applicants during telecounseling initiatives, and sharing their transitional experiences through an ad campaign called Transfer Success Stories, which appears in regional community college newspapers.


FYRST Seminars

Institutional data indicate first- and second-year students represent nearly half of SRU's new annual transfer class. To meet their needs, SRU began offering its FYRST seminar, a one-hour course designed to help students adjust to college, for transfer students with first-year status, military experience, or developmental coursework. SRU's transfer seminars concentrate on typical academic and social transition issues and encourage full assimilation by using campus programs, services, and technology. For example, students learn about study-skills workshops and study-abroad opportunities; campus services, such as the Tutorial Center, Writing Center, and the Career Education and Development Office; and available technology, including the SRU mobile site and student online portal. A culminating course activity requires participants to submit a survey (MAPWorks) that measures how well they are acclimated to their new environment. Survey results trigger a campuswide response to address transfer student needs from multiple perspectives.

TRANSFERmation

Although FYRST seminars have become available to a predetermined transfer subset, all new and existing transfer students can benefit from a recently developed TRANSFERmation series sponsored by SRU's Academic Services Department. This six-week collection of spring semester workshops covers campus acclimation and involvement, includes leadership development and career connections, and concludes with a session on appreciating diversity. Through original programming such as the TRANSFERmation series, SRU demonstrates its mission to reinvent a signature college experience, establishing for transfer students their new home away from home while officially instilling the practical skills needed for a productive future after graduation.

Conclusion

Understanding the logistics of transfer success is vital to recruit and retain students competitively. SRU's resourceful approach to transfer matriculation has produced a highly collaborative work environment between staff and faculty who are charged with serving these experienced students. Its commitment to this population critically communicates that the institution values transfer students, creating loyal patrons beyond their tenure. 

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For more information about SRU's online curriculum planners and course conversion guides, please go to <http://www.sru.edu/academics/enrollment/undergraduate/transfer/Pages/BC3.aspx>.

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Teaching Principles From Cognitive Psychology in the First-Year Seminar

Research has long established that the most successful college students develop useful study strategies, healthy approaches to learning, and enough self-efficacy to facilitate the difficult transition to college-level work (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; McCormick, Dimmitt, & Sullivan, 2012). Many first-year seminars, therefore, include sections on learning and motivation strategies (Hunter & Linder, 2005), and the importance of teaching them has been discussed at length (e.g., Tuckman, 2003). Less common, however, is the inclusion of instruction in the science behind these strategies and motivation. Many first-year instructors give students the tools but fail to explain, from a cognitive perspective, why they work. Because these strategies take considerable mental effort, students may not be convinced that the work is worth the outcome. Explaining the mechanics behind good cognition in ways that students understand helps to “sell” active-learning strategies to skeptical students, who can then transfer this knowledge to other courses. Instructors can employ many ways to incorporate lessons from cognitive psychology into a first-year curriculum (Steiner, 2012) with useful, interesting classroom exercises that focus on memory, metacognition, attribution theory, and self-efficacy.

Memory

Having students participate in sensory short-term and long-term memory tasks underscores the importance of paying attention and processing information deeply. For example, asking students to recall the names of Disney’s Seven Dwarfs, then reflecting on which names were frequently recalled, illustrates the effects of visualization, recency, prior knowledge, uniqueness of remembered information, and personal connection, among others (Miserandino, 1991). This exercise also can initiate a discussion of the encoding and processing strategies needed for successful studying, such as monitoring one’s own attention when reading and generating unique, personal examples that make the material relevant.

Metacognition

Instruction on study strategies can be supplemented with activities to promote metacognition (reflective thinking about one’s own cognitive processes), which is essential to building academic self-regulation or the ability to independently initiate and maintain good learning behaviors (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Students may be asked to reflect on the efficacy of study strategies used on the last exam or to engage in a systematic trial of newly learned study strategies for a test in another course. After taking the test and receiving a grade, students can reflect upon which strategies led to success and why. Students also can revisit incorrect test answers to determine where their thinking went wrong and how they can use different study strategies in the future to be more successful.

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Attribution Theory

Attribution theory, from social-cognitive psychology, is helpful for revealing the often inaccurate way people assess their role in their own success or failure. Upon returning an assignment, instructors might ask students to write down their immediate reactions to the statement, "I received this grade because ____." Potential answers might include "the assignment was unfair" or "I studied really hard." After learning about attribution theory, which describes, in part, the way people explain events, students can revisit their attributions to analyze them for accuracy. They may even present them to partners for feedback on how they can change their thinking to better reflect the reality of the situation and the elements for which they have personal control.

Self-Efficacy

Finally, a simple physical task, such as throwing a paper ball into a trashcan from varying distances, can demonstrate how self-efficacy, the belief in one's own abilities to succeed, affects motivation. Students typically enjoy seeing their peers demonstrate this concept. As the trashcan is progressively moved farther away with each throw, the instructor can ask students to give a pre- and post-throw assessment of their confidence in making the basket, as well as their motivation to continue the demonstration. Students soon will learn that as self-efficacy wanes, so does motivation to continue. This exercise, emphasizing their belief in their abilities to succeed, may help students see the connection between lack of confidence and low motivation in their academic pursuits.

Student Response

Students in three sections of a first-year seminar completed an open-ended, anonymous survey after receiving instruction in principles of cognitive psychology as part of the course section on study strategies. They were asked to comment on the cognitive concepts and describe how each changed their understanding of college-level learning and studying. Forty-seven out of 73 students returned completed surveys, and 219 (81%) of 271 unique comments were positive and indicated the instruction was engaging and helpful. Their responses reflected a number of themes, including

- an application of their new understanding to other classes (e.g., "Helped me learn how to study in other classes and what ways were best for me to retain information." "Helped me learn for all my classes. I found that I studied better and remembered more, longer."),
- changes in study habits (e.g., "I now know that in order to store things in my long-term memory it requires me to study a little each day, even after the test." "Showed me why note cards never helped."),

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- greater self-awareness (e.g., “Learning about self-efficacy helped me understand why I am hard on myself when I fail at things that I expect to succeed at.” “What I learned about metacognition helped me to take a look at how I thought, and how I learned.”), and
- overall transformation in thinking (“I really feel as though the material that was taught in this class affected the way I viewed life, human motivations, and the way I studied.”).

Negative or neutral comments often revealed a misunderstanding of the concepts or how they could be applied. For this reason, instructors must take care to show the real-life applications of these concepts, perhaps through authentic assessment, in addition to providing a coherent explanation and a rationale for their usefulness. Useful authentic assessments may include assignments such as a strategy project (Steiner, 2014), which asks students intentionally to apply strategies learned in the seminar to their other courses. Authentic assignments provide students an opportunity to test cognitive principles for themselves and reflect upon the outcome in a real-world situation.

Conclusion

Basic principles of cognitive psychology can be included in any first-year seminar as a companion piece to the learning strategies section of the curriculum. Instructors can make these processes explicit to students by offering examples, practice scenarios, and activities. As students become aware of their own cognitive processes, they are better equipped to adapt their learning strategies to new challenges, and as instructors become aware of why these strategies work, they, too, become better equipped to communicate their importance to first-year students. 

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Related Articles in E-Source

Stallings, H. (2007). Using cognitive development and critical thinking in teaching first-year seminars, *4*(3), 9.

Check Out These Other Resources

Other teaching principles from cognitive psychology in the first-year seminar are available on web sites such as teachpsych.org or intropsychresources.com. For instructors without a background in cognitive or educational psychology, numerous resources provide an overview of relevant cognitive principles and their application to teaching and learning. A good place to start is *How Learning Works* (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

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