

# **You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink: the development of transformed situated agency to facilitate the integration of students into institutions**

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## **Abstract**

*The degree of integration of students into the academic and social fabric of institutions is regarded as the key to success in higher education. Integration is a dual responsibility and both students and institutions have to play their respective roles to make it work. In this paper the construct of transformed situated agency (TSA) is described and presented in the form of a model. It is proposed that through TSA, in which students apply the DRIVER process to facilitate personal transformation, students can assume more responsibility for their roles in the integration process, particularly in the first year. Examples will be given of projects in which the TSA framework was used in the University of South Africa.*

## **Introduction**

The prediction of success in higher education has been the subject of much research (Tinto, 2006). Studies have indicated that there are multiple factors that contribute to success (see Prinsloo and Subotzky [2010] for a comprehensive overview); yet, in spite of all the research and knowledge gained, a high failure rate, particularly in the first year, remains a problem. Statistics indicate that the drop-out rate from higher education in South Africa continues to range between 40%--50% in the first year with a more dire situation in distance education where traditionally the student success rates have been lower than in the contact mode (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Van Schoor and Potgieter (in press) have concluded that the integration of students into the academic fabric of institutions is the defining factor that determines academic success in residential (Tinto, 1993) and in distance learning contexts (Kember, 1995). If the statistics are related to integration and academic success, it seems that almost half of the students are not fully integrated in the first year and the question is how the huge gap can be closed.

Integration is not a one-way process and institutions and students both have a responsibility to make it work. On the one hand institutions have to create the conditions that will facilitate integration while on the other hand students have to engage meaningfully with those conditions to become integrated. If either party reneges on its responsibility, integration will not be fully achieved and success will be limited. The focus of this paper is on the responsibility of the students to capitalise on the support systems provided by institutions and to deal with the success factors within their sphere of influence, but outside that of their institutions. The paper posits that a personal orientation referred to as transformed situated agency (TSA), which locates the

primary responsibility for study success within the individual, may be the link that facilitates the successful integration of students into institutions. It suggests that students must be made aware of the importance of taking control of their study situations and that they can be taught how to do it. By assuming agency students can overcome deficient predispositions (see Tinto [1993] and Kember [1995]) and increase their chances of success. The TSA construct is described and displayed graphically in the TSA model. Examples are given of projects aimed at the development of facets of TSA at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Finally, questions are posed that are aimed at assessing the validity of the construct and the programmes envisaged to support its development.

### **The transformed situated agency construct**

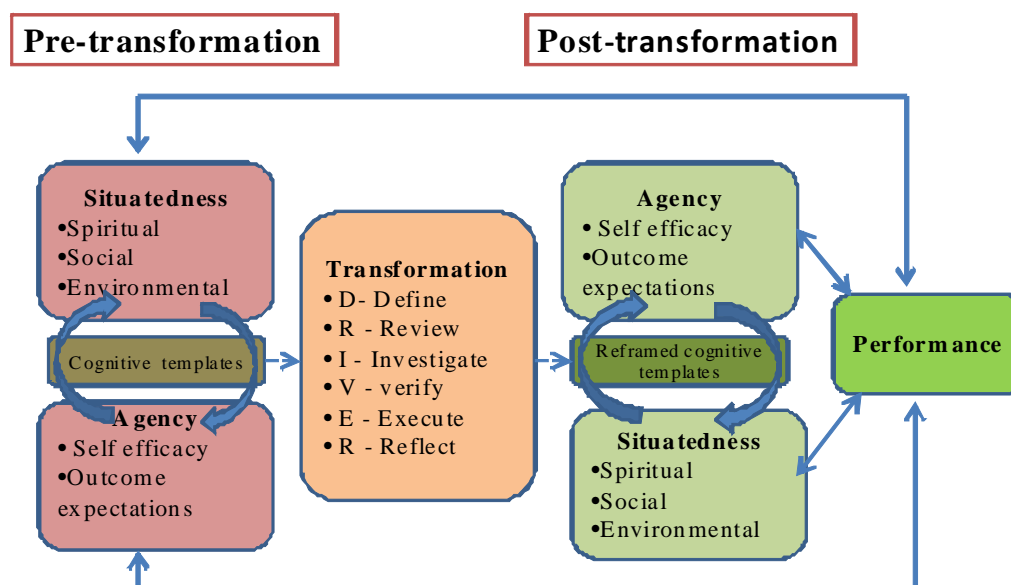
The TSA construct describes the complex intrapersonal state of agency and its interaction with personal history or situatedness. Situatedness (Giddens, 1984) refers to the contexts with which individuals have engaged over their life spans and which, in interaction with personal characteristics, have shaped individual skills, values and attitudes. Though certain contexts may be identical for each person, the impact that they have on the development of individual norms, values, habits and behavioural patterns may be different because of the interactions mentioned above. It can explain why two individuals who were subject to the same contexts can display very different behaviour patterns in higher education.

Do individuals have to accept their situatedness and its influence on future actions or can it be moderated by analysis and the assumption of agency? This paper argues that agents can transcend their situatedness because of the important characteristic of reflexivity. According to Giddens (1984) an agent is able to reflect on his or her existence and actions and to assume purposeful action based on the outcomes of the reflection. The agentic individual is therefore able to control and shape his or her reaction to his or her situatedness while the non-agentic person becomes subject to the negative effects of situatedness and relinquishes control through external attribution (Bandura, 1997).

Reflection is central to the transformation of non-agents into agents. Individuals can learn to respond effectively to the impact of their situatedness by employing a specific strategy referred to as the DRIVER strategy. The DRIVER strategy which is an extension of the DRIVE strategy presented by Oakland (2003) depicts a series of steps: **D**efine the impacting event, **R**everview the available information, **I**nvestigate possible ways to deal with it, **V**erify the most appropriate action, **E**xecute the action, and **R**eflect on its impact and adapt as required. This relatively simple procedure nevertheless suggests a powerful and structured way to tackle change conditions and can lay the foundation for the development of new and more productive skills, habits and attitudes that apply in all life areas.

### **The TSA model**

The TSA construct is depicted graphically in the TSA model (see figure 1).



**Figure 1: The transformed situated agency model**

Figure 1 shows that in the pre-transformed/diminished agency state (it is rare, if not impossible, to be totally non-agentic) an individual is to a larger or lesser degree subjected to the influences of his or her situatedness or personal history. The situatedness created cognitive templates which continue to influence future thoughts, feelings and actions. These cognitive templates, which are context-specific, contribute to the sense of diminished agency as they are activated in specific circumstances and such activation results in lowered levels of self-belief and expectations of goal inefficiency (Bandura, 1997). It results in performance outcomes that do not meet the expected performance standards. For example, if a student is about to write an examination for which he or she has not prepared properly because of poor time management, outcome expectations are lowered as well as belief in own capacity to perform. To protect the self the reasons for poor preparation and performance are attributed to external sources such as work conditions, all of which contributes to the abdication of agency. If the situation should continue as indicated by the circular relationship between situatedness and agency, diminished agency will become more pronounced and eventually become a syndrome which is difficult to resolve.

The model shows that the cognitive templates have to be reframed through a process of reflection and purposeful transformation. In the post-transformed state the effects of situatedness are controlled by purposeful action (note the changed spatial positioning of the elements). The crucial difference between the pre- and the post-transformed states is that in the latter case an individual deals with reality in a structured way through the application of the DRIVER process. For example, if poor performance in an assignment is displayed by means of a poor mark, the transformed student will reflect on the conditions and the outcome of the event, identify the possible reasons that led up to it and then put measures in place to work towards their resolution.

While all agents are able to reflect and take appropriate action within the rules and constraints that govern certain situations it does not mean that they would automatically do so as indicated by the pre-transformed state. The model suggests that students should be made aware of the

process, be informed about it and be shown the value of reflection, which will eventually assist them to become purposeful agents who are able to engage in institutional integration. In the next section an overview will be given of early attempts at Unisa which are aimed at the facilitation for the process.

### **Initial projects at Unisa to assist students in the development of TSA**

Unisa is a distance education university and is regarded as one of the mega-universities of the world. Current student numbers are around 310 000. Due to the rapid rise in the number of students who qualify for tertiary education in South Africa (in 2010, 126 371 students qualified for university study, 40 000 more than universities can accommodate) and internationally (student numbers grow annually by 10 million, and in Africa south of the Sahara growth is the most rapid with 10% annually) (Smit, 2011), distance education is regarded as the most viable form of higher education with the potential to meet the massification needs. Massification has meant that more students who are underprepared for tertiary education enter institutions, which places a larger responsibility on institutions and students to integrate successfully.

The Directorate for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (DCCAD) at Unisa has made it its mission to help students understand the importance of agency and to facilitate the process. The DCCAD is a professional unit which provides a range of counselling and academic development services to Unisa students through various media from pre-registration to the exit stage.

Due to the large numbers of students and the imperative to provide counselling opportunities to all students through a range of delivery modes, the DCCAD has embarked on a strategy of mass-based counselling interventions. Currently two projects are in place and a third one which will be fully grounded on the TSA model is in the process of being rolled out. The two projects in progress are the Mass-Based Career Guidance Project and the Science Foundation Mentor Project. In both these instances the strategy is the same. Beginner students who indicated that they needed more assistance with career guidance (in the 2009--2010 period, 33 748 students out of a total enrolment of 53 544 indicated that they wanted to receive follow-up) or with their management of the Science Foundation Programme (2 847 out of a total of 11 762) were contacted via e-mail or SMS. They were invited to make return contact through electronic means for further assistance. The assistance consisted of a referral to electronic resources on the DCCAD website, follow-up in person by career counsellors or mentors via e-mail, telephone or, in exceptional circumstances, personal contact. In both these projects the emphasis is on making students aware of their needs and placing the responsibility for the solution of problem areas in their hands while providing relevant resources via a range of delivery modes.

The third project which is currently being planned and which will be rolled out after the mid-year examinations will extend the format as described above to include specific referral to and training in the application of the DRIVER strategy. Students who have failed one or more modules will be contacted via e-mail or SMS and referred to the DCCAD website where an electronic workbook will be available. The workbook will introduce the users to the importance of taking responsibility for their academic progress. They will be exposed to the steps in the DRIVER strategy and short tutorials in the development of the skills associated with it. Students

will then be requested to apply the skills to their own situation and to provide feedback on their experience through a formal questionnaire as well as sharing it with others via a blog.

## Conclusion

This paper introduced a different angle to the issue of student success by focusing on the much-neglected role of the students in the academic integration process. It grounded the approach in the TSA construct and model and provided examples of early attempts to apply it in distance education where the needs are huge because of the multiple pressures that distance education students have to endure. It is an early stage in the research on the validity of the approach and carefully designed impact studies will be done to verify its usefulness.

## Session outline

1. **Presenter** (10 minutes): Introduce participants to the TSA construct and model.
2. **Small group discussion** (10 minutes): Participants discuss the following two questions:
  - a. How valid is the TSA construct for tackling the integration of students in higher education?
  - b. How can the TSA model be applied in residential and distance education contexts?
3. **Plenary** (10 minutes): General discussion of issues raised in the small groups.

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