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## **Spoon-feeding or mind-reading? First-year students' need for explicit communication of expectations**

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### **Abstract**

First-year students enter university with a limited understanding of what to expect from the teaching and learning environment. In general, students have few ideas of what expectations teaching staff have of them, and what they are expected to learn. Conversely teaching staff do not always seem to appreciate the need to provide clarity, and to communicate explicit expectations. Whereas staff may complain that students want to be spoon-fed, students complain that they are not mind readers. In interviews, as well as a survey at the University of Otago, first-year students remarked in a wide range of ways on issues of clarity of expectations. In this paper it will be argued that it is not helpful to frame first-year students' need for clarity as a deficit that needs to be fixed. The increased number and diversity of students who have entered higher education since the 1990s have decidedly affected the context of tertiary teaching. Other social and political developments have also changed the teaching and learning environment. This paper will argue that this changed context needs to be considered and that learning support staff can play an active role in opening up a discussion about the changed tertiary environment and the institutional implications of this.

### **Background: Changes in the tertiary sector**

Fundamental changes are taking place in the higher education sectors of the western world. Much has been written about these global changes (Barnett, 1994, 2004; Duke, 2002; Gibbons, 1998; Ramsden, 1998; Scott, 1995). Barnett (1994) argues that higher education is changing from a pre-modern to a modern institution; what we are seeing, he says, is the last stage of higher education being brought in from the margins of society (pp. 3, 4). The changes concern a wide array of societal issues, such as technological developments, changing demographics, changes in the labour market requirements, financial (funding) challenges and accountability requirements. These and many other changes have resulted in challenges to the organisation and management of university administration, as well as challenges to the pedagogical and curricular practices of university academics.

Tertiary education graduates are now considered important for the economic prosperity of a knowledge economy. New Zealand higher education policy and direction is premised on this assumption (Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, 2000). Consequently, the New Zealand government has encouraged participation, especially from traditionally under-represented groups.

Increased student participation has resulted in a higher cost of government funding in absolute terms. Students' financial contribution to their studies has also increased. These two developments have resulted in increased expectations from two of the main stakeholders, government, and students, regarding value for money. This can be seen in increased accountability demands by the government,

for example, outcomes of tertiary education. It has also resulted in the increased assertion of rights by students.

### *First year context*

The changes in the landscape of tertiary education are particularly noticeable in the first year. I would argue that the issues that come to the fore in the first year of higher education highlight a range of contested issues universities are grappling with, for example, the values and purpose of higher education, and pedagogical approaches in a mass education system, as opposed to an elite university system.

The changes in the tertiary education landscape have also resulted in a greater understanding of the importance of the first year. It is now recognised that the first year in higher education can be considered as a distinct stage in the life of university students (Kantanis, 2000; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). It has also been recognised that the first year experience can be crucial for the success or otherwise of their tertiary studies (Asmar, 2000; McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis et al., 2000).

It can be argued, therefore, that tertiary institutions should pay due attention to the experiences and perceptions of first-year students. A positive experience in the first year of higher education could arguably contribute to better outcomes, such as student satisfaction and retention.

### **Research**

The research that has informed this paper is focused on the University of Otago's first-year students' perceptions of the teaching/learning environment. One of the foci is to identify what the university can do to improve the experiences of first-year students, and which areas warrant further research. Data for the research comes from a survey of first year students enrolled in 100-level papers and from interviews with first-year students.

The survey was conducted by the Otago University Students' Association. Responses from a total of 2039 first-year students were considered, out of a total of 4762 survey participants who were enrolled in 100-level courses. The survey questions asked students to comment on what had been helpful and unhelpful since they started university, and what could be improved to enhance the learning experience of all students.

Interviews were conducted with a volunteer sample of 27 students. Multiple interviews were held with most students. Some students were interviewed individually, others in pairs or groups of three. The interviews were semi structured; they included similar questions to those posed in the survey. The survey was conducted nine weeks into the first semester. The data was entered in the second semester. The first interviews were conducted in the second week of the first semester, and continued into the first week of the second semester.

A process of inductive data analysis was conducted, drawing on data from both sources. Drawing on two different data sources allowed for confirmation, or triangulation, of the constructed themes.

This analysis resulted in the construction of three major themes of what students considered helpful: clear communication of expectations and requirements; easy access to resources and avenues of help; and engaging classroom environments. In this paper, I will concentrate on the first theme.

### **Theoretical perspective**

Students' differential perceptions can be considered from different perspectives and with different intentions. There are two main positions, though not necessarily mutually exclusive. We can try to understand students' perceptions with a view to changing students who are not doing what we want them to do. Alternatively, we can try to understand students' perceptions in order to bring about

changes in how the university teaching and learning environment is organised, and how staff view first-year students.

The perspective from which I considered the data in this research focuses less on a deficit in students, and more on identifying what the university can do to improve students' first-year experiences. This perspective finds increasingly more support. Lawrence (2000, 2002, 2005) for instance strongly advocates for shifting from a deficit discourse. Prebble et al. (2004) too remark on the emerging discourse of institutional adaptation as opposed to students' assimilation. The higher education learning support literature also seems to reflect an increasing interest in moving from a remedial approach to learning support to a developmental approach (Chanock, 2004; Peelo, 2002).

In considering students' comments regarding their experiences as learners, I have adopted a contextualised social practice perspective (Lea & Stierer, 2000; Lea & Street, 1998). Typically, this perspective has been applied in the context of research into students' writing in university. However, I would argue that the use of this perspective can be widened to include other forms of literacy, such as a literacy of learning (Lander & Latham, 1997), related to activities such as reading and preparing for assessments other than writing essays. A contextualised social practice perspective recognises that students come to know what is expected of them through becoming familiar with multiple discourses and cultures within a university. This perspective also locates students' experiences within the wider context of higher education (Lea & Stierer, 2000). I also draw on the concept of the hidden curriculum in the higher education context (Ahola, 2000; Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001; Miller & Parlett, 1974; Sambell & McDowell, 1998; Snyder, 1971).

### **Clarity of expectations and requirements**

A concern emerging in the academic literacy literature and research is the problematic issue around clear communication of expectations to students (Chanock, 2004; Levin, 2000). Data from the research with first-year students at the University of Otago confirms that this university is no exception. Students are often not clear on what teaching staff expect from them. These expectations are related to various aspects of their learning, such as writing essays, preparing for assessments, approach to reading course material and general organisation of their study.

The case of one student, Helen, may serve as a good illustration of some of the issues related to clarity of expectations. Helen, a school leaver, found it difficult to understand what was expected of her in one of her courses. The teacher concerned, however, did not respond positively to Helen's request for clarification. The teacher did not want to "spoon-feed" students, but wanted students to become independent learners.

She was just like, you know, you're big kids now, I can't spoon-feed you everything. But I mean... we didn't ask to be spoon-fed obviously. We just actually didn't know what the sheet was really saying.

One of Helen's assignments in this course was particularly troubling her. Students in this course had to work every week on one particular piece of assessment, and hand it in at the end of the semester. Helen was not sure what exactly was expected of her. The information she had did not provide her with enough indications:

We don't actually know if we're doing it right. ... Like they explained it, like they said: you need to analyse, summarise, and write your own personal response [emphasis added]. Which is like fine ... and I might be doing it right but it's just that I'm not sure like it, you know I kind of just need someone to read mine and say "Yes" or "No".

The three writing activities she refers to are highly specific activities, and each requires a range of skills.

... if I want to keep doing it the way I'm doing it and it's wrong, and if they just told me that I was doing it wrong then I'm sure I could cope with doing it the right way you know, *it's just a matter of knowing* [emphasis added]. So yeah that's the problem we have with that. *It's just a matter of knowing*. Helen did not doubt her ability to do the work, or to do it right. All she wanted is to be told is what she had to do, how teachers wanted her to do it. Many students agreed with this sentiment. Many students, for instance, wanted to see examples of past exams so they knew what was expected. The frustration of not knowing, and the inability to get guidance from her tutor, caused Helen to "hate" one of her courses in particular. I asked her what the issues were with this course:

Um just not knowing what you're supposed to do. Like it's hard, it's like, I think the problem like everyone hates it because it's hard but I think the reason it's hard is because it's not explained clearly. Like I think if it was, you're told what to do, I mean *maybe we're just used to being spoon-fed a bit much or something* [emphasis added] but yeah it's just a bit unclear. You just don't actually know what; you never know what you're doing, like. Because we, we go to our like group meetings and we sit there half the time just trying to work out what she's asking of us, not actually doing the work. Yeah.

Helen seemed to want to make a clear distinction between something that is hard because it is difficult to grasp the material concerned, and something that is hard because the explanation of what they have to do is lacking. Helen was clear that this course was hard because of "not knowing what you're supposed to do". Then she seemed to stop, and seemed to consider another possibility. She wondered whether perhaps it was not the explanation: "*maybe we're just used to being spoon-fed a bit much or something*". Helen seemed to speculate briefly that the problem could be with her and other students, and that she and other students wanted to be spoon-fed, referring back to her tutor's earlier comment. Her tutor's comment about spoon-feeding could be seen as reflecting concerns some teachers have about student behaviour in higher education.

Students' concern with wanting to know exactly what is expected of them in assessment tasks is deemed by some teaching staff to be a sign of the times. Students in this category are sometimes characterised as "instrumental" in orientation (Ditcher & Hunter, 2001; Rolfe, 2002), and less interested in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge (Tasker & Packham, 1993). This assumption, however, is problematic. It leaves unexamined teaching practices which often unintentionally obfuscate intended learning goals, and course structures (Read, Francis, & Robson, 2001). Students' concern with explicit expectation could also be conceived as a concern with constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003; Hagemeyer, 2002). What students may look for are connections, and coherence between assessment, learning, and teaching. They may seek to diminish the effect on their learning of unconnected content (Jarkey, 2004). Students may also look for clarity about the skills they need for certain tasks.

Although some of the interviewees' teachers explicitly raised the issue of skills that were needed for certain assessments, this did not always result in these skills being taught or developed. In two different classes, for instance, students were asked to vote on whether, or how, they wanted essay writing skills to be given. In both cases, the students who needed this help missed out on a skills development class. In one class, students voted for a content-based tutorial instead of a skills-based tutorial; in the other class, information was put on Blackboard, the university's web-based course management system. It can be argued that first-year students can not be asked, under the guise of classroom democracy, to make decisions on whether and how the development of essay writing skills should take place. Some students were unsure how to start their essay and approached their tutors. In some cases they were referred to essay writing skills courses offered by the university's learning support unit.

Although generic skills courses taught in learning support units can be very useful for students as an introduction, I would argue that this does not absolve academic departments from their role in developing first-year students' academic literacy skills. Discourses and conventions employed in academic writing are often discipline specific; acceptable standards in one discipline would not necessarily be acceptable in another (Lea & Street, 1998; Pardoe, 2000). Differences in expectations can even be different within courses, or even differ from tutor to tutor. The distinction between content and skills can also be considered artificial (Hagemeyer, 2002). Furthermore, an objection can be raised against the implied notion that acquiring the skills of essay writing is a single event rather than a process. Parker (2002) argues that disciplinary processes like reading, thinking and writing are neither automatic nor threshold skills but are problematic, and should be the concerns of all levels of students and teachers. What she is arguing is that a discipline is a community of practice, and that disciplinary skills are not a precursor to doing the work, but should be an ongoing concern of all in a particular community of practice.

The data indicated that some teachers were aware that not all their students had the requisite skills to successfully start or complete an assignment. Students were positive about teachers who provided clear verbal explanation of assignments. They also found the use of exemplars helpful. A number of students recounted how the lecturer had unpacked an assignment by highlighting various features, and the balance of various aspects they were looking for. Another tutor used a video of a good speech from a previous year to explain his expectations and assessment criteria.

Students' concern with clarity of expectations, then, cannot be explained away in a self-evident or obvious way. Whereas staff may consider requests for clarification as a request by students to be spoon-fed, students tended to view this differently. The frustration that some students experienced in trying to come to an understanding of assessment expectations is poignantly captured in the following survey response:

[What could staff do to improve the learning experience of all students is] be clearer in what they want concerning essay questions. THEY ARE NOT CLEAR – tell us exactly what they want – we are not mind readers.

### **Technical problem or ideological issue?**

Adopting a social practice perspective means a conceptual shift away from a more technical approach to students' learning activities. 'Technical' in this context is to be understood as an exclusive focus on narrow pedagogical issues related to students' academic literacy skills. Whereas a mismatch between the expectations between students and staff can be considered a mere technical issue, I would argue that this could also be interpreted as an ideological issue. This mismatch could be interpreted as a fundamental difference of understanding regarding the values, aims and approach to higher education teaching.

Traditionally, universities were thought to be about the disinterested pursuit of knowledge rather than a means towards an end. Only able students were thought to enter university. Students who were not able enough, or not suited to higher education, would recognise this at some point and leave. Suitable first-year students were thought to be independent learners who knew how to take notes, find resources, do their readings, have appropriate writing skills, knew how to manage their time and generally knew what was expected of them. Ability was considered an unproblematic self-evident essential characteristic of students, some students had it, and some did not (Lawrence, 2005). It is arguable whether these more traditional views of university education are still tenable. Leaving aside whether universities ever were just about the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, most universities now would espouse a wider range of aims, and recognise that they also serve a vocational purpose, that students are to be prepared for life and work beyond the university. Ability is no longer seen as self-

evident or unproblematic. There is a growing literature that attests to this changing approach to higher education teaching and learning support. Biggs (2003) and Lawrence (2005) refer to the old attitude as the 'sink or swim' approach to student learning while Chaskes and Anttonen (2005) use the term "Academic Darwinism" (p. 199). A changing attitude to the responsibility of universities also comes through strongly in the learning support literature and the literature related to first-year students. Although a shift in discourse seems to occur in higher education, students' experiences seem to indicate that many teaching practices still betray the values and attitudes of an elite university system, based on learning ability and Academic Darwinism, rather than practices that reflect values and attitudes of a mass education environment based on learning potential and equitable participation.

### **Considering the role of learning support**

In arguing for a responsibility of academic departments to develop and foster students' academic literacy skills, the role and purpose of learning support units in universities can be seen as contested. Often these units provide services to students who have identified for themselves a lack of skills, or for whom teachers have identified a lack of skills that needs to be fixed. Many teachers would not consider it their responsibility to look after students who 'somehow don't get it'; they would see a learning support unit as the appropriate place for remedial help. In this view the responsibility to acquire the requisite skills, and be acquainted with academic discourse conventions, would lie mainly with students. This view could be characterised as an assimilationist perspective (Prebble et al., 2004), that is, it is the student's responsibility to assimilate into the university culture.

There is an emerging discourse, however, that would contest that this is just the student's responsibility (Prebble et al., 2004). The alternative view that is proposed is that institutions adapt to students' diverse learning needs and preferences. Those who argue from a more institutional adaptation perspective would argue that the university has a responsibility to meet the needs of all students. They would also argue for instance that there is not one university or academic culture, but that there are multiple discourses and cultures operating within the university (Lea & Stierer, 2000). Percy and Stirling (2003, p. 43) describe universities as being in "transition" from the old "ivory tower" days of higher education to an institutional organisation which recognises that learning of content cannot be privileged over learning of skills.

Learning support staff, then, cannot stand by and remain neutral. Learning support units may have to make choices how they want to position themselves. In making choices about how to play their role and channel their resources, they have to consider how they view the respective roles and responsibilities of students and the institution. The focusing question could be: who adapts to whom and how far (or how much)?

Where learning supports units adopt a more assimilationist perspective, they would be more active in helping students in understanding the requirements and expectations of the university. They would help students to decode the expectations of faculty, or 'crack the code', through learning the rules, or becoming more cue conscious. Where learning support units consider the university to have a responsibility to adapt to students' needs and preferences, they would play a more active role in working with faculty in adopting practices that assist in making their expectations more explicit to students, for example by embedding academic skills development in courses (Chanock, 2004; Percy & Stirling, 2003).

Learning support units can also play an active role in highlighting good practice and identifying change management strategies that have proven to be possible. Before any changes are able to take place, however, faculty members with teaching responsibilities have to be convinced that there is a need for change. Learning support units can play a role in engaging in a dialogue with faculty about the educational benefits of these changes, as well as wider ideological issues and educational and ethical imperatives. Learning support units could also point at more pragmatic and expedient benefits, such as the increased emphasis by funding bodies on student retention and outcomes.

## Conclusion

It has been argued that whereas some staff may consider students to be lacking in independent skills or being instrumental, many students consider themselves incapable of mind-reading; students would contend that they cannot acquire an understanding of what is expected of them by osmosis (Francis, 2005; Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998). Learning support units can play an important role in improving students' understanding of course expectations. The manner in which they play this role is determined largely by the stance they take on the respective responsibilities of students and institution.

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