Amplifying staff development through film: the case of a university staff visit to a sixth form college.

Alicia Prowse

Centre for Learning and Teaching, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom.

Penny Sweasey

Centre for Learning and Teaching, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom.

Rachel Delbridge

Department of Languages, Information and Communications, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom.

Corresponding author Alicia Prowse, Manchester Metropolitan University, All Saints Building, Manchester, M15 6BH United Kingdom a.prowse@mmu.ac.uk +441612476136

Purpose:

The literature on student transition to university commonly investigates student expectations, perceptions and experiences and rarely focusses on university academic staff viewpoints. This paper explores the staff development potential of a filmed visit of university academic staff to a sixth form college.

Design/methodology/approach

The project created a space for eight university colleagues from a wide range of discipline areas in a large metropolitan university and ten college students from one local sixth form feeder college to observe and reflect on their experiences of learning and teaching in the two environments.

Findings

Staff development episodes were subsequently designed to allow staff who had not attended the visit to comprehend the experiences of learning and teaching in colleges and promote a consideration of pedagogies for student transition. Observations and reflections from this 'second audience' are presented.

Limitations

This was a case study of a visit of a small group of university academic staff to one Roman Catholic 6th form college who selected students to speak on film. The visit occurred just prior to final exams at the end of the academic year.

Practical implications

Packaging the visit via film and workshop activity enabled university staff to hear their own colleagues' reflections on how students learn in college and the step up to university study. This combination of vicarious/peer learning could be used in a range of staff development and training settings.

Originality

This study explored a practical way of extending a small-scale episode of experiential staff development to a much larger staff audience via the use of filmed reflections of participants, combined with workshop activity and online comment and discussion.

Introduction

In 2006, Harvey, Drew and Smith reviewed student transition literature on the first-year experience in Higher Education (HE), commenting that this had been an area for research in the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere for more than forty years. One aspect highlighted was the time needed for the process of transition and adjustment to occur. This, together with the isolation of a mass experience, and an unfamiliar didactic teaching style of instruction rather than of facilitated learning were given as factors that could lead to a high incidence of withdrawal. A further conclusion was that: 'there is no first-year experience; there is a multiplicity of first-year experiences.' (Harvey, et al 2006 p106)

Ten years on and the search for how to maximise the effectiveness of students' transition to university still continues, but with a shift from procedures and approaches (e.g. Kift's (2008) groupings of 'good practice', 'theoretical models or frameworks', or 'whole-of-institution' strategies) to notions of belonging explored in the 'What Works' programme (Thomas, 2012). This has signalled a change from an institutional focus on retention and a narrative of students being in 'deficit' towards a focus on formation of learner identity, belonging and student wellbeing (e.g Briggs, Clark and Hall, (2012)).

Understandably, perhaps, school and college education focusses on gaining the best possible grades for entry to HE or to the workplace. It is widely acknowledged that the scale of the teaching experience at university is such that students:

…arrive well equipped for studying at a school with its small class size and easy access to teaching staff. This, however, may be a poor preparation for a university education with its large class sizes and staff involved in a variety of non-teaching functions and, therefore, less available to students.

(Cook and Leckey, 1999 p.169)

In his foreword to 'University teaching in Focus' Mantz Yorke says that [first year] 'students often take time to 'get it' as regards the demands that HE makes of them…and newly enrolled students may have to unlearn some of their existing assumptions and practices' (Hunt and Chalmers, 2013 p. vii).

Indeed, Lowe and Cook (2010) reviewed several studies that show students make the transition into HE with the learning habits they have acquired in school or college, and also bring expectations of what university life will be like. In particular, students' strongly formed expectations of teaching styles over-estimated the expected amount of contact time, and under-estimated the size of teaching groups such that their overall expectation of the academic difficulties they would face was unrealistic.

There is limited literature relating specifically to staff perceptions of university transitions though some has examined possible assumptions made by both students and staff. For example, Wandel *et al*., (Wandel et al., 2015) reported staff 'pessimism' and student 'optimism' in relation to perceptions of preparedness for courses in science, engineering and nursing, in particular, in relation to perceptions of mathematical abilities.

In the era of significantly increased fees in the UK, a report from the UK Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found that students are acutely aware that the quality of their educational experience is not simply about being 'provided' with their education, but also dependent on their active engagement with it (Buckley et al 2015). A survey by the UK National Union of Students (NUS) reported that 'Students were very aware of the

idea of independent learning but wanted support and guidance in how to do this effectively especially in their first year as they have no previous experience to draw from' (NUS 2012 p.20).

Since the introduction of variable fees in UK HE, there has been a focus on the respective responsibilities of students to manage their transition into a sphere of adult learning and to recognise the reality of independent learning at university (e.g. Williams, 2014), and of staff on both sides of this transition point to consider more closely the design of the bridge between pre-university learning experience and arrival on a university course.

Even mainstream media have now entered the debate, inviting non-academic stakeholders to broaden the context further. For example, Halliwell, (2016) argues it is the responsibility of academics to bridge the chasm between college and university experiences, making 'schools being a little less directive in year 13 and universities a little more so in the first year'. In a similar vein, Ashwin (2014) believes university lecturers have a core responsibility for 'the careful design of curricula and teaching and learning experiences that systematically engage students with knowledge and ideas that can help them to understand the world and themselves in new and powerful ways'.

The design of learning and teaching (L&T) experiences by university staff has included a focus on the idea of 'transition pedagogy' where a carefully scaffolded curriculum is designed to enculture students to the way that HE works (Kift and Nelson 2005; Kift, Nelson, and Clarke, 2010).

In practical terms, this requires familiarisation of staff with transition pedagogies (e.g Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, and Harper, (2006); Kift 2009) so that learning designs include:

…simple to complex concepts; curriculum alignment; scaffolded skills development; the use of early and formative assessment, especially to identify at risk students; criterion referenced assessment; introduction to team work; and making explicit the implicit conventions, frameworks and explanatory systems in learners' minds. (Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, and Harper, 2006)

Staff development is often considered necessary for both local as well as institutional level change to occur (Kezar and Eckel, 2002) and some have urged this specifically for development of transition pedagogy (Clark et al., 2015). Thus, the literature is well developed in articulating the issues and pedagogies to support student transition. However, literature documenting educational development (ED) for implementation of transition pedagogies, and in particular the use of film/video in ED, is more difficult to locate, even though film is long-established as an essential tool in teaching (e.g. Boud and Pearson, (1979). Indeed, the design and value of ED has also been the subject of recent reviews (e.g Amundsen and Wilson 2012) and the field is still considered to be in development. For example, Amundsen and Wilson (2012) defined six clusters or broad types of ED activity focussing on: Skills, Methods, Reflection, Institution, Discipline and Action Research/Inquiry from their review of literature: a helpful categorisation when selecting an appropriate type of ED
activity.

Staff at our HE institution voiced concern about their potential lack of awareness of students' prior educational experiences and the value of an opportunity to see L&T in a college environment. We therefore decided to conduct a practice development project that involved a visit of staff (hereafter referred to as colleagues) to a college specifically to focus on teaching and learning and to capture their reflections on film. The film (CELT, 2015) was designed to extend the experience to a second audience in ED

workshops. This was part of a wider project entitled 'Reciprocal Journeys', funded by the UK Quality Assurance Agency, that also invited college students to observe and reflect on university classes.

Project Outline

Induction into HE can be so focused on a 'deficit' model of students in the HE context, that it largely ignores students' prior experiences of learning and staff perceptions of these. The project thus aimed to create a space for colleagues and college students to better understand their experience of the L&T that they encounter in the two environments. To this end, we arranged for academic staff from a large metropolitan university to visit a 6th form college in Greater Manchester. The resulting film of student and staff observations and reflections provided the trigger material for subsequent educational development workshops to promote a consideration of pedagogies for student transition.

An invitation to participate in a visit to the college was issued on the university's all-staff forum. Eight colleagues, representing departments from across Manchester Metropolitan University, including Primary Education (Maths); Information and Communications; Maths for Chemistry; Environmental Sciences, and Law accepted the invitation.

Xaverian College (Xaverian College, 2016), a Roman Catholic 6th Form college in Greater Manchester (c.2000 students), exemplified one particular set of prior educational student experiences. Staff at the college describe a mixed student group in terms of eventual achievement as well as social and family background. The college was chosen due to its locality, its position as a feeder institution to the University, and prior staff contacts. The staff visit occurred in April 2015 at the beginning of the college's

summer term. Staff and students were thus gearing up for the busy summer examination period.

A morning visit to the college was arranged, and semi-structured interviews were filmed with colleagues both before, and after the visit. Pre-visit interviews elicited colleagues' reflective comments on their own teaching and their expectations of the college students' experience of learning. The post-visit interviews asked questions regarding colleagues' perceptions on how L&T happens in the college environment and their reflections on this. Project staff also conducted interviews with ten college students (selected by college staff) and excerpts from these were also used in the film. In all interviews, pre-determined open questions were asked to each participant with follow up prompts and probes.

In line with the ethical protocol for the project, all interviewees were provided with information about the project and assurances regarding confidentiality, excluding participation in the film: participants whose filmed extracts were used were invited to have editorial input. All interviews were transcribed and NVivo 10 used to carry out initial open coding to enable thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). This then enabled selection of these themes for inclusion in the film.

During the visit, colleagues were paired with staff from the college according to discipline area. Most then had an opportunity to watch a class in progress and to talk to both staff and students about the way learning happens in this environment. Additionally a short introduction was provided by a member of college staff who demonstrated their attendance and engagement monitoring system and provided information about other college processes.

Analysis of colleagues' perceptions and reflections

Table 1 shows a summary of the themes from the analysis of the post-visit perceptions of colleagues. Staff participants expressed surprise regarding both similarities and differences in the L&T environments of the college and the university. Similarities included, superficially at least, the likeness of some college classes with seminars in University; views about the role of the teacher (in some humanities based classes, as a facilitator of learning rather than didactic expert); and the informality of interactions. Differences included attendance (higher in the college); monitoring (much more pervasive and at the 'micro' level in the college); focus on preparation for assessment (for most colleagues, this appeared to be the sole focus in college); level of student attention in the classroom (higher in college); the provision of resources ('everything' provided in college); class size (smaller in college) and structuring of many classes (generally much more structured in most college classrooms).

Naturally, it would be possible to categorise these data in a number of different ways, and divisions are not clear cut due to complexity of concepts, but from the themes that surfaced (Table 1), three further cross-cutting categories were identified which are briefly discussed below: Processes (e.g. assessment), Perceived Behaviours (e.g. dependency) and Structures (e.g. class structure). This paper does not aim to fully report these data, instead providing examples to illustrate colleagues' reflections as seen in the workshops.

Table 1. Staff reflections on differences between college and university learning and teaching.

Element	Colleagues' perceptions of learning and teaching at College	Colleagues' perceptions of learning and teaching at University

Assessment	Very frequent; briefing and deadline close together; focus on exams.	Much less frequent; briefing may be far in advance of deadline; many modes of assessment; linked to employability.
Class size	Small <20.	Various – but tending to large (20-150).
Classroom environment	Different classroom configurations for A level and BTEC cohorts; nurturing; comfortable.	Free; unstructured; a range of different environments.
Structure of classes	Bitesize; 1.25 hours maximum; strongly based on content; very structured in terms of process;	Up to 3 hours; far less structured and scaffolded; more teacher talk; 'a greater reliance on students' ability to understand the process…'
Timetabling	Staff may see students for the same subject several times in one week. Timetable is 9-4 every day.	Staff may see the same students much less frequently. Timetabled contact is much less; whole days are 'free'.
Staff design of learning	Some compliance with a centralised team model of teaching and learning delivery.	N/A
Preparation for university	Students told they will be 'treated as adults' at university	Students **are** adults – but recognition that adulthood may develop over a period of time.
Classroom behaviours	Diligent; disciplined; focussed; dependent; independent; confident; engaged; relaxed; very managed.	Discussing, eating, drinking, using phones
Dependency	Answers always provided; very short cycles of input, testing and	Students find answers for themselves; some resources

	feedback; all resources provided; monitoring system provides motivation and nudges; often daily contact with same staff member; activity is always directed; some highly structured activities e.g. writing frames.	provided, students expected to find more; students largely expected to find their own motivation; contact with same staff member weekly or less; activity often undirected.
Support	Dependency on teachers; individual support; 'cosseted'; 'very proactive responses from staff in terms of the levels of engagement, the grades, the quality of the homework, targets set…'	Lower level of support. Students expected to seek this.
Monitoring	High degree of detailed monitoring; 'benign surveillance'; 'personalised diagnostics'; very detailed attendance and marking records.	Some monitoring; staff were undecided on the degree of monitoring that was desirable – would monitoring engender dependence or independence?

Processes: assessment, feedback and support

Even allowing for the timing of the visit, colleagues reflected on both the emphasis placed on assessment and on the fact that a focus on examinations (prior to university entry) at Level 3 (UK Government, 2016) restricted students' experiences of a wider range of assessments. The experience of a wide range of assessment modes at university (e.g. live projects, or presentations) was considered essential to build a student's employability skills. There was also a realisation that students experience a completely different regime around assessment: in university, a norm would be a briefing, perhaps at the beginning of a term with a deadline weeks or even months in the future. One colleague observed that at college, it was a case of doing regular homework which was

marked and returned, whilst at university, students would be expected to work independently on an assignment brief with a deadline weeks or months away.

The availability of feedback both in terms of timing and frequency were seen as key features of assessment in the college environment, as was the availability and input of the tutor:

> …they can usually do their assignments…submit them and then resubmit them without penalty to improve them so there is a difference there in how their tutors get involved in helping them to do their assignments.

This kind of intensive tutoring of students was seen by some as likely to produce unrealistic student expectations as assessment regime and the expectations of university tutors would be so different:

> …I don't know whether they know when they come to university, they need to be doing a lot more work for themselves, no one is going to check their work for them except themselves or their peers.

Colleagues also commented on the way that work seemed to be geared to knowing a 'correct' answer:

> …they essentially learn things to answer the questions that are provided and a [college] teacher commented that if [this] type of question is asked, these are the two words you need to make sure are in your answer.

There was an empathy with college teaching staff insofar as colleagues recognised the pressures that college staff were under to have their students perform to a standard (on which they themselves, as college teachers would then be judged). Colleagues saw this as the undesirable pedagogic outcome of 'teaching to the test'.

Perceived behaviours: dependency, adulthood and attendance

There was acknowledgement that university staff may sometimes have unrealistic expectations of students, and colleagues found themselves considering, for example, notions of adulthood and the point at which this change happens:

> I'm not sure when I thought I was an adult…

This might begin to explain why university staff expectations of students are not always met. Colleagues indicated that they have expectations that students will quickly adjust their levels of dependency and behave as adult learners:

> I expect them to have done the work before they come to the workshop, I am not always successful in this expectation…and then I expect them to take part when they are there and talk to us, talk to each other…

This sense of disappointment was also evident when staff talked about attendance.

Colleagues' observations of the level and extent of monitoring and support of college students led to questions about the desirability of this level of scrutiny and the tutor-input it would require. One colleague expressed this dilemma as counter to the aspiration to create more independent learners:

> …we could monitor them a lot more…but I don't think we can do that on the scale on the number of students we have, we'd have to have a far more intensive tutoring system and then the other question is would we want to do that?

This tension between colleagues' expectations of students and the reality of student engagement in the context of a newfound independence was a recurring theme.

Structure: classes, timetabling and learning environments

Similar features as well as notable dissimilarities were observed in class structures. Although timetable structure and total contact time at university will vary according to discipline, all colleagues noted that college timetables consist of a mixture of subjects taught in short sessions. Some colleagues thought this allowed for more frequent contact

of staff with students and a way for college staff to keep a closer eye on students'

performance as they see the same staff for classes several times in a week.

Although all agreed that university class sizes tended to be much larger, some

colleagues reflected on both the differences (in relation to lectures) and in one case, the

similarities in class sizes (in relation to university 'seminars'). Colleagues also reflected

on what they saw as differences in the way that classroom layout and activities were

arranged for more academic (e.g. Advanced Level (A Level: Level 3)) or more vocational

(e.g qualifications of the British Technology and Education Council – BTEC also at

Level 3) classes.

Prompting changes in practice

Colleagues had many ideas for changes prompted by the visit, which included:

looking again at topic coverage in the Level 4 undergraduate curriculum in relation to

Level 3 (A level/BTEC) syllabus content; experimenting with problem-based learning

approaches; and focussing more on the structure and sequencing of learning activity and

re-consideration of processes around recruitment and pre-entry activity.

Curriculum level change was one way in which staff could see immediate value in

capitalising on their experience with some colleagues reflecting on the re-designs they

had already undertaken in their curricula in order to facilitate student transition.

Reflection on broader aspects of the learning environment and of practices such as

timetabling and student support were also evident. Overall, the visit prompted colleagues

to think about using their experience to inform future developments.

Educational development workshops

The film (CELT, 2015) was then constructed from the reflections of participating

colleagues and from the college students' perceptions and expectations, and used for

educational development. To date, the film has been shown at four internal MMU events, as well as at three external events, between December 2015 and June 2016, (c. 200 participants).

To prime the discussion in the workshops, three initial activities (2 minutes for each) were used for pairs of workshop participants:

1) What do you remember of your own transition into HE?

2) Make a list of the top 5 things that you think are transition 'issues' for students

3) What do you do to enable students to transition effectively?

We then used a model adapted from Arthur (2009), originally designed for considering responses to student feedback on teaching. It defines four quadrants in relation to two axes: 1) how far a lecturer feels they can influence changes and 2) factors relating to either students or lecturers. Two of the four quadrants thus define the space where lecturers feel they are able to influence change and are labelled TAME (factors relating to students 'Its about them but I/we can respond to their needs and bring them on board') and REFRAME (factors relating to lecturers – 'Its about me/us, but I/we can change and develop'). We showed Arthur's quadrant in the workshop to help staff to structure responses to the film in conjunction with a Padlet (a collaborative online tool Padlet, 2016) to capture responses to some of the following questions (depending on workshop timings):

- what occurs to you on watching the film – record thoughts, questions or actions on the Padlet.

- revisit and discuss the list you made at the beginning (5 transition issues for students)

- In some workshops we also discussed the reframing questions 'Do I need to evaluate my own expectations?' Or 'How do I make my expectations explicit to students?'

Staff Responses to the film

Because the film presented critical reflections of colleagues, this tended to encourage a critical reflection in the second audience. For example, in one staff workshop (about 75 staff), observations, questions or suggested actions relevant to this staff group were made in response to the first of the above prompts via Padlet (http://www.padlet.com) (Table 2).

Table 2. Staff responses recorded during one workshop coded by response type according to the framework (Arthur 2009). T = tame; R = Reframe; B = Blame.

Observations	Questions	Actions
Learning and Teaching (Structures and Processes)		
In college, structures for learning are clear to the students (T)	Could we make our structures and processes clearer? More contact time in level 4? (R)	Provide relevant clear 'transitional expectations' at Levels 3 and 4. (R) Help students structure their time more effectively. (T)
Personal connections with staff provide real benefits to students and staff (R)		Work on developing relationships with students. (R) Differential work loading for Level 4 staff to recognise this.
The purpose of learning is different (at university) and poses problems for designing smooth transition (R)	How do we enable a smooth transition when we fundamentally reject the kind of learning that has brought students to study with us? (R)	Convey the positive benefits of fulfilment through a university education to become independent critical thinkers. (T)
Staff chase students for late submissions (B)	Is this something we want to do?	
Students move from writing a lot in carefully reworked essays for exam success to writing very little. (T/R)	How do we work with this? Do we need more frequent shorter pieces of assessed work early on? (R)	Encourage students to write more and develop reading skills. Use Reading Groups. (R)
Observations	**Questions**	**Actions**
Expectations and Perceptions		
Our expectations of students are unrealistic. (R)	When do we expect independent learners to emerge? On graduation? When is a young person an adult? (R)	Invite students to attend sessions to help manage their expectations. (T)

Observations	Questions	Actions
Expectations work both ways. Students have expectations on them too. (R)		Scaffolding learning up to and including Level 6 is not the answer. Plan transition for independence by level 5. (R)
Support at university means help to become independent. At college it means help to get good grades. (T)	What is understood by the term 'support'? (R)	Clarify what 'support' is in this context and how it is accessed. (R)
It is reasonable for students to feel they will not just be a number. University should be a personal experience.(R)	How can we ensure this happens for students?	Develop relationships (R)
There is a fine balance between supporting and enabling independence. (R)		Explicitly direct students in for example how to develop their own meaning; how to prepare for a lecture or an exam. Be clear and honest at the start about the ultimate need to be independent learners. (T/R)
Observations	**Questions**	**Actions**
Contextual Factors		
Curriculum is narrower in college (T)		
Students are not paying a lot, they are borrowing a lot. (T)	Do we actually fear the 'student as consumer'?	
Pressures in college are more explicit (to get good grades). (T)		
We need to recognise the realities of students' lives. (R)		

The Padlet offerings from this workshop were tabulated to relate observations to the questions and actions that appeared to connect these, keeping as closely as possible to the language used by Padlet contributors. Although this did not represent formal data collection, researcher categorisation of responses showed more than half of all responses in the REFRAME (R) quadrant with about a quarter having elements of the TAME (T) quadrant indicating a high degree of critical reflection.

Three categories were identified: Learning and Teaching (Structures and Processes); Expectations and Perceptions; and Contextual Factors (e.g student funding, or the need for students to work alongside study) and some illustrative examples from these are narrated below.

The Learning and Teaching items prompted suggested actions around clearer or more explicit communication of these to enculture students to their new learning environment, as well as a focus on developing relationships with students, which resonates with the ideas of identity, belonging and wellbeing of Briggs et al (2012). This category also included the communication of positive messages about personal fulfilment through study in HE.

Observations relating to Expectations and Perceptions prompted questions that were often reflective, strongly aligning with Arthur's REFRAME quadrant. Examples of this include the observation that lecturers' expectations may be unrealistic, with one staff member asking 'Do we assume too much?' or another who observed 'We seem to be missing the link…we provide support at Level 4 but it does not seem to be the right support'. In other cases the same observation was seen more as a situation requiring remedy, either by helping students to 'manage their expectations' or by extra input for promoting skill in reading and writing, indicating more that staff felt the problem lay with students (TAME quadrant). Contextual Factors tended to be statements of a situation and no suggested actions arose from these.

Discussion

The literature, the visit to the college, filmed reflections and educational development workshops taken together provide good insights into perceptions, expectations, processes, structures, behaviours, communications and the perceived locus of responsibilities as seen by staff. Communicating the benefits to fulfilment that a university education can bring is was seen as an important message for students, as well as a reminder to staff of this important function of a university education.

While it is evident that staff (and students) consistently returned to the concepts of independence and support in their reflections, there appears to have been collective

learning by staff during the educational development workshops. This largely focussed on a notion of staff responsibility (thinking in the REFRAME quadrant) to question their own assumptions and expectations; explicitly communicate metacognitive information about how to go about becoming an independent learner; and to adjust their practices as a response to the differences in L&T constructs that were seen to exist between this university and one of its popular feeder colleges.

As an educational development vehicle, the film provided an efficient way of allowing a large number of staff vicariously to experience a visit to a college while colleagues' observations and reflections were foregrounded. The fact that the colleagues in the film were in a critically reflective mode helped to set a critically reflective mood for the workshops. This clearly relates to two of Amundsen and Wilson's (2012) educational development types identified from previous research: reflective focus, and Action Inquiry (peer-led) focus which seem to have been fundamental to the impact of this project.

Colleagues involved in this project, commented that their awareness of previous learning experience, although already keen, had been further developed by the visit, and they were motivated to re-consider their curricula as a result. Feedback from the educational development workshops was also positive: staff collectively considering how to re-shape their first term learning design to suit more closely the perceived needs of incoming students.

Conclusion

This method of filming colleagues as they experience student reality (in this case, the transition gap) and recording their reflections for presentation to another set of staff has provided benefits for a much larger number of staff than could have been realistically accommodated in the original experience. Staff commented on the efficiency of this

method, of vicarious experience and/or learning from the reflective experiences of their colleagues. One potential downside could be that staff may not form relationships with college counterparts, which in the case of some of the participating colleagues has been another highly valued outcome.

This practice development was enacted as a case study to illuminate a method of capturing action inquiry with a clear peer focus and disseminating this via film. As such, it did not seek to systematically collect or analyse data, but to present particulars of an approach to inform the practice of others in this sector. External 'validity' is therefore necessarily limited.

Funding

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