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READING THE WORLD OF UNIVERSITY: WHAT COUNTS?

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ABSTRACT

This paper will address the issues encountered by first year students in reading and reshaping the culture of university. The interim findings of a six year study will be dismantled in order to uncover what counts in the experience of first year university and the ramifications for educational practice and discourse. Feedback from staff continues to indicate that there is growing disparity between their expectations of first year students and student performance in areas such as independent learning, research skills, academic reading and writing, as well as the use of new technologies. There also seems to be a gap between the students' perceptions of their own abilities with respect to literacy practices and the demands placed on them in the tertiary setting. Dialogic critical reflection on the part of both students and staff empowers these individuals to read the world from multiple perspectives and to reshape future directions.

READING THE WORLD OF UNIVERSITY: WHAT COUNTS?

> *The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.*
> *L. P. Hartley*

As students make the transition to university they embark upon a circuitous journey into an often unfamiliar culture. Transition can be seen as moving from the world of the known to that of the unknown (Levin, 1987) thus constituting a rite of passage (Turner, 1969). The journey involves a moving forward in a search for what counts within the new context but can also bring a sense of loss for what has been left behind. For some this elicits a period of being caught between cultures - where the old becomes a foreign place and the new requires close reading. This time of shifting sands, in which the old and the new ebb and flow, can be both exciting and unsettling for students. The complexities involved in the transition to university provide the focus of a six year study, now in its fourth year, which is being conducted by the authors at RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria. For the purposes of this paper the stories of three female students moving into the world of university are explored in order to shed light on their adventures beyond known boundaries towards the unknown (Pearson, 1991).

Such adventures are universal and undertaken throughout one's life in a wide variety of contexts. Campbell (1968) argues that those who journey forth become part of the cosmos bringing knowledge of themselves and of the world. He feels that the lack of myth in contemporary life is a great loss for these powerful stories hold images of ourselves as fellow travellers, knowledge of how others have fared along the road of trials and the great lessons learned. With little knowledge of the past, the world of university appears even more remote and at times mystifying. Its secrets do not simply unfold before the waiting traveller. There must be a conscious effort made by students in transition to claim the current customs and rules of conduct often veiled in academic and social discourse. Therefore, students must unearth the secrets, and gain wisdom in order to return and teach others. Yet what is the nature of the wisdom gained? Kant (1929) explored the territory of pure understanding as an island enclosed by nature itself (p. 257). The metaphor of the *island of truth* in the *ocean of illusion* is useful. Huspek and Radford (1997) suggest that 'the sands of the island of truth ... are not stable and always have been shifting ... And the line between truth and illusion, 'self' and 'other' are, and always have been, shown to shift like the continual movements of the tides upon the shoreline' (p. 354). Thus, while students explore an alien culture, they also take occasion to explore themselves and to forge a broader student identity while dismantling the truths they have held dear. It is essential to their survival at

university to adopt a new student identity; to learn who they are as individuals, learners and professionals.

Yet this search for a new identity is also problematic in the current culture. As the doors of universities have widened with mass education, the move from an elitist education means that a more diverse student population have access to university. This shift from elitist to mass education, while welcomed, seems to have exacerbated the problems incurred within the journey to university (Kantanis, 1997). It means that the university culture is totally unfamiliar for many students. For instance, within our cohort of students, over 50% of our 165 year one intake (1999) are the first in the family to attend university. For these students the boundary crossings can be perilous. Yet even those familiar with the culture of university can experience difficulty as the culture itself is shifting. Learning has become commodified resulting in less contact time along with a 'fast' progression through the course and out again. Another barrier may be distance and access. Martin (1994) found that retention rates for rural and isolated students were markedly lower than for urban students. Additional factors, such as expanding enrolments, the diversity of the student population and the increasing expectations to become autonomous learners (Boud, 1990), contribute to the challenges students face in their transition to university. McInnis and James (1995) suggest that due to broader social forces, student identity as we know it is declining (p. 112). Less time spent on campus due to outside employment, the flexible delivery of subjects and the significant increase in part time students are contributing factors to a loss of student identity (McInnis & James, 1995).

The complex nature of students' lives, within a constantly shifting university culture, demands attention. In order to address the issues involved in transition, the authors are conducting a longitudinal study. Since 1996 all first year students within the Bachelor of Education course have been surveyed at the beginning and end of each academic year. A core group of thirteen students have been involved in a more in depth way participating in dialogical journals, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. The tracking of this core group, using qualitative methods, will continue for the duration of their four year degree.

The journeys upon which students embark are unique in terms of the encounters of each individual, yet they also reveal a collective wisdom. While drawing on Campbell's (1968) heroic journey, the paper also utilises the work of Carnell and Funnell (1998) who framed transition in terms of Goffman's (1961) notion of a 'moral career'. The term refers to the progressive changes that occur when individuals enter a total institution. Such changes encompass shifting beliefs about self and significant others. The work focuses on the ways in which individuals are inducted into an institution. The induction processes confront individuals with a series of tests in which their moral standing (or the ways in which they are viewed by self and others) is constructed. When individuals are less than familiar with the culture, and unsure in terms of expectations, the taking up of a moral career can be traumatic or at least problematic.

Goffman's (1961) work provides an illuminating metaphor through which to look at a journey from one place to another, or from a familiar culture into a less familiar one. The ways in which travellers are 'processed' and subjected to rites of initiation come to the fore. Crucial elements of such processes include the role of the staff in processing incoming neophytes into the culture of the university. Part of this induction involves students coming to terms with themselves as participants within Academe, and the way in which such their role is perceived. The impact of the peer group in terms of how the new culture is read and what rituals are adopted, is often a competing force, as students seek to find their way through the next passage.

For Sally, Jennifer and Beth, the prospect of university brought with it a wide array of expectations in the form of hopes and fears. Sally, a school leaver, expected university to be very traditional and conservative. She wondered whether or not she would able to cope with the work load, and was most conscious of the need to be well organised in order to do so. Jennifer, a country girl with experience of the TAFE system, expected university to be *"heaps and heaps and heaps of work!"*. She hoped she would make good friends and feared huge amounts of academic reading. Both she and Sally believed that they would be lonely and anonymous, within the university context. Beth, a mature age student, wife, and mother of two,

came to university with high expectations of herself. She hoped that university would fill a void in her life and give her an identity beyond the family. While Beth looked forward to acquiring a broad range of perspectives on issues, she feared the time when she had to write assignments. While the journeys of these three students are unique in many ways, their stories reveal the common threads or universalities evident in such rites of passage.

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE: SEPARATION

Students who heed the call to adventure are forced to separate themselves from the security of their past to plunge into the well of darkness that holds their future. Travellers leave the dependency of adolescence to become responsible adults. Through heeding the call they launch into a series of life events which can ultimately reap rich rewards. For Sally the call to adventure had been heard years before it could be formally acted upon. She commented: *"I basically have been interested in children all my life, when I was little I was always trying to be the mother ... and I just figured that teaching will be something that I'd really like to do".* Despite the move into a field that she felt destined to join, Sally felt unsteady when she ventured out of the *"secure", "guided"* world of secondary school into the *"confusing"* world of university. As she did not know anyone at orientation, Sally felt *"really scared and sort of like this wasn't the place for me".* However, once she *"got to meet a few people ... it got a bit easier".*

Heeding the call to university came a little later for Jennifer in that she did not move directly from school to university. Prior to coming to RMIT University, Jennifer did a Human Services course at TAFE and completed a diploma in childcare. This led her to seek further qualifications and she explored the possibility of teaching which seemed like a natural direction. The separation from her family home to the vast world of university was filled with anxiety for Jennifer. She was heavily reliant on family and friends and had not lived outside her small country town in Victoria before moving to Melbourne and enrolling in a Bachelor of Education Course. Jennifer had a secure and happy life with a large group of friends in the country, a boyfriend and a supportive environment. She describes her mother, a high school teacher, as *"the biggest resource in my life"* and once at university she felt compelled to return to her country home each weekend to visit family and friends, and to do her assignments with her mother's assistance. Unlike Jennifer, Beth, a mature age mother of two took three years to make the decision to study teaching at university. This time lapse between consultation with someone close and help from an expert, and the move into the institution is most akin to Goffman's 'prepatient phase'. This is the period in which the prospective patient, or in this case the student, works through a series of mediators so that official processes can occur. The time lapse between the advice period and official processes, and the actual move into the university is not unusual for students who gain entry through means other than an external entry score (Carnell & Funnell, 1998). During this interim period the realisation of an intention or goal occurs, followed by appropriate inquiries into possible institutions and courses, and resulting in entry to a selected course. This was indeed the case for Beth who felt something was missing in her life as wife, mother and housemaker. *"I felt I had to do something, didn't know what but I had to. I felt something was missing I wasn't fulfilled ... there was something I couldn't grasp and I didn't know what I wanted to do and I was driving people nuts".* Heeding the call precipitated much preliminary work to decide which turn in the road to take. Fortunately, Beth's husband was supportive of her study. Together they investigated course information from every university in Victoria that offered programs of interest to her, such as occupational therapy, naturopathy and chiropractic science yet nothing seemed quite right. Beth even utilised a computer service that matches up people's personalities, interests and *"what they're good at"* and teaching was one of the matches. One day she woke up and thought, *"I might be a teacher".* The turn in the road, once identified, led her way from a predetermined road to 'making the road by walking' (Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990) the discovery of a dynamic student identity alongside the multiple identities she had amassed.

THE ROAD OF TRIALS

The passage through the magic threshold is akin 'to being swallowed into the unknown' (Campbell, 1968, p. 90).

> *"This week has been a nightmare, I feel like my insides are churning. I know this is stress, I'm stressing about not understanding the work, my assignments, the lecturer's requirements, forgetting the room numbers. Tonight I'm in tears ... I feel pain ... I'm so scared to fail. I can't do this again. Help me Lord!"*

From the belly of the whale the traveller must survive a series of tests. For the student entering university these tests may take the form of learning to read the unfamiliar landscape, adapting to one's surroundings, being confronted with ideas in conflict to one's own, or learning to travel alone in order to unearth the hidden ways of knowing.

As students tread the road, there is a sense of anxiety which can overwhelm the excitement of earlier plans. As Sally reveals:

> *"The first few days I was terrified and lost. Finding a car park and making it to class on time (finding the room) were my biggest worries. I guess I never wanted to be alone. Everything was so new and scary."*

The first day of university brought feelings of insecurity and nervousness for Sally, as well as a sense of being overloaded. Finding her way around the campus and getting to class on time proved problematic in the short term. According to Sally, you need *"two or three weeks to know completely where you're going"*.

Anticipating that university life would be very formal, Sally was unprepared for the informal gatherings of students in friendship groups that occurred during between class time. Sally did not know how to participate in these gatherings which Goffman (1956) terms 'backstage discussions'. Consequently she relied on meeting people during class but this proved difficult because the cohort groups kept changing for each subject. This meant that students might meet numerous other students but spend little consecutive class time together. Social events, like beach parties and night club events, seemed out of reach in that if you did not have a group of friends you would feel out of place.

Such events were not seen as ways to make friends. Instead Sally wanted events for first year students only. She felt overwhelmed by students from other year levels as she had not mixed in classes with mature age students prior to university.

Forming friendships was also a major concern for Jennifer, who described herself at the beginning of the year as *"shy"*. Such shyness impeded her socially. She frequently commented that she didn't know a soul in Melbourne when she arrived (even though she moved into a shared house with friends from the country that she had been with from prep to year twelve). Due to a mix-up during enrolment in her irregular course (having received some credit for her TAFE course) she felt upset and frustrated. Because of these ill feelings, Jennifer decided not to go to Orientation Week missing out on a great deal of essential information and the opportunity to meet other students. Consequently Jennifer was further displaced and unsettled. She describes her first day of university like the first day of kindergarten. Talk of needing friends and making friends pervade Jennifer's interviews. She noted, *"In first semester I'd come here and like, one day I had lunch in the car cause I didn't know anyone and I had a two hour break and I wasn't going to sit in the cafeteria on my own."* In second semester she recalls crying out, *"I've got friends, it's taken awhile but they're here"*. The journey was far less daunting once her friendship group was in place. Only then could Jennifer focus on classes at university. When asked about her early expectations Jennifer said that people told her it was impersonal and she would be *"just a number"*. In reality, Jennifer did not find this to be true.

Friendship was not at all a concern to Beth as she began university. Her largest concerns were how to *"mould the two worlds"* (family and university) together and how to be a successful student. Beth found bridging her home life with school very problematic. She said *"I've had to fit my homework with my children and explain to them ... mummy can't go talk to you now 'cause I have to do homework"*. She talked about the realities of having *"no free time, going home and doing housework, making dinner and asking her husband how his day was"*.

According to Goffman (1961) newcomers to an institution come with a 'presenting culture' (p.

12). Another way to describe this is to refer to the cultural baggage that we carry with us from place to place, which includes our prior experiences, belief systems but also our ways of knowing and of behaving. As there is no trial run or practice for moving into the new context, what the students bring to the transition is what carries them forth. For Beth the tension between the 'presenting culture' and the roles inherent in it with the new culture and the roles demanded there initially created much pressure. At the start of the year, Beth found herself *"a nervous wreck"*. Although she was quite happy to get up in the morning and go to university, she found each day nerve racking and commented that *"the family felt it, they felt it badly for six months"*. Despite having taken a few access programs at TAFE, Beth had not done any formal study in years and her anxiety about study was exacerbated by long term health problems which drained her energy. She was happy to sit in classes and take in knowledge but became agitated when assignments were due as she wondered if she could "*measure up"*.

Freire's (1983, 1985) metaphor of reading the world to read the word is pertinent to the road of trials. In order to be able to adapt to the new context and thus participate fully in the demands of university life, students need firstly to be able to read what that culture is about. Change or praxis requires 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 36). Students need to firstly reflect on their world, or the context at hand. By reading the world students can then be positioned to read the word more critically. The reading of the world of university establishes a link between the world of the students and that presented in the word of academic and social discourse within the university context. Freire (1983, 1985) sees reading the word and reading the world as potentially liberating in that it can enable critical reflection on situations that might otherwise be overlooked, misunderstood or taken for granted. In the journey into university, reading the word and the world is essential if travellers are to participate in that context as members of Academe, and of the peer group. Being a member requires 'rites of passage' to enter the group, the maintenance of certain behaviours (ways of talking, valuing, thinking) to continue to be accepted as an 'insider', and continued 'tests' of memberships applied by others' (Gee, 1990, p. 143). Such rites of passage, according to Gee, constitute Discourses which are likened to 'clubs' in which rules and behaviour codes determine who is accepted and who is not (p. 143).

Part of reading the world and the word in the context of the transition to university, or becoming a member of the 'club', entails coming to terms with the technical language or the jargon of Academe, specific to each substantive area. Delphy (1984) suggests that one of the reasons for alienation is that 'the academy produces knowledge in the form of 'learned discourse' which actively prevents its use by those who are not privy to these conventions' (p. 115). There are specialist terms used in every discipline which can act as a barrier to acculturation. Such language is new and often difficult to decipher. For instance, our first year students listed general terms about university that they had consciously sought to decode. Words such as streams, extensions, deferrals, and recognition of prior learning (RPL), were among the long list provided. Terms specific to given substantive areas defy access to knowledge until students find meaning in and give use to the jargon. In language and literacy education, for example, students work at demystifying terms like sociolinguistics, genre, register, and multiliteracies.

It is not only the terminology that needs to be demystified and made accessible. The protocols that govern interaction with faculty staff and those operating within the peer group require close scrutiny and critical reflection in order to read, and later participate in, the rituals of the new context. For instance, students need to learn that it is inappropriate to wander into an academic's office, sit down, and expect immediate consultation without a prior appointment. Similarly students need to be able to read the protocols of the peer group. Modes of dress, for example, that are deemed appropriate by the peer group are noted and the ways in which such are adopted determine, in part, the way in which the individual is perceived by others. Students, like Jennifer who were most concerned about being part of the social scene, spent much time and effort trying to work out what should be worn to avoid being too conspicuous while at the same time dressing in such as way as to 'fit in'.

Along the road, clarification of expectations occurs. Goffman (1961) terms this as 'processing'. The excitement about being in the

world of university pervades much of the dialogic journals kept during the student's first year. *"I thought that classes would be boring, lectures would be HUGE, teachers wouldn't know me and the social life would be exciting ... I love the classes so far because it is all so relevant."*
Realisations or 'aha's' surface, such as *"You don't have to go to class"*, and *"They won't read your drafts"*. Such realisations reveal the unexpected and impact on ensuing behaviour but also the way in which university is viewed.

A lowering of ideals of 'what university is' may occur initially but with it grows a common feeling about being in the same boat, or in it together (Carnell & Funnell, 1998). For instance, many students entering university as pre-service teachers expect to focus on only classroom specific knowledge, and in particular, strategies and discipline techniques. Students tend to share an initial sense of disappointment in this sense, and find some unity or bonding in the commonality of their laments about relevance to teaching. Later the realisation dawns that as teachers they also need to be learning for themselves, and expectations in this regard shift.

A major test of hazard (Goffman, 1961) occurs when the first assessment tasks are graded and returned to students. These establish one's moral standing (or social standing/pecking order) in terms of the peer group and the faculty, but also are indicative of the ways in which the individual is reading the culture and whether or not some rereading is in order. For example, Sally was relieved that she was on *"the right track"* when her grades came back. Similarly, Jennifer and Beth were delighted to receive confirmation about the ways in which they were 'reading' the demands of the expected tasks and their abilities to meet these demands. This test of hazard also provided feedback to students about how they were learning how to learn, and how they were engaging in academic reading and writing.

Goffman's metaphor of the asylum ends here in that it does not take us beyond the period of processing. However, we can look to Campbell's journey to complete, or rather round off, the story thus far. Our students have reached the end of one turn in the road of trials: a journey within a longer one. Having completed one phase of the journey, it seemed appropriate to ask students to represent their changing perceptions of self and others over the duration of their first year.

One student revealed a change from an anonymous, voiceless, almost suppressed position to one of liberated empowerment situated within an academic community.

Making use of descriptors, another first year student portrayed shifting emotions from a secure, contented state to an uncertain, isolated position to once again feelings of security and satisfaction.

Table 1

High School	**1st day**	**2 months later**
content** secure** guided** satisfied pleased relieved	nervous** lost empty alone doubtful confused	settling in* hopeful making friends** happy with results still a bit lost unsure of procedure
End of Sem 1	**Break**	**Start semester 2**
relieved mostly settled* stressed** overloaded	Relaxed hopeful for sem 2 doubtful unsure of direction	excited* motivated** enthusiastic more content Settled Found my ????
2 months later	**Last week sem 2**	**End**
happy with friends** ahead of myself** forming relationships with teachers learning procedures	busy overloaded (less than end sem 1) content secure** excited relieved	Relieved Relaxed excited at year 2* satisfied at course glad

*most dominant** important**

At the end of the first year of university all three students expressed both excitement and relief. They had found the 'right' turn in the road, felt well on the way to finding a meaningful, achievable challenge, and were receiving positive feedback about their journeys into the previously unfamiliar world of university.

Despite a positive sense of meeting the demands of academic work, Sally still felt somewhat unsettled in terms of her friendship group. The concern for Jennifer is whether she can maintain friends from first year as she moves into the next stretch of the course. Beth had successfully worked out what counted in terms of the expectations of lecturers, but (unlike most students in our study) was less concerned about what counted from the point of view of her peers.

THE RETURN

When the travellers fulfil their quests they often return in order to impart 'the runes of wisdom' (Campbell, 1968, p. 193) to others thus rejuvenating the community.
Although the students in our study are only completing one cycle of their journey into university, they have already begun to give back their knowledge to other incoming neophytes. This reciprocity or giving back after having journeyed part of the distance is evident in a number of student initiatives, such as the development of an electronic newsletter for first year students and the writing of a first year survival guide for our next intake. Furthermore, student participation in Faculty orientation day programs, mentoring and University-wide Open Day events represent the extent to which they are imparting their wisdom. Perhaps these initiatives will help to preserve the oral tradition as the stories of boundary crossings will be passed on.

REFLECTIONS AND ACTIONS

The challenging nature of the journey into university demands reflection but also action. As noted above a number of initiatives to ease the transition process are already in place. Such initiatives also include student/staff consultative committees, interactive staff-student journals, and pastoral care programs through the appointment of year level co-ordinators. Given the shifting nature of university life such initiatives need close monitoring to take into account immediate and future needs of first year students. Recommendations include the enhancement of communication channels between educators within secondary and tertiary sectors via the formation of networks for the exchange of information, teacher exchanges, and student shadowing (university students with secondary school students). The provision of pre-university subjects to address study skills of prospective students needs to be extended to focus on the demands of academic reading and writing so to address the literacy-related needs of incoming students.

As students embark on the next phase of the journey they will continue to build upon existing membership or forge membership into new groups. As they engage in the incumbent rites of passage, they seek to clarify student identity which is 'multiple, shifting and often self contradictory' (Paasse, 1998, p. 95) and not unlike that of the university context. In a time of shifting realms, it is not only the students who need to discover what counts in the university context. We, as academics, must reread the world and the word of university and break through the 'crust of conventionalised and routine consciousness' (Dewey, 1954, p. 183) so that we are better placed to adjust our discourse and to direct our actions. Although the journey these students are undertaking is quite different to our own we are united in an ongoing exchange of meanings in order to procure a collective wisdom.

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