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BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Understanding Diversity as a Framework for Improving Student Throughput

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Literature suggests that a diverse body of healthcare graduates could extend health service delivery. However, the literature also indicates that the throughput of minority, working class, and historically disadvantaged students is problematic. Poor throughput is attributed to the way that university environments alienate some students. This brief communication highlights lessons learned from exploratory interviews with four first-year oral hygiene students at a university in South Africa. It provides insight into the issues that contribute to academic success and failure.

Methods: Semi-structured, individual interviews, to gain information regarding students' university academic experiences were conducted. Enablers and barriers to learning identified in the literature were used to capture themes.

Findings: The following three themes emerged: educational identity, language and finances. The analysis showed how a white middle class student recognized practices that are rewarded at university and how three, working-class, black students experienced tension between their expectations and experiences and the university culture. However, far from being victims, these students provided suggestions on how their transition might be facilitated.

Conclusion: Evidence suggests that these students wanted both to be apprenticed into the new way of doing things while having their differences acknowledged. A model for education that initiates learners and also challenges the culture of power is suggested.

Keywords: Community delivery, diversity, identity, academic performance, throughput, retention



Introduction

Training healthcare students from diverse backgrounds has the potential of contributing to effective health service delivery in the wider community (Haden et al., 2003). However, throughput in higher education of minority, working class and historically disadvantaged students is problematic (Angelil-Carter, 1998).

McLean (2004:140) attributes poor throughput to the way that university environments alienate some students. Ivanic (1998:7) argues that universities are grounded in Western, white, middle class, male culture. Thus, students from these groups are more likely to have “epistemological access” (Morrow, 1994) to the practices that are rewarded as academically successful. These students know what practices are privileged and how to demonstrate competence in them. In contrast, those who are not culturally familiar with what is rewarded at university may struggle to be successful. Their experiences of university are often “associated with ... difficulty, crises of confidence ..., the need to discover the rules of an unfamiliar world” (Ivanic, 1998).

Concern regarding the high failure rate of black, working class students in an Oral Hygiene Department at a South African university and the literature attributing poor throughput to the way in which the university environment alienates some students, led the author to conduct exploratory interviews with four first year oral hygiene students. This brief communication highlights the ‘lessons’ from these interviews. It provides insight into what contributes to student success and failure.

[Note: Historically, ‘black’ has been used in South African to include people of African, Indian and mixed origin (‘coloureds’). The terms African, white and coloured are part of the nomenclature of apartheid and are implicitly racist. However, raced location and historical disadvantage continue to shape post-apartheid social reality, and the use of these terms highlights this legacy.]

Methods

Two factors influenced selection of the four students; Annette, Willem, Thandi and Precious. (Pseudonyms to protect the identity of the students). Each student had failed first semester assessments where the language of instruction was in English and English was not their first language. Three students were black, working class; Thandi and Precious were African; and Willem was coloured, while the fourth, Annette, was white and middle class.

Data are drawn from semi-structured, individual interviews with the students. The interviews sought information regarding students’ academic experiences at university and asked the question, “What makes it easy or difficult to learn at university?” Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. Criteria highlighted in the literature as enablers and barriers to learning were used to identify themes.

Findings

The following three themes emerged: educational identity, language and finances.



Educational identity

For Willem, university represented socioeconomic success, “It is a good thing to go to university. You have better opportunities in the future.” In consequence, Willem appeared intent on becoming an insider. What he liked about university was “seeing so many educated people.” To achieve success Willem aspired to developing the identity of “educated people.” This desire was shared by Thandi and Precious.

However, its achievement was fraught. Such identity assumes competence in pre-requisite academic practices (Shay & Moore, 2002). Willem, Thandi and Precious indicated that they were ill-prepared and had experienced a poor ‘match’ between school and university (see Table 1).

Their difficulty is not unique. In higher education, students must orient themselves to new expectations and to discipline-specific discourse (Foster and Russell, 2002). As Table 1 indicates, even Annette, with her dominant race and class culture, experienced transition difficulties.

Table 1: Transition difficulties from school to university

	Work pressure	Depth required for tasks	Not knowing what is expected	Lecturers behaving in ways that were different from teachers
Annette	“You don’t have time”	“In school it was straightforward. University, you must go more deeply or you don’t get marks.”	“We all need help in the way to answer your exam papers.”	“At university no-one worries about you as a person.”
Willem	“It is more work”	“It is more complicated”	<i>Did not understand what to do when lecturer said,</i> “Follow up here”.	“At school the teacher showed you. University is different. You have to go to the lecturer if you don’t understand.”
Thandi	“The work is a lot.”	“At school, they give you tutorials to train you.”	<i>Did not understand what to do when lecturer said,</i> “Look again”.	“After school we have tutorials to help you with the chapter you don’t really understand.”
Precious	“It is a very lot of work and have the pressure (sic)”	“They are not the same. It is not like general knowledge or something.”	“I can study very hard and the questions will just come in a different way. You are not sure – is it the right answer or what.”	“There is no like specific lecturer for the module. They come for this little piece of it.”



However, while all four students struggled with the transition, it is arguable that Annette, through her middle class home and schooling culture, had epistemological access to at least some of the ways in which students are expected to behave at university. Table 2 indicates the contrast between Annette’s experiences and expectations, and those of the black, working class students. While Annette assumed a learner-centered, independent, inquiry-based approach, Thandi, Willem and Precious described a school context that was teacher-directed, structured on spoon-feeding, and based on rote learning. And, while Annette had access to a school library, computer and science laboratories, these learning opportunities were not readily available to Thandi, Willem and Precious. Students who do not have these skills already in place when they arrive at university are particularly vulnerable to academic failure.

Table 2: Educational experiences and expectations

	Extent to which school prepares for university	Resources at school	Assumed behaviour for success at university
Annette	<u>Opportunities for independent learning</u> “We had to search for information, and research. They left you a lot on your own.”	Well stocked library Well equipped science and computer laboratories	“Look for more information, go more deeply into it, put things in your own words. Go and physically sit and think”
Willem	<u>Assessment not learner-centred</u> “I understand that it can’t be the same as school – but we didn’t really have projects”	Science laboratory available No computer facility No library Nearest library one hours walk away	
Thandi	<u>Spoon-feeding</u> “At school they give us like – after school we have tutorials”	No science laboratory No computer facility No library	“If you try hard, that is enough.”
Precious	<u>Rote-learning as a strategy</u> “I try to memorise something and then I would try and write it down.”	Library and science laboratory available No computer facilities	“If you try hard, you are going to do better.”

Lack of epistemological access meant that the working class students could not always behave like ‘educated people’. However, in their desire to be successful, Thandi and Precious argued that effort and hard work, (two aspects over which they arguably had control) were all that was needed in order to do well at university. In claiming a relationship between effort and success, they implied that they could be successful if they only knew how and they argued for an apprenticeship. In contrast, Annette’s testimony indicated that she knew exactly what was rewarded and how to do it.

Language

Language was another barrier for all four students since none of them spoke the language of instruction as their first language. All, including Annette, complained about new terminology, “words that I have never heard in my life and you must understand what



the word means before you can go on.” However, given the favorable match between Annette’s middle class culture and the expectations of university, it is arguable that she was merely challenged to master concepts, values and skills of new disciplines (Dison & Rule, 1996).

In contrast, the black, working class students were faced with a culturally unfamiliar context. A gap existed between their lived experiences and the demands of university. Their difficulties with the ‘language’ of Oral Hygiene were not merely vocabulary-based (Hutchings, 1998). The difficulties related instead, to cultural attachments to language in the form of values, beliefs and social (including academic) practices (Hutchings, 1998). None of them objected to English as the medium of instruction. Rather, they asked that their differences be acknowledged, contesting the construct of the successful student as the native English speaker. As Precious stated, “they must think of other people who don’t understand the language very clear.”

Finances

Working class students often have financial difficulties which make it more difficult for them to fit the image of the ideal student (McMillan, 2004). Thandi summarized the implication for learning of over-crowding at home, competition for resources, house-keeping responsibilities and time wasted in traveling, “I don’t get a chance to read my books.” She described how financial constraints impacted on preparing for lectures and on learning, “Sometimes they just come to the textbook. When I don’t have money I don’t photocopy that chapter. And so sometimes I miss the notes.” For Thandi, being poor impacted negatively on her academic performance.

She argued that she needed more time to complete her university tasks to be academically successful, “I know what they want me to do, but it is the time to do it.” Implicit criticism was the demand for an alternative conception of the ‘ideal’ student; an identity that acknowledged the constraints of working class reality where it was possible to be working class and academically successful.

Conclusion

The exploratory interviews echo the literature, reinforcing the fact that university environments challenge and potentially discourage students who are not culturally familiar with what is valued and rewarded at university. However, far from being victims, these students provided suggestions of how the transition might be effected. They wanted to be apprenticed into the new ways of doing things and have their differences acknowledged.

Delpit (1995) suggests a way forward by first making rules of power explicit. For example, lecturers teach explicitly the values and practices (including academic) that operate within dominant university cultures and specific disciplines. Yet, Delpit challenges that students should be taught to adopt passively an alternative code, arguing for making explicit the locus of power, “Students need technical skills to open doors, but they need to be able to think critically and creatively to participate in meaningful and potentially liberating work inside those doors” (1995).

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