

Reflections: Unpacking the Concept of Student Transitions

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Maybe we start with a fundamental question: What is meant by 'a transition' or transitions within the context of education and student learning? From the literature the term 'transition' tends to be conceptualised as the passage of change: embodied within notions of the shift from one position or state to the next. For most of us, a transition relates to the sorts of progressive and regressive alterations in the passage of life – which involves a complex blend of physical, emotional and cognitive adjustments. Thus, given that we are dealing with physical, emotional and cognitive adjustments that will be interacting, the plural 'transitions' seems more appropriate.

One fascinating feature of the concept of students' transitions is the way these bring together a multiplicity of factors within the context of education. Indeed, the phenomena of transitions within the realm of education is somewhat pluralistic in its outlook, displaying peculiar tendencies modulated by multiple dynamics and engaging with complex non-linear social systems and processes. These processes and dynamics include the circumstances of time and place, the unique dynamics of individual subjectivity, agency and interaction with others such as teachers, support staff and peers.

Transitions within the context of education are viewed, fundamentally, as a process of adjustment and change and so the metaphor of a 'journey' is commonly used to conceptualise the individual and the setting they operate and interact within. For example, from school to further education, school to higher education, or further education to higher education. These transitions can be seen as an educational undertaking with established turning points which takes place at a 'set time and in a certain place'. We must also recognise that students will undergo, simultaneously, large and small adjustments as they exit from one educational experience and enter into, and through, a new and unfamiliar educational experience. Importantly, the transitions journey also contains both retrospective and progressive aspects, creating continuities and decisive ruptures with previous educational experiences.

Looking across the literature we can detect certain contours and characteristics of student transitions emerging. In particular, social-cognitive processes of belonging; of negotiating a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to a group, a community and institution. And yet, despite the emergence of these common themes within the literature, which have certainly expanded the field of study, we must not lose sight of the fact that a transitional journey is highly complex

process. It is both deeply contextualised and where each individual's experience is unique. Educational transitions are characterised by multiple experiences, perspectives and meanings and is dependent on the individual student's biography and the institutional setting. Cuconato and Walther (2015: 291), provide a glimpse into why research on student transitions can be a multi-layered many-toned project:

Transitions are considered as crossroads of the life course at which individual processes of social integration as well as subjective identities are being negotiated and redirected. [...] The liminality of transitions requires an extensive and continuous activity of interpretation, negotiation, reconciliation and decisions-making, which in many cases, is neither perceived nor recognised (and supported) in institutional contexts of regulating transitions.

Cuconato and Walther's (ibid) suggestion of a 'liminality,' – a term predominantly found in the field of anthropology to describe the sorts of identity and character changes that may take place during rituals – may be a useful way to comprehend the levels of complexity here. During the liminal period previous understandings dissolve and the continuity of tradition – ways of acting, responding and thinking – loses its way and becomes less certain, being replaced by something else not fully implanted. Accepting Cuconato and Walther's (ibid) interpretation, it is reasonable to argue that the student leaving one educational setting and entering into a new educational setting will be in a 'liminal state' (an in-between state) between two educational identities. In making the necessary transitions to a new identity the student must strip away aspects of their old sense of self and embrace new attitudes and sensibilities that come together to fashion an altered identity: one coloured by the exigencies of the new educational setting. The transitional state of simultaneously jettisoning the familiar and embracing the unfamiliar can be characterised by a period of self-doubt, where the student identity is fractured and somewhat disembodied, neither fully in one identity category or the other. For us the notion of a liminal state helps to advance, but not necessarily crystallise, our understandings.

Others such as Gale and Parker (2014: 737) usefully frame the somewhat fluid complexions and contours associated with student transitions by characterising it as 'the capability to navigate change'. In a sense we have two fluctuating catalysing features inextricably at play here; the 'inner self' and the 'external environment'. Student transitions, according to these commentators encapsulate a multidimensional process, part of which will comprise certain linear steps and dynamics, with other more fluid, and unpredictable, processes contingent on a range of subtle individual characteristics interacting with the external. The student transitions journey is perceived here in performative terms: demanding academic ability, mental agility and robustness of the individual to engage with and transverse the challenging topography of the newly emerging educational

landscape. For Gale and Parker (ibid) successful transitions are measured in terms of student engagement: how they negotiate change, take ownership of their studies and participate in the dominant institutional structures and discourses.

From the literature, the notion of three phase models has been employed as an approach to capture the discursive and complex dynamics associated with student transitions, placing them within what looks like a logical sequence of events. These phased models with their linear steps of progress can be appealing as they fit well into the notion of a journey and, in doing so, they seek simplicity amid the cluttered complexities, thereby rendering the messy cognitive and emotional realities into a more manageable and more coherent set of processes. Whittaker, (2008: 18), for example, draws on a version of Tinto's (1987) Model of Student Integration (depicted in three phases) as a fruitful way to conceptualise students negotiating the transitions into higher education. The phases are: 'separation'- this represents a departure from previous educational environment/setting; 'transition' – denotes the process of adjustment to their new educational environment/setting; and the final phase of 'incorporation' – denotes full integration and acceptance of and by, their new educational environment/setting. Tinto's writing has clearly prompted others to develop new models or draw on models from elsewhere in the search to conceptualise student transitions. By way of example, Cheng, (2015: 3-8), usefully highlights 6 models for conceptualising student transitions including Bridges' Transition Model (2011) and 'U-Curve Theory of Adjustment' (Risque *et al.*, 2008).

Such transitional models offer considerable appeal for educationalist as they attempt to depict students on a journey of personal and academic development, with linear sequences or stages of adjustments and progressions. Critically, such models, by projecting how particular time bound experiences are consumed, endeavour to distil and, ultimately, to bring order to the sorts of fluid social, cultural and psychological complexities associated with the students' transitional journey. Such transitional models also seek to illuminate and structure understandings, governing the paths of action and associated thinking. Taken together, such models have created conceptual scaffolding, for meaning and significance which is critical to any process of formulating and managing measures to enhance transitions into and through the first year.

However, we would argue that uncritical acceptance and adoption of such models however can eliminate or side-line many interesting and potentially illuminating questions about how students engage with institutional discourses or how students conceptualise and understand their own transitions. Any given model depicting different phases of student transitions – however logical and persuasive – will likely obscure as much as it reveals about the set of experiences it seeks to capture. The student's sense of identity during their transitional journey becomes fluid and malleable, contingent on the actual educational experience and this is not fully appreciated or captured within these phased models. The models may be helpful to

our understandings. However, they don't adequately address or unpack the issue surrounding whether the students themselves understand the transitional processes or journey through which they are going through during their first year. This potential limitation underscores the importance of research that actually seeks to map and understand the student's lived experiences with respects to what they perceive as the most relevant aspects that enable successful transitions.

References

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