

First year students' perspectives of learning engagement: The centrality of responsivity

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Abstract

Universities prioritise the first year experience of students in efforts to enhance student experiences and improve retention rates. Many aspects of student life have been investigated, in efforts to clarify factors influencing student engagement. This paper reports on findings of a study which used semi-structured interviews to investigate the perspectives of both first year students, and lecturing staff who teach first year courses, to determine the key elements necessary to create learning engagement in a regional university campus. These findings indicate three key aspects of engagement including social, reciprocal and responsive elements. The scope of this paper is to report specifically on the central dimensions of responsive teaching that the students in this study recognised as good practice.

Key words: *First year experience; learning engagement; responsive teaching; scaffolding.*

Introduction

The first year student experience has become an area of interest for many universities both in Australia and overseas, and as a result, institutions now monitor with increasing intensity the experiences of their first year student population. National studies have often investigated student engagement by quantifying time spent on campus, but this does not indicate specifically how students use this time for learning engagement and what benefit they receive from activities they pursue in learning. Far more in-depth analysis of how students perceive various forms of learning engagement and what enables and obstructs such engagement is required.

First year students arrive at university with their own conceptions of learning as well as a personal learning history, which may affect the outcome of their success at university (Meyer & Shanahan 2001). There is a need, therefore, to better understand how first year students, examine what their daily experiences are, as well as find out more specifically about the quality of content and the processes they are experiencing in terms of teaching and learning (McInnis et al., 1995). The more knowledge academic institutions acquire about the learning experiences of their students, the better they will be able to improve teaching (Ramsden, 2003).

Not only are the views of students important, but also those of the teaching staff. A survey conducted at a large university in Australia revealed differences in staff expectations of students' academic skills, and student performance (Latham & Green 1997). Interview data from a study examining student and staff perceptions and expectations of teaching and learning, revealed a disparity between the staff and students, but also considerable variation amongst staff themselves (Akerlind & Jenkins 1998). After completing a survey of first year students' perceptions of learning, Johnston (2001) concluded that to understand the interaction between teaching and learning, there is a need to investigate approaches to teaching. Strategies targeted at teaching and learning are therefore best developed taking into account not only student perspectives but also the perspectives of teaching staff. Scholarship of teaching, as conceptualised by Boyer (1990) though relevant at all levels, resonates particularly in terms of first year experience, as this is when students form habits and attitudes towards learning, which will impact upon their entire tertiary experience (McInnis & James 1995).

Clearly, enhancing the first year experience is of particular interest to universities in order to address issues of retention, course satisfaction and transition from secondary school or previous career endeavours. This is particularly important in a small regional university in Australia, such as the one in which this study is set. This university, like others in the higher education sector in Australia, places significant priority on key performance indicators such as retention, student experience and graduate outcomes. Whilst studies across the nation have collected a wide range of information relating to first year students, it is vital in the context of this specific regional university that academic staff and leaders understand the issues relevant to its own cohort of students. To effectively address issues of learning engagement, both the perspectives of staff and students need to be analysed. Further, the degree of congruence between students' perspectives and lecturers' perspectives should be identified and implications made at the levels of policy and future practice at this university.

This paper reports on the first phase of a study that was funded by the university to investigate the key research questions:

What are the perspectives of first year students when engaging in learning through lectures and tutorials? And;

What are the perspectives of lecturers when engaging with first year students when engaging in learning through lectures and tutorials?

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual first year students. The interviews were scheduled at a time most suitable to students. The interviews were typically one hour in length and consisted of a series of questions in the form of an interview guide that was derived from the key research questions:

What are the perspectives of first year students when engaging in learning through lectures and tutorials?

- In what learning environment do you prefer to engage in learning?
- Under what conditions is learning engagement most successful?
- What difficulties do you encounter while engaging in learning and how do you manage these difficulties?

Throughout the data collection phase the researcher simultaneously analysed the interview transcripts informed by 'grounded theory' methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In particular, general ideas, themes or concepts, as analytical tools for generating key propositions were sought to address the research questions.

All students enrolled in first year courses across three faculties were invited to participate in the study (about 600 in number). Only five percent of this cohort responded to the invitation and their responses form the basis of reporting in this paper. All volunteer students were accepted into the study. It is not the purpose of the study to undertake a factor analysis in which factors such as age, gender, experience, culture or location are deemed to be important. As such, the findings reported here are hardly generalisable across contexts. The purpose of the study is to portray and analyze the perspectives of a diverse group of first year students. As a result, the findings are useful in generating propositions that underpin a deeper understanding about learning engagement in first year from the perspectives of students. These propositions will form the basis of strategic discussion and will generate more extensive research in the future. The findings are presented here for discussion.

Findings

As stated above, the following findings are based on interviews with a diverse cohort of first year university students across three faculties. As individuals, the students reported different issues and emphasized a range of factors that influenced their levels of engagement in learning. However, as a group, several themes or propositions emerged that were consistent across all students from all three faculties. The three key themes include:

- Engaging learning incorporates the social aspects of learning;
- Engaging learning is most effective when learning is a process of reciprocity between staff and students; and
- Learning is at its best when teaching is characterized by responsiveness.

It is the third theme, the way that lecturers are responsive to the needs of students that will be discussed in this paper. More specifically, the paper will show how learning engagement in the first year of university can be enhanced through

- (i) teaching that is characterised by responsiveness,
- (ii) adopting the process of scaffolding learning as central to teaching; and
- (iii) the use of differentiated responsive teaching.

Further, this paper will report on a number of learning and teaching strategies that reflect the concept of responsivity as central to teaching. These findings are based on students' perspectives of factors that enhance learning engagement in their first year of study at one university.

Teaching that is characterised by responsivity

All of the interviewed students indicated that the most effective teaching staff are responsive to their needs in terms of promoting understanding and enhancing learning engagement. It was reported that this occurred in both lecture and tutorial situations. In formal lectures, academics displaying this quality repeatedly asked if students had understood concepts. Further, it was reported by students that many staff recapped and reinforced points throughout the lecture, took time to explain concepts in a simplified manner and used questioning to assist in this process. As one student recalls when deliberating about a positive experience of lecturer responsiveness:

it was a lot of listening but she always asked us if we understood, or always had a question session at the end. (ST_LA_F)

A student in a different faculty stated the following:

so he'd go, ok, in doing this, let's flick to the practice exam, let's have a look at a question that's similar to what we've just talked about, and he'd get us to go through and give an answer and then go, well why?...so that sort of helped too, it kept reinforcing things all the time, instead of just learning a heap of knowledge (ST_LA_G)

Students such as these indicated that responsive strategies of this type were also important characteristics of effective tutorials. In addition, they expressed the importance of using part of the tutorial to clarify key concepts covered in the lecture or to discuss any concepts students were finding difficult to comprehend. In capturing the nature of responsive tutoring, one student stated:

I haven't come across a tutor yet that hasn't started out every tutorial session with, is there anything from last week, is there anything from this week's lecture ...if you miss a foundation piece of information, it can destroy a semester, and I think there's a lot on offer for making sure, that, especially in the first 5 or 6 weeks of the semester that there's continually backtracking, whether its asked for or not...its critical and it looks like it exists, for the subjects I've experienced anyway. (ST_LA_D)

Several students, in describing responsive teaching, noted that in some instances it was the tutor who had the ability to break concepts down and explain them on a simpler level. This was one way of being responsive to students needs. Students commented that the enabling classes (additional courses offered to strengthen a student's academic confidence in various science disciplines) in particular were very positive in terms of their learning experiences and responsive teaching. Again the students reported that these staff were very open to questioning and were excellent communicators. The students felt free to participate in a tutorial at any time and indicated comfortably to their tutors when they didn't understand a concept. Sessions such as these, it was reported, were structured around the students and included the reinforcement of key concepts presented in the lecture, but also centred on the students, by asking: 'what do you need to know?' It was the centrality of this key construct that lies at the heart of responsive lecturing and tutoring as described by the students. For example:

and the guy who ran both of those classes was fantastic, he was really open with us saying to him, ok hang on, stop, don't understand what's happening, and he could put it into a really easy context for us, so that we could pick up on little things that made a big difference to the whole picture... he structured it around us, ... he used to come to the

lectures, find out where things were at, what they were actually teaching us at the time, and then, for us it was really good because he'd say, ok we were talking about this, was there anything that you needed to know? (ST_LA_G)

Further, another student reinforces the concept of responsive teaching as instrumental in heightening learning engagement and the meaningful construction of knowledge through responsive patterns of communication and consequently creating a learning transformation. He argued:

I just think some people have a natural flair for teaching and some people, who are very intelligent people are very smart and have PhDs and everything else, but they're not effective at communication and they're not effective teachers. They can't impart information to students.... sometimes you can have someone who doesn't have half of that academic sort of background, but just the way that they can communicate, they sort of can take it down to your level and teach it well (ST_LA_H)

Of importance also was the students' perspective of the lecturer as willing to respond to questions. The process of acquiring clarity by asking questions varied from class to class and students reported that the level of engagement in learning depended on the level of questioning which in turn was related to the degree of comfort they felt with the lecturer or tutor. Students felt that the more responsive teaching staff indicated that they were more approachable to student enquiry. This implies that lecturers, who upheld principles of responsivity as central to teaching, were more comfortable in responding to spontaneous questioning from the group. For some students, this was established by lecturers promoting a positive, low risk and interactive learning environment. Learning engagement heightened when the level of risk for students was low and the invitation to question was high.

... it would be the way he drew the answer out of the audience... he just seemed to have this ability to encourage them to talk without criticising them, and we were bound to get it wrong, we all got everything wrong all the time but he never seemed to make us feel dumb about it, which was really good...he wouldn't say, you're wrong, he would go on and try and find what you were right about it, and find something else who could bridge the gaps, which was quite good. (ST_LA_C)

Scaffolding learning as central to teaching

Scaffolding throughout learning conversations was an important dimension identified by students as central to responsive teaching. Students reported that their learning engagement was heightened when lecturers and tutors clearly demonstrated they that were there to help the students. Scaffolding was manifested in different ways according to the data. Along with those staff constantly offering assistance during lectures, students reported positive experiences of lecturers attending tutorials, reinforcing the fact that there were able to come and see them, in post-lecture or post-tutorials situations. In terms of tutors, those offering to continue discussions via email outside of class time were noted as facilitators who scaffolded learning engagement. It was emphasised by a number of students that this responsiveness and scaffolding enhanced the quality of student learning and thus, heightened student satisfaction. As one student reports:

if you had a question he was always happy to answer it, and I always felt that he respected us, but I mean ok we were new at it and we didn't really know what he was doing, but I just felt he respected us and you know a couple of times we had a query on something so I wrote to him on the email and he wrote straight back and really helped me (ST_LA_I)

Another student valued the spontaneous responsiveness of the lecturer and expressed feelings of being valued as a learner. The following quote reflects this sentiment:

(he said he was happy to discuss our questions) not just at consult times but at any time, you know, look if you need to see me, come and see me, and if you don't get it, then, if you see me having a coffee, come and see me, we can have a coffee, we can go through it, just being approachable I think is a really big thing (ST_LA_H)

Of significance, was that differing levels of scaffolding and responsiveness (high to low) were evident. The level of scaffolding and responsiveness, whether high or low, by the lecturer or tutor could vary depending on the motivation shown by the students. As one participant discovered, the higher the level of interest displayed in learning, the higher the degree of responsiveness and scaffolding was offered in return, to the point where staff were willing to spend large amounts of time with students. Students who experienced a high congruence between student interest and lecturer responsiveness reported increased levels of learning engagement throughout the first year of their studies. This in turn led to a high degree of satisfaction as is reflected in the following sentiment expressed by one participant.

our tutor who is also our lecturer realised, hey you guys are actually interested in what your doing and they're really willing to help you if you're willing to make an effort with things, if you have trouble with stuff and you go and approach them and say look I really don't understand what that was about they're willing to help you with it (ST_LA_G)

The level of interest expressed by students and reflected in the level of scaffolding and responsiveness offered by the lecturer was shaped by factors such as student initiative, the degree of self-regulation evident in students questioning and the degree of commitment by the student to learning or finding a solution to the problem. As one student reported:

he said, "I've got an open door policy", he said "I don't have a set time for you to come and visit, he said as far as I'm concerned I'm open door, you can come anytime and if I'm free I'll see you. If not I'll say look, come back at such and such a time, I'm just busy right now". And yeah that was what he was really good, he said if I can see you've actually attempted to try and work this out yourself and you've got stuck, I'll spend as much time with you as you want. He said "but if you just come to me and expect me to give you the answer, I'm not going to do it". (ST_LA_G)

Students value the lecturers' willingness to scaffold their efforts as independent learners, a prerequisite to refined learning engagement that differentiates university learning from secondary school interactions

Differentiated responsivity

A third dimension of responsive teaching relates to differentiated responsivity. Students identified the diversity of the levels of understanding and abilities across the groups. They commented that they had great respect for the lecturers and tutors who engaged in differentiated ways of modifying learning engagement with the range of students with a view to ensuring quality outcomes for all students. As one student noted:

it could get hard at times to balance the students who were keeping up and the students who were really like, I don't get this, and they'd say well look, we'll have to work on it later or, you know, go home and have a go at it, and email me and we'll organise a get

together time, that sort of thing, so they were good at trying to offer that sort of stuff as well. (ST_LA_G)

In most cases it was reported that tutors and lecturers would follow up with individuals according to need and this differentiated responsiveness was considered a key part of heightened learning engagement for all first year students. Despite some very positive reports, there were two students reporting instances where they did not experience this level of responsiveness, affirming that this is not helpful to the learning process. One student spoke of some lecturers as non-responsive in their approach to differentiated learning. He stated:

the lecturers, sometimes they're not as accessible that they make out that they are, they're very busy,... if you ask a question they look at you and go, why are you even asking this question? (ST_LA_B)

Still another student recalled his concern that some lecturers had lost interest in student need and consequently did not respond with enthusiasm to requests for support. He recounted the negative impact of this type of lecturer on his first year experience:

I mean some of them have done it probably for a long time, and can be a bit condescending and I don't think that helps anyone, I mean they may not mean to do it, but that's just the way they come across (ST_LA_I)

Students also differed as to whether they felt a closer responsive relationship with their tutor as compared to their lecturer. One student did comment however, that even when the lecturer did show interest, it was the student's own shyness that deterred him from contacting the lecturer, and instead the student was more comfortable seeking assistance from the tutor. He explained this feeling in the following way:

(the tutor) said straight up look I don't know everything, and if I don't know I'll go away and come back and so I found I had a balance, so if I didn't understand something in the lecture then I could go to the tutor and look its not that the lecturer wasn't interested in her students, she was very much interested, but I was this timid little thing walking in (ST_LA_I)

Discussion

The study reported here investigated the perspectives amongst students of the factors leading to successful learning engagement. As individuals, they reported different issues and placed emphasis on different factors. However, as a group, several themes emerged that were consistent across all students. These themes emerged as three main categories that describe learning engagement from a first year student perspective within one institution. The categories reveal the significance of the social aspects of learning experienced in the first year experience, the reciprocal nature of learning as instrumental in fostering meaningful learning engagement, and the value of responsiveness by lecturers and tutors in enhancing the quality of learning engagement. It is the later category that has been discussed in the scope of this paper.

Clearly the participants in this study argued that the more responsive the lecturer or tutor, the greater the likelihood of becoming engaged in learning. This study has illustrated the significance of not merely transmitting content through didactic teaching, but of the development of teaching that is characterized by responsiveness. Becoming a responsive teacher involves being aware of the student and their needs in the learning process. This finding reflects the well-established paradigm of student-centered approaches to teaching (Ramsden, 2003).

This study foregrounds the significance of responsiveness to students in the first year of learning engagement and reflects the findings that a student-focused approach to teaching can influence student study approaches (Richardson, 2005). It is important to note that the students in this sample may not have arrived at university with a set approach to learning (Barrie, Ginns, & Prosser, 2005). However it can be deduced that, despite their differences, the sample of students was unanimous in celebrating the concept of responsive teaching as central to heightening learning engagement. Lecturers and tutors can take away from this finding that it is not just content or teaching strategies that will determine the successful achievement of learning outcomes (Chang, 2002; Yeo & Zadnik, 2004). It is the way in which students and lecturers engage pedagogically that is of vital importance. The dimension of responsivity is a key factor that enhances learning engagement in the first year of university experience in one specific context.

Responding to different student positioning in learning is an important part of responsive lecturing or tutoring and is critical in fostering learning engagement in first year. As good teachers observe and listen to students (Jackson, 2005), learners need to be given the *opportunity* to be listened to or heard. This phenomena was clearly evident in this study and led to enhanced engagement for most participants. Referred to earlier as the scaffolding of learning through spontaneous questioning and responsive patterns of communication, lecturing or tutoring that was characterized by responsivity was reported to facilitate:

1. transformative learning experiences for first year students
2. the deconstruction and reconstruction of existing knowledge
3. the recapitulation of new learnings, and
4. feelings of being valued as a learner.

These outcomes are indicative in this study that the concept of responsive teaching adopted by lecturers and tutors can enhance the richness of learning engagement for students experiencing their first year of study across faculties.

Scaffolding and checking for understanding through conversation is seen as important (Jackson, 1997) both within and outside of formal assessment, and should be considered a fundamental part of teaching (Ellis, Calvo, Levy, & Tan, 2004). These findings are in agreement with previous studies indicating that learning conversations and spontaneous questioning of this type enhance learning engagement (Chang, 2002; Yeo & Zadnik, 2004).

In this environment of scaffolding through substantive conversation, students responded to academics who showed a genuine interest in what they did know, and what they were having difficulty understanding. The process of differentiated responsivity gave the students specific opportunity to clarify points and seek extra information outside of normal classes. This approach has been recognised previously as an important part of learner-focused approach to teaching, and Cahyadi (2004) advocates that additional time should be made available for students seeking clarification. In this study the students affirmed that scaffolding of this type took place in a low-risk environment, was shaped by lecturers' invitations to engage in interaction and was constituted as a pedagogy of conversation not instruction. The dimensions of supportive environment, invitation to participate in learning through scaffolding and substantive conversation capture what was deemed to be engaging learning, as well as qualities possessed by approachable staff as described by the students in this study.

Students from this study indicated they are more likely to enter into conversations with teaching staff when they perceive a level of comfort from approachable staff. Showing respect for students and being approachable are both important qualities rated in studies describing good teaching

(Jackson, 2005). These qualities indicate that responsive teaching requires creating a safe environment for students to be willing participants and engage in learning (Damron & Mott, 2005), and where they feel comfortable to ask for assistance or feedback (Lawrence, 2002). Some students may perceive asking for help as a sign of weakness (Lawrence, 2002). However when scaffolding is used effectively and responsively and is differentiated to meet the needs of individual students, the learning environment that the academic creates, can alter students' motivation and learning behaviours (Yeo & Zadnik, 2004). It was reported that certain teaching staff were better able to explain concepts in alternate ways if the students were experiencing difficulty. This was also reported in the study by Jackson (2005), where teaching at the right level and being relevant to the students were amongst the top characteristics of good teachers.

In light of this study it can be concluded that it is an important quality in responsive lecturers and tutors to acknowledge that students have difficulty grasping a concept, and then commit to being able to explain the learning requirements in a different manner. This is referred to here as differentiated responsiveness, a teaching strategy that ensures that all students feel valued as learners and gain important insights into the topic under study as a result of the lecturer or tutoring taking the time to explain, re-teach and recapitulate key learning concepts in differentiated ways for a diverse range of learners.

It is the perspective of the first year students in this study that differentiated responsiveness of this type is highly valued across faculties and instrumental in leading to learning satisfaction. Further the participants in this study indicated a high congruence between student motivation, commitment to learning, sustained student problem-solving and lecturer/tutor responsiveness. It was shown that the higher the levels of student motivation and commitment, the higher the level of teacher responsivity, and, as a consequence, the greater the degree of learner engagement.

When considering designing curriculum to enhance engagement, McInnis (2001) warns of universities becoming reactive, when it is clearly the case, based on the evidence presented here, that it is more important to be responsive to the concerns of students (Williams, Harreveld, & Danaher, 2003). Establishing rapport, checking for understanding regularly, becoming an effective communicator, engaging in substantive conversation in whatever context the students are being taught, are factors that were rated very highly by students in this study. They did not regard resources and online facilities as the key factors promoting their learning engagement. It was the pedagogical responsiveness of lecturers and tutors not resources (Coates, 2005) that enhanced the degrees of learning engagement and satisfaction for students in this study.

The findings of Phase One of this project endorse the centrality of responsive teaching in promoting learning engagement in first year cohorts. It was encouraging to hear the students affirm lecturer and tutor commitment to differentiated responsive teaching and to varying levels of scaffolding as central to student engagement for first year students. Students characterised their first year as positive because of factors such as spontaneous questioning, substantive conversation, and the development of a low-risk learning environment. The students reported that the utilisation of responsive pedagogies ensured the deconstruction and reconstruction of key learning concepts, which resulted in transformative learning engagement. Further, they reported that responsivity of this type was actualised through reciprocity of respect between learners and lecturers and this generated feelings of value as a learner. Future publications will report on two more key themes central to enhancing learning engagement that have emerged from within this study. The themes capture concepts referred to as reciprocal learning engagement and the social politics of learning engagement within first year classes. Additionally a paper is underway that analyses the levels congruence between lecturer and student perspectives regarding learning engagement.

While such a study is context specific, many interesting insights have been gained regarding student perspectives on learning engagement. In order to enhance learning engagement in the first year of university experience, students have recognized the centrality of responsivity to teaching, the importance of scaffolding learning and the necessity to differentiated responsive teaching according to the varying needs of the student cohort. It is the students' perspectives that to do so is strategic in heightening student engagement in learning and in enhancing their satisfaction with their first year experiences at university.

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