

Learning to 'be' a university student: First in family students negotiating membership of the university community

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Abstract

An integral part of the higher education (HE) journey is the act of 'becoming' a student, however students who are first in their families (FiF) to attend university have had limited exposure to the HE environment. Innovatively for research with this cohort, this paper draws on situated learning theory to examine how learning to become a university student occurs through participation within the university community of practice. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with FiF learners at the end of their degrees, i.e. successful students, the analysis describes students' movement from initial participation at the periphery of the university community to fuller participation. This paper offers practical insights into how we might support and engage this cohort to improve student retention.

Key Words: Community of Practice; Situated Learning; participation; first in family; higher education; persistence

1. Introduction

Students who are first in their family to attend university are a diverse cohort, often intersected by multiple equity categories such as low socioeconomic status (SES), disability, remote and rural, and indigeneity, who experience compounding disadvantage in educational settings (O’Shea and Delahunty 2018; Richardson, Bennett and Roberts 2016). As a result, these students may have higher levels of attrition from higher education (HE). That is, these students are often over-represented among those who discontinue or ‘drop out’ of university (Harvey, Szalkowicz and Luckman 2017). Ongoing research with this cohort is needed in order to gather knowledge to inform practices and policies in order to ensure positive educational outcomes (Luzeczyi, King, Scutter and Brinkworth, 2011; Toutkoushian, Stollberg and Slaton, 2018)

While students’ definitions of what constitutes success at university vary (O’Shea and Delahunty 2018), in order to graduate from university with a degree, it is important to first learn how to ‘be’ a university student. Being a student requires both technical skills such as applying and enrolling in the system, navigating a campus or online environment, understanding technical language as well as more personal skills related to writing effectively, listening and learning in a self-directed manner. However, students who are first in their families to attend university may not have access to knowledge, support and understandings passed on by the family members who have attended university before them (O’Shea, May, Stone and Delahunty 2017; Luzeczyj,

Graham, King and McCann 2015). Thus, many of those students who are the first in their family to enter university may not have an in-depth knowledge about how to 'be' a university student. Situated Learning theory provides a lens to consider the ways in which this cohort engage with the learning environment, particularly how these students learn to 'be' a university student.

The theory of Situated Learning sees learning as social, situated and occurring through participation in a sociocultural environment (Lave and Wenger 1991). In order to learn how to become a university student and ultimately obtain a degree, arguably all learners need to participate effectively within their university community. However, for FiF students without familial knowledge about university participation, learning through participation in the university community is essential in order to successfully navigate its systems, supports, processes, and culture. To achieve 'becoming', we argue that students must put into place deliberate and targeted strategies that ensure each persists through the challenges of higher education and ultimately succeeds. Carefully exploring how this cohort navigates the HE learning environment provides deeper insights into the nuances of learning experiences and the potential for support, retention and higher levels of success for FiF students in HE.

This article draws on interviews (n=69) conducted with students who were all first in their family (FiF) to attend university, a growing population within HE globally which is approximated to be just over half of the current student population (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). The study occurred across nine universities in Australia during 2017 and focussed on those students at the end of their degrees - most of whom were on the brink of successful graduation. This cohort was then those students who had successfully integrated into their university communities. We argue that by asking

students who are at the end of their degrees to narrate their transition to ‘becoming’ a university student, we are provided with valuable insights into how individuals themselves manage entry into the new educational domain.

This paper seeks to explore how FiF students transition from a place of not-knowing (about university participation) to that of knowledge and success. Research has indicated that the FiF population often experience difficulty ‘mastering the college role’ resulting in a limited sense of ‘fit’ with HE institutions (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013, p.330). Hence, drawing upon the experiences of those students who have progressed through their degrees provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their persistence behaviours. To contextualise this understanding, the following section explores the unique challenges faced by first in family students, a group highly intersected by multiple disadvantage, in their transition to higher education.

2. First in family students ‘managing’ HE participation

Students who are the first in their family to come to university are generally depicted in both literature and research as having to overcome additional and sometimes invisible obstacles whilst engaging with the HE community. While we are not suggesting that all those who are the first to come to university are similarly disadvantaged, we do contend that this group is collectively assumed to be ‘at-risk’ of poorer academic outcomes and possibly early departure. Bryan and Simmons (2009) report how one cohort of FiF students described a range of personal and familial circumstances that impacted negatively on their studies. Aside from the pressure of being the ‘first’ to attend university, this cohort also referred to issues of ‘management’ including managing relationships with community and family, dealing with poverty and also, handling different identities. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013)

undertook a comprehensive review of the literature in the field and described how this cohort is more likely to feel *out of place* within higher education settings, with a higher likelihood of working longer hours than their non-first in family peers and also living off-campus. An *outsider* status within the HE setting is echoed by Southgate et al. (2017) who argue that the FiF participants in their study lacked a *sense of entitlement* to be studying at university even if these learners had already demonstrated appropriate academic skills and abilities. Such disconnect can lead to thoughts of departure and indeed, higher rates of attrition and non-completion have been recorded in the US (Ishitani 2016) and Canada (Lehmann 2007) where data on this cohort is collected consistently.

Within the Canadian context, Lehmann (2007) argues that FiF students may consider departure due to ‘cross-cultural discontinuities’ (p.89). These discontinuities are manifested through descriptions of not ‘fitting in’, not ‘feeling university’ and not being able to relate to other students (p. 105). This combination of both personal circumstances and more embodied feelings about university may result in a group that is less likely to be involved in on-campus activities. Indeed, these students may exist within a commuter culture that is characterised by simply coming to campus to attend lectures and then leaving afterwards, or in the case of online learners, simply engaging with learning materials rather than online peers.

Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) argue that the combination of these factors leads to a heightened sense of insecurity for many FiF students in relation to their potential success within this learning environment. For some, displays of ‘stigma management’ (p. 237) result which involves ‘concealing their class identities and cultural tastes’ (p. 237). This theme of stigma is also reflected upon by Southgate (2018) who draws

upon Goffman's work on stigma to explore how FiF students 'negotiate social distance' and thereby 'manage and resist certain forms of stigma as they form their professional identity' within the university community (p. 166). Stigma management may be exacerbated by the isolating nature of this participation, as FiF learners have also reported a lack of understanding about university within the homeplace (O'Shea et al. 2017). Such disconnect may not only be regarded as a material obstacle but also impact at a more embodied level requiring individual learners to keep the various domains of their life separate (O'Shea 2016) often resulting in limited family involvement in what has probably become a significant part of their life. Such family/university separation can also impact on levels of engagement with the university. Bryan and Simmons (2009) report that the students in their study indicated that assimilation with the learning environment was 'specific and issue driven, which allowed them to switch back and forth between their home and university cultures' (p. 404).

Given the many issues encountered by this student cohort, the ways in which this population successfully manage this university journey is worthy of further exploration. The next section will consider the Community of Practice (CoP) theory as one framework that can assist in providing insights into this process.

3. Applying Community of Practice theory to the first in family student experience

The theory of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) regards learning as being both social and situated (Boylan 2010), occurring as a result of participation in a Community of Practice (CoP). The concept of situated learning is a useful tool for thinking about how individuals attain participation within a group of

people who already have obtained the skill or knowledge that is being sought by a learner. A Community of Practice or 'community' is characterised by joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire (Wenger 1998). In this paper, we see each university as being a community of practice with individual practices, artefacts, conventions, histories and social complexities. Adopting this view 'obliges us to think of learning as a process of becoming a member of a certain community' (Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000, p. 155). It is actually how this process is enacted as narrated by the students themselves that is the focus of this article. Specifically, we sought to understand how students described the ways in which they had learnt how to act and communicate according to the norms of the community (Sfard 1998), in this case the university community. We know that learning does not simply involve acquiring rules or codes, but equally requires acquiring ways of acting and different kinds of participation (Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000). This perspective is an alternative to much literature in HE which highlights the importance of the transmission of rules or codes (for example, Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, and Southgate 2016; McKay and Devlin 2014). In addressing this alternative perspective, this paper will show how becoming a university student is a deeply relational process and explore how this is enacted by those learners who have limited participation in, or assumed knowledge about, the HE environment prior to attending university.

The CoP theory has been demonstrated to be a powerful way of conceptualising HE institutions and aspects of their structures in order to understand the social and informal learning that occurs within them (for example, Lambie and Law 2016, Lim, Macleod and Tkacik, 2017, Power and Hibbert 2016). Of most relevance to this paper are those studies which have viewed the university as a CoP and examined how students are socialised/ apprenticed into being students (e.g. Donnison et al. 2017;

Penn-Edwards and Donnison 2014; Snowball and McKenna 2017; Turner and Tobbell 2018). These studies examine how students progress their academic skill and knowledge to develop their identity as university students informally and socially. Most of these applications of CoP theory have focussed on the first year experience and students' successful transition to university (e.g. Donnison et al. 2017; Penn-Edwards and Donnison 2014; Turner and Tobbell 2018). However, there is little understanding of the actual practical initiatives that students employ as they manage this participation in the practices of the community nor how this participation is managed by students who are at greater risk of attrition from HE.

The need to consider how diverse students themselves understand this incorporation has been noted in the literature, as Turner and Tobbell (2018, p. 710) explain:

Undergraduate students come from diverse educational settings where, by virtue of their success, they can be viewed as full participants. As they move to university they become peripheral participants with no experience of the new community. It follows, then, that an observation of undergraduates' participation during transition could offer new insights into the process (p. 710).

University transition, although often considered to occur during the first year, actually extends beyond this time. In fact, 34% of FiF students contemplate departure in their second/ third year compared to 27% in the first year (Coates and Ransom 2011) suggesting that the process of transitioning, becoming and belonging is often not fully realised within the initial academic year at the university. As such, drawing upon learners' reflections of their participation across the whole of the student life cycle

usefully offers new insights into how FiF manage their transition into the new community.

4. Methodology

This research was conducted in Australia in 2017 and was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP170100705). The main focus of this project was to examine how students reflected upon their persistence at university and what contributed to their success. All participants identified as being the first in their immediate families to attend university and were recruited from nine Australian universities across the country. Participants could either complete an online survey (n=306) or participate in an in-depth biographical interview (n=69). This article focuses on the interview data as this touched upon a diversity of facets of individuals' unique student experience. The interviews adopted a narrative biographical approach (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), and participants were encouraged to reflect upon their journey into and through their respective HE institution.

4.1 Participants

During interviews, participants were invited to share demographic information that provided some insight into the diversity of these students' lives as well as the intersectionality of this cohort. Intersectionality includes 'multiple aspects of people's identities, such as race, Indigeneity, gender, class, age, ability/disability' (Delahunty 2018). The majority of participants in this study were female (n=53) with a number indicating that they were derived from low socio-economic backgrounds (n=29) and/or originating from rural/isolated areas (n=23). A reasonably high proportion reported a disability (n=15) and just over half had child dependents (n=33). The mean

age of these participants was 34 years which is not unusual within the Australian context as just over 40% of the current student population is regarded as being mature aged (over 25 years) (ABS, 2013). As Delahunty (2018) suggests, the challenges for learning and participation within higher education are not always a result of just one factor or demographic attribute but come about as a result of the diverse backgrounds, or the intersectionality, of participants.

4.2 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and all identifying information was removed which was followed by line-by-line coding to explore emerging themes. This inductive process provided the basis for the coding nodes created within NVivo11 and was then complemented by the application of theoretical frames to the data.

In this article we have applied the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) as a frame of analysis to understand how learning to be a university student takes place. The CoP framework does this by focussing our analytical interest on the interactions of newcomers with experienced members of the community, as this is the point of participation and where learning occurs. As advocated by other social science research, this paper finds CoP to be a powerful unit of analysis to empirically document informal learning (Koliba and Gajda 2009).

The following section contains the analysis and discussion framed by CoP, guided by two over-riding questions:

- How did one cohort of FiF students narrate the process of becoming university students?

- How did this cohort learn to participate in the university community?

5. Analysis

Learning to become a student is a staged process that involves initial peripheral membership in the CoP, which later extends into more full incorporation into the community. This analysis examines the phases students move through as they participate over time in the university community with a focus on the specific strategies used by students in order to participate. The findings are presented here in two sections: initial learning through participation on the periphery and strategic help-seeking and fuller participation.

5.1 Initial learning through participation on the periphery

The students clearly indicated that their knowledge of university was primarily gained through participation in its practices. When asked how they acquired their understandings, most responded that they did so by '*going through the experience*' (Lara, 46, YR 2), by '*being there*' (Bernadette, 45, Final YR), and by '*doing it*' (Ruth, 53, YR 3). Participants also reported engaging learning strategies such as observing, talking to people, and exploring in order to learn about the university environment. Both Lucas and Hannah explained how learning about the community involved a period of '*walking around*' and becoming immersed in it. This is a very personal and embodied experience that requires immersion in the setting and the people within it.

A number of students also reflected on how, early in their journey, they had utilised formal opportunities to learn about the university including the orientation events and information packages. Bernadette and Hannah both acquired information about the practices of the university by '*going to orientations, attending all those things that are*

optional (Bernadette, 45, Final YR), and *'reading everything that the university sent you at the start, taking everything in that they possibly had to offer'* (Hannah, 26, YR 3).

Adopting strategies that enabled participation in the university community varied across these students but it was key to learning to become a university student. It appears that for many, in the initial stages, participation occurs on the periphery, through exploring, observing, reading, and attending. However, although these strategies are valuable sources of information, persistence through the various challenges that arise in a journey of HE requires strategic help-seeking behaviours which extend newcomers' participation in the community. The following section describes a second stage of participation in which successful students seek help and support from core members of the community and achieve a more complete participation in practice.

5.2 Strategic help seeking and fuller participation

When faced with personal or academic problems, these successful FiF students interacted with more central members of the community to obtain advice and assistance. In order to learn and be supported, participants widened their participation in the CoP by strategically interacting with other core members including career advisors, disability support services, counsellors, financial advisors, and administrative staff. They also interacted with their tutors and lecturers on a more individual and personal basis. Through these interactions with 'old-timers', students acquired a deeper knowledge about the community and its practices, appearing to move from the periphery towards the centre of the CoP. However, importantly, this connection was largely defined in terms of action on the part of the individual learner. As the following

quotes indicate, these students had to 'seek out' these relational networks in a deliberate and somewhat 'tenacious' manner.

Jennifer (28, YR3), an online student, located the human resources required to learn about university practice, specifically she would contact the teaching staff or her online peers for help if she got '*stuck*' or wasn't '*quite getting something*'. Fiona similarly sought the advice of other community members for help. She reflected on saying to herself, '*Stuff it, I'm struggling. I'm going to ask 20 people how to get myself out of a hole*' (Fiona, 24, YR 4). Seeking out human contact was echoed by Bradley who interacted with teachers - core members of the community - to obtain knowledge about university. He recalled developing strategies of '*talking to the people who are teaching me*' and '*asking questions about how people work together*' to learn (Bradley, 20, YR 3).

While many of the students described the assistance they received from a range of support staff, there were also many who described this help-seeking behaviour as being very self-driven. For example, Isabel (28, YR 4) described herself as being '*resourceful*' and as a result deliberately sought support from those in the university:

I'm happy to ring up the university and say, "I'm late on my uni fees, what assistance can I get" and then they put me through to places and everywhere that I go. (Isabel, 28, YR 4)

She juxtaposed this behaviour with other students - perhaps those learners located more on the periphery:

a lot of students they struggle with assignments and things but they don't put their hand up in class and say "I don't understand this. I need help" whereas I do. I stay back late and I ask for help.... (Isabel, 28, YR 4)

Erin (32, Final YR) also identified strategic interaction with other members of the community as playing a critical role in success. She similarly contrasted her strategy with that of other students 'who just sort of flit in and then flick out'. Instead, Erin vigorously pursued networking and social learning opportunities in the CoP.

I want that extra knowledge and that information and that networking and that experience, I've gotten that by putting my hand up and offering help and learning where I can. (Erin, 32, Final YR)

For this cohort, the key to gaining assistance and support was often described in terms of actively locating a key person or program within the community to help them. Participants mentioned key people by name and indicated that they had a familiar relationship based on repeated contact. Counsellors were valuable emotional and personal support people for participants such as Leon:

I think I know all the counsellors there, pretty much on a first-name basis now ... they're an undervalued resource because they're there to help you. (Leon, 36, YR 4)

An administrative staff member was Merelyn's first point of contact for any questions or problems that she had.

they've been great at (university). I like "Sue" in admin – she's fantastic – if there's anything, you know, she's fantastic. (Merelyn, 29, Final YR)

Teaching staff played a critical role in the persistence and success of these students across these HE CoPs. Many participants commented on how significant teaching staff were in this educational journey. Obviously, as the primary human resource that students have available, teaching staff are going to be influential, however, the data shows that quality impact occurred when connection was made at an individual level, as Eddie explained ‘*get a good rapport with your lecturers and tutors it’s good*’ (Eddie, 55, YR 3).

Not surprisingly the approachability and openness of staff was crucial with many quotes relating to this amongst the participants. For many it was often the actions of one individual that could make the difference between success and failure:

A couple of times that I was really struggling, I just would call a couple of people that I knew, like our lecturers and stuff like that, and be like, “I have no idea what I’m doing. Can I come and talk to you and show you what I’ve done so far? I have no idea if this is even right or wrong.” And so I was lucky that a few of them were really good and they were like, “I’m free right now, come into my office” sort of thing so they were good.

(Fiona, 24, YR 4)

I’ve had some great lecturers. I’ve felt at times, “My God, if I give them another sad story, I don’t know if they’re going to listen” – what can you do?... I’ve had a lot of understanding and I’m very grateful for that.

(Michelle, 61, Final YR)

It is important to note, that many of these teaching staff were perceived more like supporters, actively cheering learners along and backing them to succeed. In some

cases, it was characterised in terms of a strong interpersonal link and it was this familiarity or approachability that provided one of the key motivations for persisting in the degree:

I feel like they're my best friend and my biggest support and you just feel like they're all there for you and they're wanting you to win and they want to give you everything they can to make sure you do. It's like having a personal coach and it's quite extraordinary because there's nowhere else in life you feel that. (Heather, 59, YR 4)

Tutors have told me that they believe in me and having that has just been so encouraging. (Miriam, 53, YR 3)

However, teaching staff did not simply provide important emotional support for these learners but in some cases provided opportunities to participate more widely in the university CoP and relevant industry.

Well I've been on a few international study trips actually. The first time I went on a normal one, you know, any other student can get to. The second time, I used those relationships I guess and ended up working for three months in a university in Thailand. (Olivia, 36, YR4)

Like I've had a lot of amazing people during my degree come into my life, like one of my lecturers ... she's very influential. (Danielle, 32, YR 3)

Here we make an important point about those who *drop out* or leave university before completing their degree. By not accessing core members who can provide assistance and support, at-risk students may not move from the periphery, and in

some cases this immovability leads to thoughts of departure. This seems to contrast with successful students, with similar educational biographies, who proactively seek the help and advice of more experienced participants in the university early on in their HE journey. Comments from successful students show this. When asked what they would have told themselves prior to commencing university, most participants replied that success at university is underpinned by accessing core participants in the CoP prior to or during their first weeks at university. This sentiment is summed up by Fiona (24, YR4) who explained:

If I could tell my younger self ... to just go and talk to people and to I don't know, ask for help at the start... to join all those hobbies and clubs that I joined later on – to join them earlier because I would have had probably more an established friendship group. (Fiona, 24, YR 4)

Similarly, Naomi (21, FINAL YR) asserts that she would have been '*more willing to ask for help and accept help.*'

This analysis has shown that in order to overcome problems and be supported on their HE journeys, participants widened their participation in the CoP by strategically interacting with central members. Through these interactions with old-timers and core members of the CoP, students learnt more about the community and its practices and as a result seemed to move from the periphery towards the centre of the university CoP.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Students reflected upon how their initial participation in the university community was

on the periphery of the environment but in order to succeed, many employed strategic and deliberate techniques designed to achieve fuller participation. This change in participation was demonstrated in the ways the students went about seeking information and assistance when faced with complex and confusing university practices. However, research in this field has shown that FiF newcomers located at the periphery of the university community may prefer to seek out information from other peripheral sources located within their social comfort zones (Luzecy et al. 2015; Morales 2012). These sources may include peers or online sources but are generally characterised by having a level of familiarity for the student rather than being someone or something that they have not met or are not yet comfortable with (Morales 2012). In one study, FiF students relied on the internet most heavily to gather information due to its ease, proximity, accessibility, and immediate availability (Morales 2012). Other research has shown that FiF students also depend on informal networks such as peers to successfully navigate the university landscape (Longwell-Grice et al. 2016; Luzecy et al. 2015; Morales 2012). Seeking help from familiar sources aligns with the findings of Goldingay et al. (2014) who found in their research that students from minority groups often seek advice from their family instead of utilising academic advisors. This pattern of peripheral interaction largely with familiar persons might be unique to FiF over the general student population.

As the information from family or peers may not always be accurate or sufficient, FiF students need to effectively ‘move away’ from these comfort zones to find the answers they need to succeed (Morales 2012). The FiF students in this study, all of whom were approaching the end of their degrees, reported seeking assistance from career advisors, disability support services, counsellors, financial advisors, and administrative staff. These were all participants in the community whom students had no initial affiliation

with and so each had to be sought out independently by the learner. Some of these learners also reflected upon the need to strategically develop more individual and familiar relationships with their teaching staff. This move away from interacting with passive or familiar sources such as the internet, peers and mentors, to participation with more central participants within the university CoP is arguably key to the necessary movement from the periphery of practice to more fuller participation; a move that may not have been realised by those students who dropped out of their studies. Here we echo the point made earlier about those who leave university early. It seems possible that by not actively seeking assistance and deliberately and strategically creating networks of support early on in the degree, these individuals may not move from the periphery and as a result are in danger of abandoning their studies.

To address the need to create meaningful and deliberate opportunities for newcomer FiF students to negotiate appropriate relationships with ‘old timers’, we propose the following recommendations:

Institutions need to deliberately create links between at-risk students and members of support services, teaching staff and the student body. Such relationships with community members are opportunities for students to learn ways of communicating, acting and participating in the university community which may support persistence and success. This ‘linkage’ might include assigning an academic or personal adviser to in-coming students deemed to be at-risk; these could be professional or academic staff members who elect to participate as a ‘student success’ coach. Such a role would not need to be overly onerous – with perhaps meetings timed to critical stages in a semester or academic year however, as recommended by Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), the contact should be direct and ongoing. Importantly, the creation of these

relationships needs to be guided by the institution rather than the individual student to ensure participation.

Similarly, peer mentoring programs promise benefits to both students new to the university as well as more established students further along their journey (Lim et al. 2017; Zamberlan and Wilson 2015). Such programs can support access to HE (Herrera, Brown and Portlock 2015), the situated learning of university practices (Power and Hibbert 2016), and the ‘integration’ of new students into the practices of specific faculties or degrees (Lim et al. 2017, p. 408). Established students also obtain significant professional and personal growth from such programs (Lim et al. 2017). Finally and most importantly for the FiF cohort, peer learning programs support the development of a student identity and sense of belonging within the university community (Power and Hibbert 2016).

Given the insecurity experienced by FiF students in regard to their sense of belonging and potential for success in higher education (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013), the creation of linkages between at-risk students and other students and staff may also assist in the management of stigma. With this goal in mind, approaches which shift the negative perceptions of FiF students by acknowledging the personal and cultural strengths that they bring to HE might reduce deficit thinking around FiF, build confidence and promote a sense of belonging for these students.

Finally, these narratives also point to the key role played by trusted ‘old timers’ in the community, the support provided by these individuals needs to be highly relational and personal in nature. For staff, this type of support requires both temporal and emotional resources, yet it is also an *invisible* form of work largely unacknowledged in workload or position descriptions. We argue that these activities need to be

foregrounded as key to retention and the staff that engage in this be acknowledged for their input into students' persistence and successful outcomes. This reflects an understanding of academic success that moves beyond simply the input of knowledge into learners to one that recognises the personal and embodied nature of incorporation into the university community.

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