# Peopling the technology: designing for successful student transition

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## Abstract

*This project focused on digital initiatives and corresponding pedagogies to support diverse students transitioning to a university. The challenging adjustment to complex environments is made more difficult where students have significant family and work commitments, and/or varied experiences of education and digital environments. This was the case for three cohorts within an Education course.*

## Context and background: Focusing on the learner and collaborative development

Australian Universities are aware that widening participation has increased course cohort heterogeneity, resulting in varied cultural histories, educational experiences, and multiple levels of academic and digital literacies (Goldingay et al., 2012). The Transition and Transformation (T&T) project interventions were designed to support three cohorts that, prior to the 2020 global pandemic context, had differing learning paths[1]. The three cohorts vary from each other in terms of their mode of delivery; predominantly face-to-face, predominantly online, and through a Community Based Delivery Model.

Course examination of student experience data identified retention and success as a primary focus for enhancement, with two areas of need particularly evident. Firstly, pathway students with CPL often demonstrated sound practitioner skills in Early Childhood Education but experienced a challenging transition into more formal academic environments, particularly in terms of content and assessment requirements. Secondly, students who have educational gaps due to inequitable educational opportunities shaped by colonisation, risks related to lower socio-economic boundaries, and limited access to English, needed greater support to successfully transition to university. The approach used curriculum design grounded in deep learning, student belonging, and supported engagement with digital education landscapes.

## Project intervention focal points

Retention and completion are driving motivators in tertiary institutions seeking to support positive student outcomes. In addition to this, transition pedagogies position literacies building and belonging as paramount in successful transition to university (Meehan & Howells, 2018). Responsive to these factors, the design of the interventions in this project focused on three key areas: (i) content, usually relating to discipline specific threshold concepts; (ii) digital worlds embedded in the tertiary setting; and (iii) fostering belonging.

*Content, usually relating to discipline specific threshold concepts* - Student academic success has been identified as directly related to experiences of transformation in learner identity (Brook, Fergie, Maeorg, & Mitchell, 2015). Discipline specific knowledge is transformational when threshold concepts support students to experience shifts in their

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[1] The project was conceptualised prior to the 2020 pandemic. Pandemic restrictions compelled all teaching and learning to take place online, fortuitously this was supported by the digital approaches applied by the project.

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ontological and epistemological understanding. By using a multifaceted approach including threshold concepts, the project moved beyond just a scaffolded academic transition to university. The identified content appeared in units as animations, discussions, and interactive learning experiences that integrated with curriculum.

*Digital worlds embedded in the tertiary setting* - In relation to digital worlds, teaching staff observed that students who required the greatest supports were those who predominantly accessed learning digitally. Therefore, the pedagogy that emerged looked closely at the digital provisions in the "Cloud classroom". Through anecdotal discussion and observation, staff developed a pedagogical approach that sought to encourage digital engagement through ease of use, collaborative opportunity and interactive agency. The model is referred to as the I-CI (Immediate – Collaborative, Interactive digital pedagogy).

*Fostering belonging* - The project recognises that the entanglement of academic institutions and privilege can culminate in some students being positioned as outsiders in the digital tertiary landscape (Ayyad, 2015). Through intentional digital learning supports, created and curated to identify with Early Childhood content and the Early Childhood Educator, the project sought to support a sense of digital belonging for all students. Discipline knowledge and literacies building were both necessary to support students in gaining agency as self-directed learners, comfortable in the digital learning space. It became apparent that students who navigated the space were also able to navigate the content with greater confidence.

**Key questions to open discussion**

The session will explore fostering belonging in digital landscapes. After reflection on the current evaluative phase of this project, the session will move into audience participation that includes digital engagement, personal reflection and discursive prompts focused on the following questions. Drawing from Sims-Bishop's (1990) pedagogical model and applying to digital learning leads us to ask key questions about "windows and mirrors" in online learning. What experiences do students transitioning to university encounter that inform them they belong? What new knowledges do students transitioning to university need to acquire?

**References**

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