

Which First Year and Whose Transition?: Transforming Academic Teaching Models

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Abstract

This keynote explores the role that teaching models have in supporting aspiration, access and achievement. Drawing on research undertaken in the ALTC project 'Historical Thinking in Historical Education', this paper will tease out how student and staff perceptions of the models of teaching and classroom activities needed for academic success in history have wider pertinence for staff interested in the first year experience. In particular, it will note how staff privileging of PhD supervision as a model for teaching might be harnessed to develop more effective teaching models for large first-year classes, and in turn, how those experiences might be used to support aspiration, attainment and achievement in higher-degree research programs. In support of these arguments, examples of practice from the 12 participating institutions in the project will be given.

Introduction

In 2008, Sally Kift used her keynote for this conference to highlight the disparity between the rich sources of information we have on the first year experience, and much rarer examples of coordinated institutional approaches to supporting student aspiration and achievement through transition. Two years on, as we come closer to the advent of a standards based, student demand driven model in which participation and attainment by formerly underrepresented groups will count more than ever, I suspect that a few of you have, or are beginning to see significant changes in the first year space. From entry mechanisms, to institutional partnerships and curriculum renewal, a number of universities have built in, grown or stepped out to generate opportunities for students to develop both the abilities, understanding and confidence needed to navigate tertiary studies. Co-curriculum orientation and transition activities are also flourishing. But, as some of you will no doubt note, the competing demands of the first year space continue, as seen in subject guides that compete for limited student time, and the initiatives aimed at developing financial understanding, social connection, academic literacy can make the first semester a busy, and dare I say it, a busy and even disconnected experience. Those of you who participate in, or even coordinate transition programs, will understand all too well the tightrope act of ensuring that various voices are reflected in institutional programs.

While I do not want to diminish these difficulties, I do want to argue that there is more logic to this frenetic space than might be otherwise first thought. For, as I want to argue in this paper, these activities are overwhelmingly focused on the *first year undergraduate student's experience*. There are, as I want to suggest by contrast, another first year, and another transition that might play a shaping and yet largely hidden or unappreciated role in the first year undergraduate student's experience: I refer to the transition of academic staff into teaching first year undergraduate students, and their use of their own experiences of PhD study as a departure point. Moreover, I want to argue that while it is tempting to see these as an obstacle to effective undergraduate teaching, there are opportunities for cross-exchange of insight that might be mutually beneficial for undergraduate and research students, and staff.

The starting point for these observations is ‘Historical Thinking in Higher Education’, an ALTC-discipline based initiative I was fortunate enough to contribute to in 2009. While this study was focused on one discipline—one with arguably the best retention rates and highest rates of student satisfaction in the country—some of its findings deserve pause in the wider field of first year studies.

In the latter part of 2008, 1455 first-year and upper level history students and 50 historians completed interviews and questionnaires on the nature and roles of historical thinking at twelve Australian universities across six states and the Australian Capital Territory. This scoping study was designed to provide the profession with the information needed to complement and build upon earlier curriculum scoping studies undertaken by the Australian Historical Association. In particular, those of us in the project team thought that it might help us to understand how student and staff perceptions of the discipline might contribute to the increasingly common discussions on national and international standards at tertiary level. What we discovered certainly helped with that aim, but it also provided us with information that in some ways knocked us sideways.

The premise for the study was simple: we wanted to know what first and final year students and staff thought historical thinking was and what it was for, and to tell us something about the activities that they most associated with historical thinking. In response to the first and third questions, some first and final year students confessed that that ‘hadn’t studied the question yet’. Many more suggested that history was about avoiding the mistakes of the past, and a key mechanism for affecting change. One of the most striking things about their statements was the absence of their agency: global change flows from the study of history in a high level, abstract sense. In response to the second question, students noted that textbooks and journal articles played a larger role in developing historical thinking than primary or archival materials, visual and digital sources and receiving feedback on their work. This final point provided an interesting contrast to other evaluations in which students repeatedly say that they do not receive enough constructive feedback. It was an attention grabbing focal point, but we were more surprised to see little difference in the responses of final and first year students; a finding that has since encouraged us to write into the draft threshold learning and teaching standards for history the ‘Ability to identify, and reflect critically upon capabilities developed in the study of history’. This standard will make Australia’s statement about history graduates globally unique, and will I hope prompt projects in which the first year experience in the history classroom entails greater opportunity for self reflection and appraisal.

The process of articulating standards is in itself an activity of historical thinking. By this I mean not simply that we expect to offer multiple drafts of our thinking, or that we will commit to update them over time. For many people, it also represents the opportunity to express a developmental narrative about how it is that historians, or more generally, graduates develop. The developmental narratives that students and staff tell—as distinct from the models that we might teach them about in formal programs such as a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education—about their own and others’ journeys provide perhaps more of a diagnostic tool in first year and transition studies than might have been previously been thought, and it might be worth encouraging dialogue around such narratives during the ALTC’s Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project. This will be particularly useful given that the provision and nature of GCHE programs varies widely across Australia.

While the stories that students and staff tell about themselves are reflective of their individual experiences, certain patterns or ‘tropes’ became apparent—in fact two patterns, if I am to be more specific—when we analysed the surveys and interviews were completed.

The first had the form of what might have been called a Damascan narrative in ancient times, or even a conversion story if our context had been nineteenth century Britain. As we noted in the final report for the project, the archetypal example of this narrative might be found in the autobiography of the eighteenth century Italian historian Giambattista Vico. He explains his embrace of history this way:

as a child, he was very happily spirited and inimical to rest; but at the age of seven, he fell off a ladder to the floor, where he remained a good five hours motionless and unconscious.... The surgeon, finding the skull broken and thinking ahead to the long period of recovery, made the following prediction: either he would die, or he would survive insane. Neither of these predictions turned out right, thank God; but having recovered from his misfortune, he grew up henceforth a melancholic and irritable nature, as it must be with profound men of genius, who because of their genius are brilliant in their perceptions, and because of their depth take no delight in witticisms or falsehood.¹

In this narrative form, one ‘becomes’ an historian via a dramatic, even traumatic incident. Time is collapsed, or is even ‘out of joint’ as Derrida would suggest, and there is a sense in which identity changes. Students and staff talk of ‘aha’ moments, of ‘the lights going on’ in ways reminiscent more of out of body experiences. These experiences are not simple encounters with ‘threshold concepts’²; they are changes in identity that extend beyond one’s understanding of a discipline, and which have the effect of rendering previous experiences timeless, ‘prehistorical’ or ‘natural’³ as this example shows:

I think the biggest [opportunity for learning] is the kind of aha moment that comes usually when one student, and it was always in the medical history course, when looking at these ideas for hysteria for example, will say ‘these ideas were outmoded, doesn’t that mean that in a hundred years from now someone will see that our ideas are outmoded’ and so as far as I am concerned that moment crystallizes the whole meaning of what history thinking is. It is to be able to see a moment in the present as a moment that will become somebody else’s idea of history, so we mustn’t think of ourselves as dinosaurs but a lot of people ahead of us are going to.

How, if this is our understanding of our own development, do we then teach those who are seen as being in the ‘before’ or the ‘natural’ space? Do we wish for threshold

¹ G. Vico *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. M. H. Fisch and T. G. Bergin, 1744 edn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, revised edition, 1984), p. 1.

² See for example Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land, *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Cousin, G. (2010), *Neither teacher-centred nor student-centred: threshold concepts and research partnerships*, *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Issue 2: February 2010, online at [http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jldhe&page=article&op=viewFile&path\[\]=64&path\[\]=41](http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jldhe&page=article&op=viewFile&path[]=64&path[]=41).

³ S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 2001.

concepts, re-engineer activities, assessment tasks, and outside activities in the hope of ‘triggering’? Is it the job of academics to be ‘troublesome’, as Perkins puts it, than to provide a ‘transition’?⁴ Transition implies a movement into a context, threshold implies some form of shock. The historians we talked to were more likely to place themselves in the role of ‘troublesome’, than of ‘transition’, as these two further examples suggest:

[My course] raises all sort of epistemological questions on history. When I start the class I always pose the question to students: What is History? Is there such a thing as a recoverable past? Can it be said that the past exists? What are we doing as historians are we trying to rediscover or discover what happened? Or are we fashioning a kind of a notion of a past for our own presentist purposes? And these type of things.

[Y]ou are always there wanting them to argue and to think about history at that level of argument, to see it as being always under contest. And I think different students get there at different times.

Do we assume, as Jorn Rüsen has done, that education moves us from regarding a subject as ‘predictable, stable and therefore simplistic’⁵ towards a willing embrace of uncertainty, complexity, disagreement, and gear our curriculum in first year to nudge students in that direction? In summary, is our obligation to daze and confuse, rather than to provide a smooth transition?

These are questions not simply for those interested in the psychology and sociology of learning and teaching, for they involve questions about how it is we ‘ought’ to engage with the first year experience. They are therefore also philosophical questions, and ones that might lead us to question our propensity for developmental narratives; ironically, our need for narratives that might be ahistorical and fixed. I do not want to enter into a detailed discussion about this matter, but simply note that there is much here that might be problematised.

I want to move on because ‘Historical Thinking in Higher Education’ highlighted a second learning and teaching narrative shared by many more staff members. This was a narrative in which identities, transitions and the notion of a ‘first year’ took on multiple layers of meaning, and which might lead us to reassess the boundaries of ‘the first year experience’.

Which First Year, and Whose Transition?

- isolation
- self doubt
- lack confidence
- want to drop out
- Need mentoring

This list is both familiar and not. These are words that we might easily attribute to a first year undergraduate student, or to groups of undergraduate students. Who those students are might vary a little in the institutions we all work in.

This list is a trick: the author or authors are not students, but early career history academics. What is the first year experience for an academic? Those of us ‘looking

⁴ D. Perkins, ‘The Many Faces of Constructivism’, *Educational Leadership*, 1999, vol. 57(3), pp. 6–11.

⁵ J. Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York: Berghahn, 2005), pp. 28–30.

in' might answer the question in one way, noting that staff will likely bring a host of experiences to their first appointment. But there is of course another way of answering the question, by asking those who teach to tell us when that is, just as we might ask students to tell us about their first year experience. Answers given in 'Historical Thinking in Higher Education' rarely identified a particular time, as with the 'aha' moment of becoming an historian. More commonly, answers suggested a moment when a teaching experience clashed with a key moment in their developmental narrative.

For more than a few historians, the major marker in their narratives of teaching development is the PhD. The PhD is the beginning of learning to teach, or not to teach, or a combination of both, as this example suggests:

I guess I learnt how to supervise by how badly I was supervised. You do have to listen to the student. You do have to be there to support and guide, to know guidelines and deadlines. To be a mentor and a supporter, and to work them through that spiral of learning, through the unconscious. ... and he didn't have the skills or resources to take me through that. But in terms of his stimulation to do history, in different ways, to do things from different disciplines, that was exceptional and transformative. He was a mixed memory for me.

Time and again, teaching narratives were grounded in the individual's early experiences of postgraduate supervision, and mentoring that might have taken place in or around, or despite that arrangement, as these examples attest:

When I started my PhD it was very much about—well you say you're a kind of a British historian and an Australian historian, 'well whatever you are—you're not one us', you know, I didn't sort of fit the pigeon holes

When I went to graduate school, I was like these students coming into the honours course, 'oh well it is just a question of researching and compiling your empirical evidence' and that's what history is and all of a sudden and I get thrown into a sea of theory and interpretation and I was drowning for a little while and then I rose to the occasion I suppose.

When I did my undergraduate [degree] it was extremely conceptually sophisticated I was very good on big ideas but I hardly knew anything about historical data. When I went off to do my PhD in [the USA], particularly, we had to do three years of course work I was really confronted by my lack of basic foundational narrative for my period and I was shocked by how poor that was. I was shocked because the scholars I went to work with [in the USA] were thought of extremely relativistic postmodern thinkers. [But] They all just sat me down and said you need to learn your basics and I really had to learn for three years. That's why I stress so much, the proper approach to reading as I see it because they taught me the big ideas are nothing without an adequate and nuanced response to the historical data itself.

And the PhD can function as an anchor in a narrative in which the present is confusing, frustrating and in flux, and which agency might be hard to see:⁶

The workload is very high at the moment. I haven't had the chance to actually write anything for quite some time. It is rather frustrating [and] there is an expectation, supposedly one third of my job is actually doing something like writing an article and it can't be done. I can't do it. I just do not have the time.

The irony is that this is my area of expertise and in the last couple of years I think I have taught almost every historical area except that one. (laughs) Well that's not so unusual these days, talking to early career lecturers. Being thrown into different fields

and I think I've taught at nine different universities. You know a difficulty in getting a permanent job initially, which most of us go through.

The PhD also functions as a departure point for teaching, where the key feature is taken to be the either effective or ineffective relationship between supervisor and student rather than, say, experiences of isolation, or working within a research team. This relational view is expressed in the desire to know students as individuals as one was, or should have been known and understood as a PhD student. Consider these two examples:

I would like to do more, to get them doing more things in groups conversing in groups and breaking down their isolation, because I think humanities students are too isolated.

I tried to increase the amount of interactive teaching and first I did that by having one lecture and a two hour tutorial it was a disaster, because it meant my classroom hours more than doubled. That was the year when I spent something like 25 hours in the classroom per week which was a bit silly. So I stopped doing that

More often than not, we hear about it as a model that does not work, and the guilt, disappointment and confusion that follows. As one interviewee explains, it is not scalable:

it is not really a model that lends itself to teaching history. Larger classes of 200 are fine, you double that, it is unbelievable. So that has been a challenge for us, as to how to do it, how to teach it well, how to lecture to 500 students is different, completely different environment, of interaction with the student and actually devising a subject where you keep the attention of the students is quite a challenge.

⁶ For research on agency, autonomy and comfort in early career academics' experiences, see Archer, L. (2008). "Younger Academics' constructions of 'authenticity', 'success' and professional identity." *Studies in Higher Education* 33(4): 385-403; MacKenzie, H., K. McShane, et al. (2007). "Challenging Performative Fabrication: Seeking authenticity in academic development practice." *International Journal for Academic Development* 12(1): 45-54; Laudel, G. and J. Glaser (2008). "From apprentice to colleague: The metamorphosis of Early Career Researchers." *Higher Education* 55: 387-406; Prosser, M., E. Martin, et al. (2008). "University academics' experience of research and its relationship to their experience of teaching." *Instructional Science* 36(1): 3-16; and Reid, A., L. O. Dahlgren, et al. (2008). "Identity and engagement for professional formation." *Studies in Higher Education* 33(6): 729-742.

Early career staff narrate over and again their failure to connect with students in a one to one fashion, to give students enough time or feedback, to customize the content for students. Teaching, some of them tell us, threatens to consume them. Such impressions tend to receive further reinforcement when students indicate that they want constructive feedback—which we tend to interpret as *more* feedback, rather than better feedback, and staff complete supervisor training in which models of the supervisor-student relationship are foregrounded. Indeed it is worth noting that more staff will complete supervisor training than a PhD.

In narrating these issues, have I constructed a narrative of despair? Why, many of us would ask, would someone place so much stock on a model of teaching that has an attrition rate higher than most first year undergraduate programs? Is this a fundamental misalignment in need of correction, a model that leads to frustration and perceptions of failure?

How might we respond to this in a way that has a beneficial impact for the ‘first year’ experience of staff and students? Recent research has focused on staff perceptions of authenticity, on models for encouraging the growth of inclusive communities of inquiry, and models of professional development that might trigger ‘threshold’ concepts. It is striking that in a number of ways, we think of and treat early career teachers as first year students.

New Models of Doctoral Training: Reclaiming First Year?

While it is right to focus on the education of academic staff, it is also worth noting recent changes in doctoral training programs.⁷ Recent reports in Australia and by the UK Council for Science and Technology and Council for Higher Education and Industry have argued for the extension and reconceptualisation of the PhD experience.

A four year ‘advanced’ model of PhD training, it has been argued, provides an opportunity for students to develop skills in communication, problem solving, leadership and commercialisation.⁸

Cranfield University’s Enhanced Engineering doctoral program, for instance, combines the activity of producing an original and substantive thesis, coursework in engineering, components of an MBA and supervision panels that include an industry mentor. The Wellcome Trust’s PhD program includes coursework and laboratory rotations, which are designed to give students the chance to experience different options before honing in on a project proposal. Other more familiar models include central induction or commencement training, which serve to introduce students to various dimensions of research culture, including ethics applications, creative commons, and to the projects undertaken by other students.

The emergence of Doctoral Training Centres and Research Graduate Schools is also worth noting, as they provide cohort-based education experiences for candidates both within and across faculties, and even institutions. Queensland, for instance, has adopted a state-based approach to the growth of PhD programs in critical areas such

⁷ B. Kehm, ‘Doctoral Education in Europe and North America: A Comparative Analysis’, in U. Teichler (ed.), *The Formative Years of Scholars* (Colchester: Portland), 2006, pp. 67–78.

⁸ See for example Council for Science and Technology, *A Vision for UK Research* (London: Council for Science and Technology), 2010; Council for Industry and Higher Education, *One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education* (London: Council for Industry and Higher Education), 2010; and T. Cutler (ed.), *Venturous Australia* (North Melbourne: Cutler and Company), 2008.

as transformative health care. Finally, many of you will come from universities that have central orientation and commencement programs for higher degree research students. These are akin to, but not identical to undergraduate programs, with the major difference being less of an emphasis on social events.

Taking Stock: Connecting the First Year and Transition Experiences

It is possible that the shifting ground in doctoral program provision will have a beneficial effect upon academic staff models of teaching. That could take a few years, however, and there is no guarantee that disciplinary and interdisciplinary identity will hang less upon the experience of writing a doctorate in a master-apprentice model. Indeed, given the common focus of supervisor training upon successful models of supervisor-student communication, there is no reason to expect a radical shift in view.

Do we again find ourselves at a moment of despair? Does it vindicate the decision of some universities to leave the first year experience to ‘experts’? To, for instance, hire staff who specialise in first year teaching, to require students to complete units of study conducted by those in central divisions with relevant expertise in, say, academic culture or literacy? Does it support the view that the first year experience happens before formal classes begin, in central or faculty programs? In our actions, are we trying to ‘protect’ students from academic staff? Is the first year experience something other than a disciplinary experience?

I think not, because I think we have more opportunities to prompt reflection and change than academic succession. It begins by rethinking both the content and context for supervisor training, and not only because of the prosaic consideration that more staff are likely to complete this form of training than the PhD. This is because supervisor training might be doctoral education training: training that discusses the structure, aims and outcomes of doctoral programs as well as models of good supervision.

The signs might be good. In February of this year, supervisor training became a component of the Monash GCHE. Bringing such training into the GCHE not only sends a powerful message about the research-teaching nexus: it also provides a powerful opportunity to ensure that supervisor training includes education in doctoral training models, and to explore, adapt and apply strategies designed to foster retention and attainment in both the first year of doctoral studies, and the first year of undergraduate studies. This is not to suggest that they are identical—far from it—but consider the possibilities when innovations in assessment, learning technologies use, academic literacy education and learning spaces design for both spaces meet. Furthermore, it allows to ask whether the new forms of doctoral training we have seen provide opportunities too late in a student’s developmental journey. Why wait until PhD training, for instance, to provide engineering students with leadership education opportunities?

Moreover, it is important that such units be connected with others in more traditional learning and teaching territory. Is there a space for participants in foundations programs, for instance, to consider their experiences of PhD study with some of the things we know work in large class first year teaching. More powerfully, sessional staff training programs have the opportunity to catch people as they both teach and undertake PhD studies. And can we draw connections in the assessment tasks we assign in other components of GCHE programs with that in supervisor training?

Imagine a world, in which PhD students are able to complete the kind of ‘forgery’ exercise made available to first year students in an Australian university. In this exercise, students create primary documents which are then mixed with genuine primary documents. Students then work in groups to identify the forgeries. Imagine undergraduate students working up discrete assessment tasks into a unified expression of their understanding. Imagine HDR students being encouraged to develop eportfolios, or using collaborative learning technologies to present, appraise and improve their understanding of a research topic across institutions. And imagine PhD students putting together group publications as we found a group of history on film students doing at this university: Flinders. There is more to the doctoral experience than the supervisor-student relationship, and the literal act of writing a thesis.

And there is more to the first year experience than ensuring that students feel welcome, supported and encouraged in their studies. For unless the people teaching them also feel comfortable in the spaces where they meet, then we will not have achieved the coherent vision of the first year experience that Sally Kift introduced us two in 2008.