

Student-facilitated transition: Fostering empowered collectives

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(Received 13 August, 2015; Published online 30 January, 2016)

Each student's experience of transitioning to university is unique, complex and dynamic as they negotiate their sense of identity and becoming. While developing peer networks is one predictor of student engagement and retention, peer networks are also potential sites for cultivating critical pedagogies. In this paper we discuss an undergraduate subject, 'Experiential Learning in Communities' which developed at our university in response to increasing student diversity. Through engaging in a collective, multidimensional learning experience, which incorporates a core thread of reflexive praxis and student-led communities of practice, transitioning students and their peer mentors empower each other to create a sense of "becoming" a university student that uniquely suits their individual and group experience. Together they explore the meaning and practice of being a university student, and engage with the expectations of the academy on their own terms. This community of practice disrupts the imposition of one set of cultural values onto students of diverse backgrounds, while still enabling them to develop strategies to succeed in relation to those values. Whiteness studies are explored as a means of interrogating these often opaque cultural values. By academics positioning themselves as White cultural brokers, students are given permission to explore and leverage the various capitals they bring to the learning context. Together with their peers they help each other to discover strategies which enable them to succeed in what is often an alien environment. As all participants, including academics, continually reflect on their practice, we all develop in our understanding of the nature of learning and teaching. By engaging in this collaborative "becoming" process, students discover that they do belong in the university.

Key Words: student-led communities of practice, transition as becoming, peer learning.

1. Introduction

Each student's experience of transitioning to university is unique, complex and dynamic as they negotiate their sense of identity and becoming. While developing peer networks is one predictor of student engagement and retention, peer networks are also potential sites for cultivating critical pedagogies. In this paper we discuss an undergraduate subject, 'Experiential Learning in Communities' which developed at our university in response to increasing student diversity. We suggest it includes innovative pedagogies which are transferable to other contexts. The subject incorporates a core thread of reflexive praxis, where students continually reflect on their own experience of putting theory into practice, and student-led communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). Although there are some structural parameters, these learning communities provide a forum for students to explore their various identities and draw on the multiple and intersecting forms of capital they bring to their experiences. This means that students can define what it means to be a university student in their own terms rather than having it defined for them by the academy. The academics who coordinate the subject position themselves as cultural

brokers and attempt to provide some interpretation of academia through experiential activities, while encouraging students to reflect on what this means for them personally.

The following discussion is informed by a critical pedagogy lens whereby education is viewed as a transformative and empowering project that challenges existing inequalities and privileges and refuses a deficit model of learning (Kress, Degennaro, & Paugh, 2013). Critical pedagogy critiques an instrumental or governmentalist approach to education and instead views the need for validation of “multiple forms of expression as well as social and cultural experiences of the learner” (Scorza, Mirra, & Morrell, 2013, p. 19). It is concerned with “questions of justice, social freedom, and the capacity for democratic agency, action and change, as well as the related issues of power, exclusion, and citizenship” (Giroux, 2011, p. 121). As such the development of students’ critical consciousness through reflection and praxis can serve to validate their own experiences as well as opening new avenues for learning. Scorza et al. (2013) suggest that such validation can “allow a community of learners to become teachers and alter the educational discourse” (p. 20).

Experiential Learning in Communities (ELC) is an introductory education subject offered as an elective in undergraduate degrees for students on pathways to postgraduate teaching degrees. Students in second and third year not only come to realise that they can learn from first year students, but that the resources and capital each brings to the learning community enriches the whole group. ELC aims to disrupt students’ conception of education as a power directive from teacher to student and open the possibility of learning being perceived as a mutually beneficial interaction between all participants. First years not only benefit from more experienced students’ greater institutional capital, they also gain confidence as students who feel they belong to the university environment and have something to give to others. As prospective teachers, participants gain experiential understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of learning and engage with a model they can apply in their own teaching practice in the future.

1.1. Transition to university

Discussion about the first year experience and transition occurs in a contested space which calls for ongoing interrogation of assumptions and practices. Differing perspectives on Transition have been described by Gale and Parker (2014b) as Transition as induction, Transition as development and Transition as becoming (2014b, p. 17). The first two approaches to Transition are critiqued as positioning transition to university as a “particular, linear and universal” experience (Gale & Parker, 2014b, p. 25) which assumes a typical student. We are particularly interested in the notion of Transition as becoming which, in contrast, recognises the inherent change, complexity and heterogeneities within the experience of Transition (Gale & Parker, 2014b). Here, the emphasis is on an ongoing process during which students are also navigating their identities. These identities are multiple, as students juggle many different sets of belonging, yet also unique, as each set of belongings reflects the differing circumstances and experiences of each student.

The process of transitioning to university is unique to each student and often cannot be neatly encapsulated within the first year of university. For instance, some students may experience life events that interrupt their university studies while for others it may take several years to feel that they are successfully navigating their university experience. It is also important to recognise that universities are not homogeneous entities but sites of “multiple, complex and diverse social relations, identities, communities, knowledges and practices” (Brook, Fergie, Maeorg, & Michell, 2014, p. 3). In their edited volume that seeks to unsettle some of the discourses about the first year experience, Brook et al. reconceptualise the first-year experience in terms of “multiple and dynamic processes of dialogue and exchange amongst all participants” (2014, p. 3). ELC fosters such interactions by facilitating student-led exploration of the diverse experiences of being a student.

Despite critique, perceptions tend to persist that students from some equity groups, such as low Socio Economic Status (SES) are the “the problem to be fixed”, rather than recognising the strengths that such students bring to their experience. These perceptions perpetuate a deficit model (Bletsas & Michell, 2014; Devlin & McKay, 2014). In contrast, students can be under-

stood as agents in the process of navigating how they will conceive and develop their identity as university students, through drawing on their “strengths, strategies and resources” from their “socio-cultural worlds” (Maeorg, 2014, p. 156). Such a strengths-based approach aligns with the notion of Transition as becoming in which transition involves an agentic transformative process inside individual students, taking into account external pressures and requirements, rather than simply adding something onto already established identities.

1.2. Interrogating peer mentoring as a response to the First Year Experience

The importance of peers in navigating the academic environment is commonly emphasised in the first year experience and transition literature (for example: James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Nelson & Clarke, 2014). As peer mentoring also increases student engagement and participation, this has given rise to the implementation of peer mentoring programs in many forms (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Holt & Lopez, 2014). Universities tend to devise their own programs to suit the needs of their cohorts and/or adopt and adapt existing programs to suit their particular contexts (for example: Armstrong, Power, Coady, & Dormer, 2011; Copeman & Keightley, 2014). Programs vary between those that pay mentors, provide a stipend or vouchers, are voluntary with professional development and certificated recognitions, or those that run for credit in subjects of study (Arendale, 2014).

As well as being of considerable benefit to the mentee, research suggests that the mentor accrues both interpersonal and academic development through participating in peer mentoring programs (Holt & Lopez, 2014; Terrion, 2012). Both mentees and mentors report learning enhancement and forming connections with a broader cohort of students to be significant benefits of their experiences, with mentors also emphasising the satisfaction of being able to assist other students (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Holt & Lopez, 2014), particularly as a “learning coach, trusted friend and connecting link” (Holt & Lopez, 2014, p. 416). On the other hand, there are challenges involved in balancing expectations and potential dependencies, and vulnerabilities entailed in forming relationships. For instance, mentors and mentees may not find immediate rapport or ready articulation of their needs within the relationship, motivation may affect both parties as can time commitment issues, and there may be difficulties with role definition and boundaries (Holt & Lopez, 2014). If the mentor does not meet the mentees’ expectations this can result in “overwhelmed” mentors and “dissatisfied” mentees (Christie, 2014, p. 963). Additionally, issues of power and resistance can also permeate these relationships (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Overall, however, the benefits are largely seen to outweigh the challenges and risks.

While the peer mentoring literature generally promotes the benefits of peer mentoring programs in universities, Christie (2014) raises questions about the “uncritical acceptance” (p.964) of such programs. She suggests that issues of power and control within, and brought to bear on, these programs are often not sufficiently interrogated, addressed in training programs or explored in research. She contends that peer mentoring programs are often connected to institutional governance and retention agendas although they are presented in the guise of student-led programs. Additionally, peer mentoring programs are often reliant on project based funding which affects their evolution and sustainability, and means that funding can dictate the parameters of the programs including prescribing which cohorts are to be targeted. Christie (2014) proposes that mentoring can be a form of “governmentality, through which the University inducts students into particular ways of thinking and being” (p. 961). This is then legitimised through the mentoring training which is tailored to skill mentors in supporting mentees to develop identities which enable them to “fit in” to university life.

Critical mentoring, which is the frame within which we locate ELC, rejects a hierarchical model of mentoring as a uni-directional relationship and instead emphasises the mutuality involved in the mentoring partnership so that learners are in a “dialogic exploration toward knowing and understanding” (Freire et al., 1997, p.xvi.). Liou, Martinez and Rotheram-Fuller (2015) propose that this approach to mentoring enables students to navigate both inequality and change more effectively. They suggest that in order to do this students need to appreciate the forms of capital they bring to the mentoring partnerships and develop a sense of their own agency. They assert

that students not only need to learn to understand their own strengths but they also benefit from exposure to resources and training which help them to develop their individual and collective strengths. For this reason, as the academics in ELC, we position ourselves as providers of resources and training, and interpreters of academic culture, while enabling students to determine their own processes within their learning communities. The interpreter's role is to make the implicit explicit, the opaque transparent, and the incomprehensible understood. However, as we are not "bilingual" in our students' backgrounds, our interpretation is likely to be inadequate. It is part of our approach to the unit to explain why academia does the things it does, to encourage a reflective dialogue with students to examine the practices and assumptions of the academy and its academics, and to continually revise our assessment templates, instructions and exemplars so that they are as clear as possible for all students.

2. Experiential Learning in Communities (ELC)

The program we discuss here is embedded in a for-credit cross-level undergraduate subject within an Education Studies Major in which second and third year students provide mentoring for first year students. It initially arose in response to a request for mentoring opportunities from refugee-background students entering Western Sydney University and was developed as a funded project through the Office of Learning and Teaching (Vickers & Zammit, 2014). While it was available originally to refugee-background students, they requested that the opportunity be extended to other first year students so that their transition into their first year at university could also be supported. In the current iteration of the program the subject runs alternately on two campuses and, up to now, has been limited to 100 enrolled students in the first semester and 50 in the second, primarily due to the challenge of finding enough mentees and the administrative load of organising mentoring pairs and debriefing groups.

Mentees are recruited through direct phone calls to new students, advertising around the campuses and through personal contact. Mentees may enrol in the subject or be mentored without enrolling in it. Mentees and mentors complete a questionnaire that is used by the subject coordinator to try and match student preferences for the mentoring partnerships. Pairs are allocated by the subject coordinator and any problems can be discussed in the debriefing groups or with the subject coordinator. As mentees who are not enrolled in the subject often do not continue, there is a significant administrative and communication load on the academics at the beginning of the subject to try and establish stable mentoring pairs and to reassure students who initially find themselves without a mentee that they will still be able to meet the face-to-face time requirements of the subject.

Our institution is described as a new university as it is less than 50 years old. Seventy six percent of the student population comes from Greater Western Sydney drawing from 170 countries of birth with 32% of students speaking a language other than English at home. We are above the sector average with 64% of commencing domestic students being the first in their family to attend University and 24% of students come from a low socio economic background (University of Western Sydney, 2013). These student demographics are representative of the Experiential Learning in Communities cohort.

ELC was designed to prioritise social relations in the learning environment (Vickers & Zammit, 2014). These social relations are embodied in four different types of weekly interaction. The first type of interaction is a face to face relationship between a mentor and a mentee. The second occurs in small debriefing groups (three to eight people) run by student facilitators for all mentors and mentees enrolled in the subject. Students debrief their mentoring experience and also discuss a weekly reading that is related to what they are experiencing. Student facilitators are either previous mentors or mentees who have been invited back to participate in this capacity, or Master of Teaching service learning students. The facilitators meet as a group with the academic tutors once a week. The facilitator group acts as a model for the facilitators to apply in their debriefing groups. It assists facilitators to prepare for their debriefing sessions and is a forum for discussing any issues that may be arising within the program. Mentors and mentees also attend tutorials run by academics. In tutorials they learn about the practice of mentoring, how to build relationships, and are introduced to different aspects of university learning including academic

writing. If there are enough mentees enrolled in the subject, they have their own dedicated tutorial which allows for an increased focus on academic literacy development. When we are unable to recruit enough first year mentees, students without mentees form peer mentoring pairs. Mentees who are enrolled in the subject engage in the same experiential learning, including assessments, as the mentors. Mentees who are not enrolled in the subject are not part of the debriefing groups but are often invited to the social activities run in conjunction with the subject.

Experiential learning, as the subject name implies, informs the pedagogical approach taken in the subject. This is consolidated for students through ongoing reflection which is a component of each of their assessment tasks. Learning is understood to be a process that involves an interplay of “action/reflection and experience/abstraction” so that “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2014, p. 51). Moon’s (2004) adaptation of Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning provides a clear representation for students of the links between experience and reflection. Moon(2004) suggests that students move cyclically through concrete experience, abstract conceptualisation where they learn from the experience, reflective observation and active experimentation where they try out what they have learnt. This cycle applies to ELC students who participate in their debriefing groups and mentoring partnerships, submit weekly reflections based on their experiences and their weekly readings, and then continue through the cycle to apply their learnings in their groups and partnerships. The reading topics include communities of practice, meta-learning, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and peer mentoring. Students also write a reflective essay and participate in a debriefing group reflection–presentation which uses visual media to distil their learning experiences in the subject.

2.1. Communities of Practice

Wenger’s (1998) conceptualisation of Communities of Practice (CoP) has also been an important framing for this subject. Usually communities of practice tend to originate somewhat organically, as practitioners recognise a commonality of interest and identified shared purposes. In contrast, the communities of practice that we describe, rather than evolving organically, are “an artificial construct created by the teacher” and “perceived by students as an obligation” (Bos-Ciussi, Rosner, & Augier, 2007, p. 291). However, utilising the terminology of CoP provides a conceptual framework through which students can interpret the subject and their experiences within it. Students have described the program as one which blends individual and collective learning into shared practice, and as a program that creates chains of learning in higher education.

Figure 1 below provides a pictorial summary of the CoP within ELC. The dotted line delineates the locus of the CoP but also represents the blurred boundary across which students relate to others outside their own debriefing groups and mentoring pairs. The single-headed arrows indicate that facilitators and academic tutors introduce stimulus material into the CoP in terms of skills training, academic literacy development and material to aid students’ reflection on their learning. The double-headed arrows indicate where the main collaborative learning occurs.

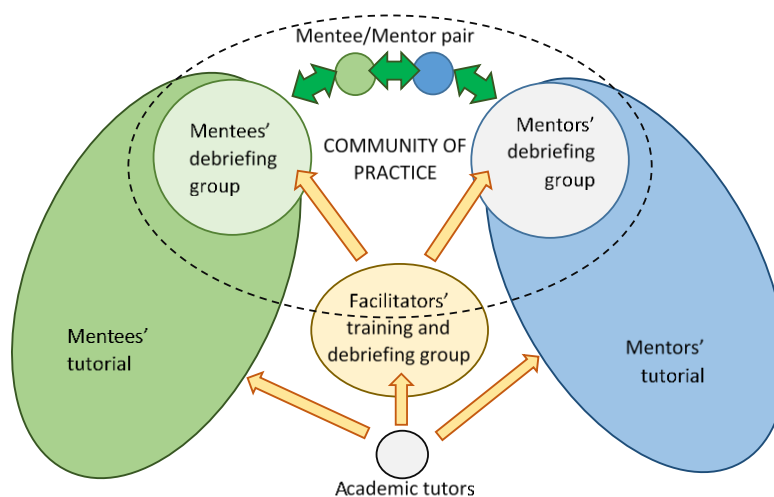


Figure 1. Locus of community of practice.

The primary locus of the community of practice is the student debriefing groups and mentoring partnerships. In the debriefing groups, the facilitators create a forum for exploring the multi-dimensional nature of being a university student and draw on their own experiences to help group members develop their group's unique shared understanding of their own multiple identities. Academics are essentially on the margins of this unique CoP and serve predominantly as cultural brokers, helping the students to understand the expectations and culture of the academic world. The facilitators and mentors act as cultural mediators and interpreters, illustrating what the academic tutors mean by giving examples and advice based on their own experience. Even with extensive explanations by academics, it is often only through the interactions with each other that ELC students develop an understanding of how they can achieve their aspirations and what this means in terms of their relationships with others in the multiple contexts they are relating to and managing. What actually happens in the student-facilitated meetings is controlled by the students. There is only informal accountability for what occurs in the groups and, although academics control the structure, sometimes academics and students can feel uncomfortable due to this lack of formal control and accountability.

2.2. Empowered collectives

We focus on these student-run CoP in the following section. We think they lend themselves to a contemplation of critical pedagogy informed by theories of Whiteness. We suggest that the student-led communities of practice, although located in the constraints of a subject, nevertheless are "humanising and empowering" experiences for students that can be conceived of as "empowered collectives" (Scorza et al., 2013, p. 29). This is because the debriefing groups are more than just a support network in that they mobilise students' existing social capital to develop strategies to prosper and succeed at university. They enable students to create their own unique identity as university students and to discover a sense of belonging, ideally as they determine it, not as is determined in the university environment. We would locate this in the paradigm of Transition as becoming.

For the purposes of this paper we are concerned with the intersections between Whiteness studies (Goldenberg, 2013; Meredith, Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007), conceptualisations of capital (Liou et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005) and critical pedagogies (Scorza et al., 2013) and their application in terms of locating universities as sites of reproduction of power and privilege. Allen (2005) argues that although critical pedagogy arose from a class based analysis, it has not been widely embraced as such by people of Colour because it has not taken a race conscious approach. She suggests that acknowledging that White identity politics has structured critical pedagogy from its inception is necessary to its ongoing relevance. Likewise critical pedagogy in its initial form has been critiqued by feminists who have developed gender conscious feminist pedagogies (Luke & Gore, 1992) and engaged pedagogies (hooks, 2014). By integrating views from these different areas we hope to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the "becoming" of transitioning students.

2.2.1. Whiteness studies

The experience of dominance and privilege which is often invisible to White people is interrogated and exposed in Whiteness studies. Moreton-Robinson (1999) argues that

Whiteness in its contemporary form in Australia is culturally based. It controls institutions, which are extensions of White Australian culture and is governed by the values, beliefs, and assumptions of that culture and its history. Australian culture is less White than it used to be, but Whiteness forms the centre and is commonly referred to in public discourse as the 'mainstream' or 'middle ground' (p. 28).

As such, Whiteness is socially constructed, fluid and contextual (Meredith et al., 2007) as well as "pervasive and constitutive" (Allen, 2005, p. 63). Those who belong to, or who have intentionally adopted White culture are imbued with cultural capital which also endows privilege. However, as Whiteness is invisible, at least to White people, it is often implicit and perpetuated in institutional structures and systems, including educational settings (Haviland, 2008) and

opaque to those with little White capital. The ELC communities provide a forum for interrogating this opacity and finding multiple strategies for understanding and negotiating it.

In the context of a discussion on closing the achievement gap in America's schools, Goldenberg stresses the need for White teachers to engage with "students' nondominant cultural capital" (Goldenberg, 2013, p. 113). He proposes that White teachers need to acknowledge their Whiteness and their place in the dominant framework and "embrace the students' nondominant culture pedagogically" (Goldenberg, 2013, p. 114). As White academics, we have sought to provide a space where students' cultural capital can be affirmed and leveraged in a collaborative meaning-making enterprise. We provide information and analysis about the White system's meanings and demands, but in an attempt to "decenter Whiteness" (Allen, 2005, p. 64), we empower and facilitate students' collective exploration of their own unique experiences. At the same time, students can choose what cultural capital they acquire, and how they use it, in contrast to what the academy might want them to acquire and use. One example of this is the extent to which students choose to adopt the English of the academy in the various communicative contexts they engage in.

Devlin and McKay (2014) propose the lens of "socio-cultural incongruence" as a way of analysing "the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low SES backgrounds and the high SES of the institutions into which they move" (p. 99). They suggest that acknowledging student agency and the need for universities to take greater responsibility for the differences can work to bridge socio-cultural incongruity. This framing of incongruence resonates with a critique by critical race theorists of deficit models of capital. For example, Yosso (2005) asserts that Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital which critiqued "social and cultural reproduction" is misinterpreted when it is used to describe "culturally wealthy" and "culturally poor" communities (p. 78). Instead she proposes the "community cultural wealth" model which recognises the inter-linked and multiple forms of capital within Communities of Colour (Yosso, 2005, p.70). These forms of capital are categorised as aspirational capital – students' hopes and dreams, linguistic capital - language and communication skills, familial capital – strengths, bonds and knowledges formed within family and community networks, social capital - network and support structures already in place, and navigational capital - the skills that students utilised to access universities and other institutions. The community cultural wealth model provides a comprehensive strengths-based framing that can be extended to all students from diverse backgrounds (Moeller & Bielfeldt, 2011).

2.2.2. Integrating multiple forms of capital

The ELC CoP provides a generative space for the creation of a new integrative melding of multiple sources of cultural and social capital. In Figure 2 the academic tutor is portrayed as a cultural broker. The tutor presents what the academy offers and explicates the route inwards, while the facilitators and mentors act as interpreters, examples and sounding posts as members of the CoP work out what they want to achieve and how to achieve it most efficiently. In other words, the tutor acts as a broker for the transfer of cultural assets. Although the students receive the assets, they may not know how to manage or utilise them to their best advantage. The peer learning community negotiates a collective capital unique to the participants' diverse experience and needs. The interaction within the community is bidirectional between mentors and mentees as both learn from each other and construct meaning together.

Lehmann (2014) researched the different ways in which working class university students developed their cultural repertoire and negotiated their social worlds in order to achieve success. He noted that successful students had to adopt a middle class habitus but could not simply discard their working class identity. The students he researched perceived that they were growing their cultural repertoire rather than substituting one for the other and often struggled with an ongoing sense of straddling two different worlds and having difficulty belonging to either. They often reported conflict and disrupted relationships through the process of their transformation. In addition, success was also associated with active involvement or employment on campus and was difficult without this tangible integration into the campus community. In the case of the

ELC cohort, involvement in their communities of practice provide a tangible point of integration into university life.

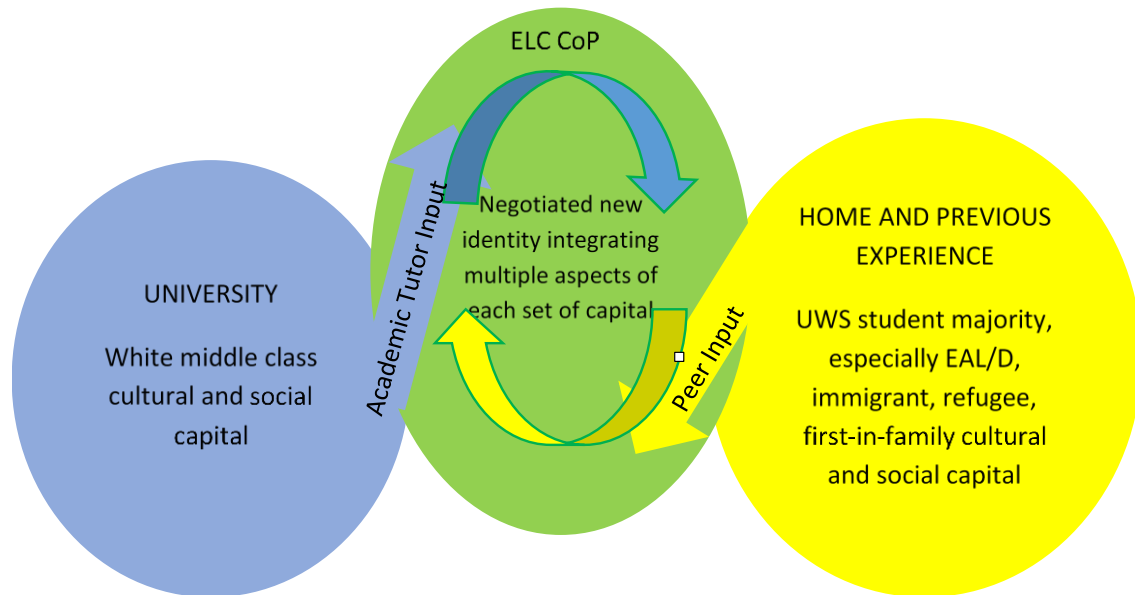


Figure 2. The ELC CoP provides a generative space for the creation of a new integrative melding of multiple sources of cultural and social capital.

3. Returning to transition as becoming

It is widely recognised that students from many non-dominant backgrounds find it difficult to feel like they belong at university (Nelson, 2014). Part of the social function of the ELC community is therefore to help transitioning students develop a sense of identity as university students, feeling that they belong or have a right to be there. This aligns with the conceptualisation of transitioning as “becoming” whereby collaborative, inclusive, student centred learning experiences facilitate students’ iterative processes of acculturation to the academic environment (Gale & Parker, 2014a). The facilitators in ELC facilitate this process both by being living models and also by helping the mentees in the process of making university study personally meaningful. Mentors do the same in their partnerships and especially help through normalisation. Mentors become friends to transitioning students. This provides a tangible connection with existing university students with whom mentees can personally identify and, as such, helps them to develop social affiliation with other university students.

As well as crossing the boundary into the academic world, students also have to negotiate their changing identity within their existing contexts. Lehmann (2014, p. 2) refers to this as negotiating a “precarious balance between their old and new social worlds”. Barton and Hamilton (2005, p. 18) refer to the boundary of a CoP as having blurred edges which create a generative space where resources can be combined in novel ways. In the ELC case, there are multiple boundaries to negotiate and integrate as each participant brings their unique set of contexts and forms of capital into contact with others’ and work together towards integrative and purposeful meaning. Harris and Shelswell (2005, p. 175) noted that, for their adult basic education students, it was important to help the students “reconcile new aspects of identity and different forms of membership” into Wenger’s “nexus of multimembership” (Wenger, 1998, p. 159). Harris and Shelswell found this was aided by facilitating the development of skills which could be applied outside the community of practice as well as within it. In the ELC context, students learn to recognise the skills that they bring with them to their learning contexts and further develop inter-

personal skills and learning strategies which can be applied outside the subject. Reflective exercises aid them in considering how these competencies can be further extended in other contexts.

Learning involves more than the simple transfer of content or skills. Martin (2005) stresses the role of mediation, and especially language, at the centre of learning relationships. However, relationships are also social and affective and not necessarily predictable or easily measured. Roffey (2013) relates the level of social capital to the quality of the emotional climate in a school. She argues that active promotion of positive feelings and good relationships results in improved learning. The creation of a positive learning context, a focus on relationship-building, as well as supporting students through the initial awkward stages of building relationships with strangers has proven to be a crucial aspect of community-building in the early stages of running ELC each semester. The positive social and affective impact of participation in the ELC community is strongly affirmed by students, alongside an increased feeling that they belong at university.

The ELC CoP intentionally reifies the experience of being a university student by using fixed community events, especially debriefing groups and mentoring pairs, and by creating a shared language, through common study of readings, but it also attempts to let the process be dynamic within each relationship so that each group/pair can develop their own tools and narratives (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 2005, p. 26). Part of the challenge of this process is the discomfort students feel with the more generative style of learning and the lack of a more structured form of learning, especially at the beginning. They are unfamiliar with the concept of university as being a place to make friends and build social networks. As the ELC community consists of students, mostly from first to third year in experience, the distance between the centre and periphery is not major and those at the centre—the facilitators—are still negotiating their understanding of themselves as students as they engage with new entrants to the community. However, although it might be assumed by the academic establishment that, in common with many other transitional academic learning subjects, the purpose of this subject is to induct students into the academic community, in practice, it functions more to help students develop strategies to manage their engagement with the established academic world.

Students also develop critical literacies in their debriefing groups as they discuss their readings together each week prior to submitting their reflections. Critical literacies can be understood as “a process of naming and renaming the world, seeing its patterns, designs and complexities and developing the capacity to redesign and reshape it” (Luke, 2014, p. 29). Through dialogue and participation students are able to explore these processes in a more intimate and safe environment than a tutorial. They deconstruct the readings in activities and processes suggested by the facilitator or each other and approach the written reflection with a deeper sense of their agency as writers. Lea(2005) observed that although academic writing acted in a gatekeeping role with respect to academic communities, most academic practice tends to position undergraduates as “permanent novices” and offers little hope of the novices ever belonging to the same community as the lecturers (pp. 193-194). The ELC approach does not automatically assume that students want to become part of the academic community but allows participants to explore how they want to relate to it and manage their interactions with it. At the same time, by fostering a sense of belonging and engagement with readings, we hope to stimulate students’ desire to become part of the academic learning community.

For the participants in ELC, belonging to the community is an essential part of developing their identity as independent students. In the formal university context which largely excludes their own cultural capital, it enables students to find a way of adapting to and integrating the largely White scholarly identity into their own reality. Through the relationships developed in the ELC groups, along with successfully achieving academic milestones with mentors’ and each others’ help, students begin to perceive university as a place of belonging rather than exclusion. As the majority of participating students are preparing to become school teachers, these communal learning experiences also provide them with insights into how people learn. Students are therefore able to apply this understanding to their future teaching career and also develop their concept of themselves as learning facilitators.

4. Reflecting on our practice

Lea (2005), in reflecting on the application of communities of practice to higher education, proposes that we need to reclaim the “understanding of learning as practice” (p. 181). Lea suggests that Wenger wanted to foster the development of learning communities within educational settings which focus less on taught curriculum but which draw on their own “resources for participation from within and outside the formal institution.” (Lea, 2005, p. 186) Using reflection as the academic mode of assessment in the ELC subject seems appropriate for this as it aids the students’ personal negotiation of meaning in relation to institutional and academic expectations. Students have demonstrated through their reflections that they have come to appreciate this dimension of learning.

In their discussion of experience in fostering CoP among adult literacy and numeracy learners, Harris and Shelswell (2005) found that community formation was facilitated by participants feeling that they were engaged in learning together. To encourage this they would “plunge” the group into learning activities from the very start of the course (Harris & Shelswell, 2005, p. 170). We have also found that the sooner mentors and mentees can be paired and establish working relationships, the sooner students settle into the ELC community and way of learning. Where mentoring pairing is delayed, for example due to difficulty in recruiting sufficient mentees, students not only become frustrated but also find it difficult to engage meaningfully with the subject.

One of the challenges we have encountered in this subject is failure to attract sufficient mentees. After four years of implementation, and despite students strongly recommending this subject for all first years, we have not been able to solve this dilemma. There appears to be both institutional and student factors including challenges with institutional support and student suspicion of institution-organised mentors. This lack of sufficient mentees can result in frustration among students who desire the opportunity to mentor a first year student, and also prompt students to perceive the subject as disorganised. The unpredictability of mentee demand and mentor supply can create tensions which students address in different ways. Some students will actively seek a mentee on campus, while others decline to participate in this process. Given that this is a credit bearing subject and students need to accrue 14 hours of face-to-face mentoring this can be problematic. As noted earlier, setting up students in peer mentoring partnerships which are necessarily mutual enterprises has become more common practice in the subject. This has served to re-align the emphasis from mentoring to the learning communities’ nature of the subject.

Harris and Shelswell (2005) found that once formed, the communities were “enduring” and learners wanted to stay together even after the learning objectives were achieved (p. 171). In the same way, many mentors and mentees report ongoing friendships after the subject finishes and the network develops further sustainability as mentees become mentors and mentors become facilitators. However, the transience of study and limited time on campus means that it can be unrealistic to expect the mentoring relationships to continue beyond the end of the subject. To prepare students for this, different aspects of closure are addressed in the debriefing groups and tutorials.

At the same time that students are enabled to engage in praxis in this subject, we recognise that as academics we should own our responsibility within the institution to engage in reflexive analysis of our structures which embed White privilege, as well as considering the ways in which universities support and encourage students who are aspiring to, or working with their communities to challenge inequalities and injustices. By decentering our roles within the subject and giving pre-eminence to the students’ learning communities we feel that we are making some progress towards fostering a model of critical mentoring. Writing this article to some extent mirrored a process similar to the students’ reflective practice in their debriefing groups. The students read, discuss, individually and collectively reflect on theory and experience and then write and present. In the same way that students could often go deeper, we feel that we are only skimming the surface of the implications of the critical issues we are seeking to engage with.

5. Conclusion

Through engaging in a collective, multidimensional learning experience, transitioning students and their peer mentors empower each other to create a sense of “becoming” a university student that uniquely suits their individual and group experience. Together they explore the meaning and practice of being a university student, and engage with the expectations of the academy on their own terms. This community of practice disrupts the imposition of White values onto students of diverse backgrounds, while still enabling them to develop strategies to succeed in relation to it. By academics positioning themselves as White cultural brokers, students are given permission to explore and leverage the various capitals they bring to the learning context. Together with their peers they help each other to discover strategies which enable them to succeed in what is often an alien environment. As all participants, including academics, continually reflect on their practice, we all develop in our understanding of the nature of learning and teaching. By engaging in this collaborative “becoming” process, students discover that they do belong in the university.

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