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Undergraduate research and learning

First year undergraduate students in the hot seat: co-constructors of knowledge and inquiry in Higher Education

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Research skills and inquiry promote independence and autonomy of the learner, yet these expectations of HE are not always made explicit to the student body. Informal discussions have recurring themes that reflect students are failing to read enough. While students in later stages of their study are indicating they wished that they had read more. In an effort to becoming increasingly ‘student-centered’, perhaps there has been an element of overlooking learner inquiry, engagement and ownership (Ramsden, 2001).

Engaging and enabling first year under graduates to become active researchers and learners has led us to note their abilities to search, or source literature, but the limitations or stumbling block to this inquiry process is in making sense of such sourced literature, and deeper knowledge acquisition. There are students who demonstrate a reluctance to engage with the implicit pedagogical expectations, and practices of directed and self-directed reading. Engagement and academic discernment with such materials would aid knowledge construction, challenge beliefs; provide theoretical underpinning, tensions and arguments to be used in formative and summative tasks. Stevenson and Okeefe (2011) identified such students as ‘searchers’ rather than early ‘researchers’ and proposed the need to develop learner attributes of questioning and inquiry.

In the context of this work, we meet students both full and part time who are the first in their families to study higher education in an untried institution. They have little knowledge, understanding or relatable experience on which to draw. They tend to rely on what they know, and bring with them to their studies, rather than spending time in preparation of seeking out new higher level knowledge. There is a sense of uncertainty around gaining new knowledge in an unfamiliar learning space. To promote inquiry consideration of a sound pedagogical and andragogical process to both problematise, and assist students in the ownership of knowledge was sought (Mortimore, 1996; Knowles 1996; 2005).

The students’ voices indicated that their uncertainty led to a very narrow view, or lens of knowledge, and the belief that there would be single answer to any question posed. With the recognition of such uncertainty, an explanation for the need to think more widely for themselves, and with each other was given. This provoked discussion on multiple perspectives, and a reassurance that there are multiple lenses and a range of viewpoints to consider in the disciplines of social science degrees. An approach offered to students was shared and paired reading strategies (Kingston and Forland 2004) to stimulate thinking about such perspectives, create a collegiate and socially constructed approach through reading with a purpose.

Developing a hybrid approach for student inquiry we also drew upon an idea of Ginnis (2002). The approach involves every member of the class in ‘taking the hot seat’ for 2- 5 minutes (including lecturers). Participants need to be cooperative and agentic in discussions, we call this ‘caring and sharing knowledge.’ Individuals in the hot seat begin to evaluate what they have read, and reveal their understanding, knowledge and positionality to the wider group. The approach reflects Bruner’s (1996, p.96) interlocking of ideas. This sharing of inquiry, when practiced as pedagogical process allows for a narrowing of

relationship between those teaching and learning as co constructors of knowledge. The discursiveness of back-and-forth reciprocity offers opportunities to propose wide ranging, or critical views (Healey and Jenkins, 2009). Most significantly, it prevents the danger of working solo, or holding a view '*...widely off the mark.*' Or that one's own views and observations may be difficult to justify and validate.

Collaborative inquiry is socially constructed learning; it is progressively driven by discursive processes with other active minds which can promote social transformation, and the production of new and owned knowledge, rather than a pedagogy of excess, or consumerism (Neary and Hagyard, 2010). It can dispel the mis-placed notion of some students who believe they are impostors in the higher education system. The formation of new knowledge in higher education is more easily understood in the new context of collaborative inquiry, as opposed to highlighting earlier differences of learning experiences. The participation of sharing in new socially constructed knowledge promotes ownership of understanding, which can reduce the potential threat of cultural suicide and loss of earlier innocence an affinity of former learning experiences (Brookfield, 2005).

The findings so far reveal 'mixed feelings.' an initial wariness, to a clear liking of being asked to take the 'hot seat'. The student cohorts indicated by their own poll there are benefits from engagement in the process. These include reading more frequently, greater quantity, and selecting literature of their choice, which they in turn recommend to their peers and lecturers.

The students ownership of this text based inquiry, indicate a sense of playfulness, through the formation and accretion of both ideas and challenges. This is aided by the collegiate support from peers and tutors alike. It has given students confidence in their academic journey through university, with clear ownership of their learning progression.

The exchange of ideas, and points of view have led to a continuum of developing research skills and inquiry, with additional benefits of becoming competent in extensive referencing of materials, most importantly, instilling within them their intellectual right, and ability to critique others work and contribute to the discourse.

The use of e-learning materials and technology has provided some undergraduate researchers with technological skills, as not all belong to the 'good generation' (Rowlands, Nicholas and Huntingdon, 2008). The students' realisation of their own learning and knowledge has offered unprompted written views, and their voices were also captured through a multi-modal method (video) as a measurement of what occurred in the 'hot seat'. Ownership of inquiry is important for achievement in an uncertain world, a world where important knowledge is frequently contested.

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