

# THINKING ABOUT FIRST YEAR RETENTION IN TEACHER EDUCATION: THREE STUDENTS IN A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY AND THEIR METAPHORS OF SURVIVAL

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## ABSTRACT

*In Australian faculties of education, retention and progression issues are paramount within the current neo-liberal climate which emphasises student degree completions. This is particularly the case in regional universities, where many students – often the first in their families to attend university – are from rural, regional and low socio-economic communities. This paper draws on data generated during a project that provided support for first year teacher education students in a regional university. Using critical discourse analysis, it describes and analyses the metaphors used by a small group of pre-service teachers as they talked in interviews about their transition into university and the strategies they used to “survive” their first attempts at study in a tertiary institution. The metaphors provide insights into the pre-service teachers’ perceived need for social support alongside traditionally-offered academic support. The data suggest that a rethinking of support offerings might be necessary to ensure that teacher education caters for pre-service teachers who feel dislocated from their home and community roots.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is currently considerable pressure within Australian universities for faculties to ensure that student participation, retention and progression are high priorities. As highlighted in the Bradley report (Australian Government, 2008), students from rural and regional areas and from low socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented in higher education. Whilst the retention of students has considerable local economic effects for universities, it also has much wider consequences in terms of ensuring broader societal and national benefits through the development of self-reliant citizens who are able to participate to their full potential in society.

Over recent years, it would appear that many universities have expended substantial energy in the design and implementation of programs to support students in their transition to university. Whilst Tinto (2001) criticised institutions for merely “tinkering at the margins of institutional life” and doing “little to address the deeper roots of student attrition” (p. 1), it would appear that many universities now regard transition into university as an important consideration. With the massification of higher education and the increasing diversity of student populations, transition issues have become a particular focus (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009). It would appear that many efforts have been aimed at trying to help students “fit the system” of university. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that “top-up” academic skills courses for improving the academic abilities of first year students have remained a popular strategy for dealing with the perceived problems of at-risk students (Devlin, 2008; Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Tinto, 2001). These processes have tended to enculturate students into university practices, without questioning the

appropriateness of these practices for the students or the development of their capacities for living in today's society.

In focusing on students and what they cannot do, such programs tend to construct students within deficit discourses, locating possible solutions to students' deficiencies in study skills courses and other remedial programs offered by learning support mechanisms within universities (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005; Henderson & Hirst, 2007). In many cases, the teaching of academic skills has been through generic courses that focus on pre-determined sets of skills that students are meant to master if they want to be regarded as successful scholars (Henderson & Hirst, 2007). Bowl (2001) identified similar barriers in UK higher education where "the onus seemed to be on the students to adapt themselves to the institution and its rules, rather than on the institution and its main players to adapt in response to the fresh perspectives which participants brought with them" (p. 157). Approaches which identify students as deficient take a rather narrow view of the factors that may impact on the ability of students to make the transition into university study and to be successful in that context. An alternative view is to advocate change to the educational culture rather than expecting that students will change (Tett, 2004).

In other educational contexts, such as primary and secondary schools, there is a growing body of research that has investigated the resilience of deficit discourses that blame students and their families for poor performance in educational contexts (e.g., Department of Education and Training, 2005; Henderson & Woods, 2012). Some researchers (e.g., Bartholomaeus, 2012; Henderson & Woods, 2012) have recommended taking a "wide lens" view to look beyond individuals and to consider how contextual factors can enable and constrain students. Whilst this argument has been less obvious in universities, it has been suggested that a wide range of factors can impact on students' success in university contexts (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Tinto, 2006, 2008) and that narrow approaches which identify students as deficient do not address the more substantive issues surrounding students' inexperience with tertiary study (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004; Tett, 2004; Tinto, 2001).

Part of the complexity of the situation would appear to come from changes to the demographics of students who are attending universities. In the current broader participation agenda, a wide range of factors would seem to be in play and this is particularly pertinent for regional universities who tend to attract a higher proportion of rural students (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Maltzan (2006) identified some of the barriers that impact on students from rural locations, suggesting that first generation student status, the economic and social support offered by families, and other factors like ethnicity can be barriers to the enrolment and persistence of rural students. Contextual factors are likely to play a crucial role, particularly for students whose experiences of home and community vary enormously from those whose families have traditionally supported university study. Indeed, Bartholomaeus (2012) has suggested, in relation to school students from rural areas, that there is a real need for educators to consider how they might "facilitate engagement with students' lives, with their local community and with their learning" (p. 136).

It is also recognised that many university students have substantial time commitments to employment and home and community activities, and that their study sometimes "runs the risk of simply becoming another appointment or engagement in the daily diary, along with paid work and a range of other commitments beyond the campus" (Krause, 2006, p. 3; see also Turnbull, Nettelbeck, Ward, LeCouteur, Sarris, Strelan et al., 2006). This changing context has prompted calls for universities to find ways of ensuring that students are supported socially as well as academically. There has also been a call for a success-focused research approach to investigating student retention, because this will help to develop a broader perspective on how to increase university participation and success (Devlin & O'Shea, 2011).

In taking up issues related to the transition of particular groups of students into university, this paper reports on a program that set out to provide support for "at-risk" first year university students who were enrolled in a Bachelor of Education degree at a regional Australian university. Demographic information, available from the university's annual report and equity-related documents, has indicated that the student population in recent years has included a high proportion of students from rural and geographically isolated areas and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The university

recognises that many students present as “financially disadvantaged ... ‘first generation’ students (that is, the first in their family to attend higher education) ... ‘second chance learners’ (that is, students returning to education as adults after missing educational opportunities in their youth) ... [and] educationally disadvantaged.”

Within this context, a program was planned as a support mechanism for students who self-identified as at-risk of failure in their transition to university study. Based on a Learning Circle approach (Aksim, 1998; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005; Riel, 2006), the program planned to build on students’ strengths, by involving them in discussions and the sharing of knowledge about ways of dealing with the issues that the students regarded as important to their new role of university student.

As the two academics who facilitated the weekly Learning Circle, we had planned a flexible agenda that would consider the academic and social issues identified by the students. We expected that an important part of our input would be a range of academic skills to assist the students to engage with study. However, it quickly became apparent that social issues dominated the students’ concerns and that our role within the Learning Circle involved being effective listeners and facilitators of processes that enabled the students to transfer the problem-solving capacities they already had to the university context.

This paper investigates three pre-service teachers’ discursive constructions of their experiences of the Learning Circle. These particular students were chosen because their arrival at university had meant a dislocation from their home and community contexts. In particular, the paper focuses on the metaphors that the students used to make sense of their Learning Circle experiences and considers the implications for designing future support programs for first year university students. Although metaphors have been used in a number of teacher education studies to investigate as well as to develop the beliefs and identities of teachers and pre-service teachers (e.g., Alsup, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Shaw, Barry & Mahlios, 2008; Williams, 2006), this study takes a different approach by investigating the transition experiences of three pre-services teachers as they commence their teacher education studies.

## **THE CONTEXT, PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING**

The Learning Circle initiative was an attempt by the education faculty of a regional Australian university to address issues of retention and student progression within a cohort of first year students. Approximately ten students attended the weekly meetings that were available for assisting students with the transition into university study. The Learning Circle was available to all on-campus education students and participation was voluntary. Attendance varied from week to week in keeping with the drop-in nature of the initiative, but there was a core group of around six or seven students who attended regularly for the whole of the academic year. Most, but not all, of the students were female; however, this is not unusual given the gender representation in the field of education broadly and the initial teacher education enrolment patterns. Some of the students were school leavers who had moved directly from school to university, while others were mature-aged students who had decided to try university study as “second chance” learners. In general, the students fitted the university’s demographic profile as most were from rural, regional and/or low socio-economic backgrounds and were the first in their families to undertake higher education.

The students attended a weekly Learning Circle meeting where they discussed the issues that they believed were difficult for them in their transition to university study. Discussion around those issues provided opportunities for the students to problem-solve, to share ideas and to reflect on their experiences (Noble & Henderson, 2008; Noble et al., 2005). It became evident as the year progressed that the students met more than once a week. Friendships had developed and this meant that the problem-solving, sharing and reflecting that they did was continuing between Learning Circle meetings. From our perspective, this suggested that the processes implemented as part of the initiative were likely to be sustainable, as the students had taken these ideas beyond the room where we met.

Within the first few weeks, the students who were attending each week had decided that the Learning Circle approach was very helpful to their survival in the university context and they were keen to keep a record of their experiences and their progress through their first year of study. For the remainder of the year, and with ethical clearance, the students and the academics recorded Learning Circle discussions as a way of documenting the “what” and “how” of the approach. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the students, so that follow-up questions could be asked about the discussions that had occurred and about the students’ perceptions of the Learning Circle process.

This paper focuses on the metaphors that were used by three students – Catherine, Helen and Stacey (pseudonyms) – to explain the perceived benefits of their weekly participation in the Learning Circle. We selected these three students as they often talked about their feelings of dislocation and their discomfort in the university setting. Catherine lived in a rural area about three hours drive from the university and she travelled between home and the university every week. Helen also came from a rural area, but she had relocated her family to the city surrounding the regional university after enrolling in university study. Stacey lived in the regional city and her family fitted a low socio-economic profile. She was the first in her family to attend university.

The data used in this paper are drawn from transcripts of semi-structured interviews that were conducted individually with the students. It is recognised, however, that the metaphors were not only individual discursive constructions, but that the Learning Circle had afforded opportunities for the students to share, critically reflect and jointly construct understandings of their experiences. The interview transcripts have been analysed using a critical discourse analysis approach based on Fairclough’s (2001) text-interaction-context model, which conceptualises discourse simultaneously as text (the transcripts), discursive practice (the social interactions of the Learning Circle and the interviews) and sociocultural practice (within the institutional context of the university and the broader community). Fairclough’s model is based on an understanding that language users make conscious and unconscious language choices to represent experience, to interact and express a point of view, and to present a coherent meaning (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop, 2000; Fairclough, 2001; Poynton, 2000). By interweaving textual and social analysis, this method enables an examination of the connections between social contexts, institutions and discursive practices.

Through examining the metaphors in the transcripts of the pre-service teachers’ interviews, the study has taken Paechter’s (2004) view that metaphors are important “as indicators of the ways we think and as rallying-cries for particular world-views” (p. 450). As Shaw, Barry and Mahlios (2008) explained, metaphors can provide insights into “the larger constructs under which people organize their thinking and from which they plan their actions on the multiple environments in which they participate including, to some extent, how they teach and work with students” (p. 35). Although metaphors might seem to be an indirect way of obtaining information, Patchen and Crawford (2011) suggested that they offer insights about the ways people construct reality. Metaphors thus provide evidence of the linguistic and social constructions that are used to make sense of the world and of experiences, and are suitable for a critical discourse analysis approach (Hart, 2008).

## **CATHERINE: “THE DOOR” AND THE “PROTECTED ENVIRONMENT”**

A common theme amongst the metaphors used by the pre-service teachers was that the Learning Circle provided a “calm” space and place that allowed them to “escape” from what they perceived as daunting aspects of university. For Catherine, a mature-age student who lived approximately three hours drive from the university and had not studied since leaving school 35 years previously, a place to escape was essential. Catherine described university as “really overwhelming.” She was particularly concerned by her complete lack of experience with computers and she recognised that she had a lot to learn, including how to use email, how to access online course materials, and how to use a computer for study and assessment purposes.

Catherine explained that she had initially attended the Learning Circle meeting because she hoped that it would be

*a little bit more relaxed and that people could, you know, we could talk to people and basically say that we were having, you know, problems with A, B or C ... Just probably a listening ear more than anything.*

The door of the room where the Learning Circle was held appeared to be particularly significant. She claimed that the door cut her off from the “overwhelming” nature of university study. She explained:

*‘Cause I just find the uni really overwhelming and, probably because I’m from away, but the whole concept of the whole thing is just really overwhelming. And the computers and everything, you know, trying to get into the swing of stuff. But to actually be able to go in that room and shut the door, it’s like you can send the whole uni away. And you’re in this little protected environment where nothing’s actually expected of you. And I think probably that’s it. Just because you can shut the door and you can go in there and be yourself and no-one, there was no demands. No-one was expecting anything. You know, you didn’t have to perform to your best standard like you do for the rest of the uni. That’s what I liked about it. I could just be myself.*

Catherine’s talk set up a binary between the Learning Circle “place” behind the door – a “little protected environment” – and the university outside the door where she felt that there were demands as well as expectations that she would “perform” to her “best standard.” It was evident that the physical location of the Learning Circle was significant for Catherine, even though it was a regular classroom. The door seemed to provide a safety barrier and the inside of the room enabled Catherine to relax and not feel so pressured. In travelling to the university on a weekly basis, Catherine seemed to feel dislocated from the safety of her home and her community. Her description of herself as being “from away” was a theme through many of her discussions in the Learning Circle.

Catherine went on to say that it had the relaxed environment of a coffee shop:

*It was just a relaxed environment. You know, everyone was just friendly, it was just like, the only thing that was missing was the ambience of the coffee house or something. I mean, and there was no coffee, but it was just that relaxed environment. Like that nice environment you have like if people were sitting around having a cup of coffee. But there was no coffee, there was nothing, but that environment was still there.*

For Catherine, the room where the Learning Circle meetings were conducted was regarded as a safe place. Throughout Learning Circle discussions and in interviews, she used the word “calm” to describe the classroom. As she explained:

*It’s just a calmness. As I keep mentioning, once that door was shut ... when the door was shut it was just the world was removed and it was just a real calmness in there.*

This contrasted with Catherine’s descriptions of the university context outside of the room, where “we were stressed out.”

## **HELEN: “THE SANCTUARY”**

Like Catherine, Helen was a mature-age student. She was a single mother with two daughters – a university-aged daughter and a five year old – and a son who no longer lived at home. When Helen described the room where the Learning Circle met, she focused on her perceptions of a “safe place” where judgments would not be made. She described the room as:

*like a sanctuary. A safe place where you could go and talk about what was going on, not just in uni life, in your everyday life as well, and know that people were experiencing similar, or had experienced it, and weren’t going to judge you, were just going to give you little different strategies to help you get through everything.*

Although Helen used different words from the ones used by Catherine, she seemed to express a similar point of view – that the room represented a non-judgmental environment with opportunities to see that she was not alone in her experiences of university. She too identified the “calm” and coffee shop atmosphere that the room provided and explained that:

*Yeah, it was just a normal classroom but the atmosphere in there was like, we all left the stresses at the front door and we walked in there and we just relaxed. It was like, I mean, we didn't have cups of coffee or something like that but it was just like a really good get together where you could say anything and everyone could participate without any pressure of, oh, I'm being judged here, I'm saying the wrong thing here. It was great.*

Both Helen and Catherine seemed to feel that they could not meet the expectations of the university context. In contrast, the Learning Circle provided opportunities to meet students who, as Helen explained, “were going there ... for the same reason as you.” She compared the room used for the Learning Circle with classrooms where “you know people are there but they're not all there with the same intention that you have.” Helen suggested that the room was a place where she could combine her university-self with her outside-of-university self, rather than keeping them separate.

In separate interviews, Helen and Catherine had both suggested that the room had similarities to a coffee shop but without the coffee. Although this may have been an example of a metaphor that had been jointly constructed during times when the students were together, it seemed to imply that perceived power relations were absolved in that situation. Helen teased out this idea, saying:

*That was really good because in those meetings I got to realise that, yes, they are academics but, yes, they are real people as well. They can relate on the academic level when they have to but they can also bring it down to our level and help bring us up to the academic level. So it was sort of, okay, I don't know what to expect, they're academics, they're going to bring different terminologies, different everything else, but they're real people. They have a life, they have families, they're real people who've been there done that.*

Helen identified these opportunities to see academics as “real people” as an important way of understanding multiple perspectives on education. As she explained:

*Yes, because they could relate more about different work situations as well and stuff like that. So they're letting you in on a little bit of a secret of what life in a teaching world, an education world, is really like. It's not all being seen through rose glasses.*

For us, as the academics involved in the Learning Circle, Helen's statement highlighted the importance that she placed on the sharing of time management and stress-relief strategies. In discussions, we had shared the everyday strategies we employed in our own busy lives, including diary lists, highlighting or ticking off jobs that had been completed, and marking off time for short breaks. We had not considered that we had revealed anything out-of-the-ordinary, especially since it had been a spur of the moment decision to show our ongoing efforts to cope with the demands of busy work lives. However, our move was identified by Helen as important to her perceptions of university personnel and the broader field of education.

It appeared that, in the Learning Circle, the process of sharing strategies had enabled students like Helen to understand that the need for problem-solving – for trialling a range of strategies and finding what worked for her – was not something that she was doing in isolation. Indeed, it appeared that she was beginning to realise that she was not a “deficient” student, but was engaged in processes that were “normal.” In summing up her learning, she commented that “*You learn from people everyday, and if you stop learning then you're doing something wrong.*”

## **STACEY: “CLOSED IN ... SECURE ... THAT HOUR FOR RELAXATION”**

Stacey had arrived at university straight from school. Due to health problems, she had withdrawn from her first year of study, then she returned the following year to try study again. Like Catherine and Helen, she too had identified herself as being “*at-risk*” of failure in the university context. Stacey joined the Learning Circle with expectations that she was going “to get my questions answered.” She explained that she had returned to study with a view to accessing a broad range of services:

*So this year I decided every single thing that I could get my hand on I was going to. So the moment I heard it [about the program], I thought, right I've got to go to that. 'Cause I went*

*to a counselor and everything. I went and got everything that I could have that was free to help me.*

As a self-confessed “disorganised student” whose diary had “been sitting in plastic for six and a half months,” Stacey identified herself as needing assistance to organise her study and to gain skills that would help her be successful. Our sharing of our diaries and the organisational strategies that we used had apparently had an effect on her, as she explained:

*They [academic staff and other students] helped me, like the organisation. Seeing the way Robyn did her diary and you did yours, and this is how Helen did it, the way that I didn't have any organisation but was still to function.*

Stacey had hoped that the Learning Circle would provide specific assistance and that “If I had trouble with referencing then we could do a session on that.” As evident in the following interview excerpt, it appeared that the Learning Circle met Stacey’s expectation, but it also offered a place where she could feel “secure.”

- Stacey: If I had questions they'd get answered. But if not you could just talk and chat and relax but still be in the uni environment.
- Karen: Okay. And why was that important? Why was the sitting, relaxing, chatting, how was that different to any other place and space that you had at uni?
- Stacey: I guess because it was a classroom but it didn't feel like a classroom. It was kind of closed in so you felt secure but if you moved the desks around you could do it, whatever. The way you wanted it to be is what it was going to be.
- Karen: Okay. And in terms of the dynamic of the group, like in terms of you know the people that were there and the way that played out?
- Stacey: I learnt a lot about my friends I didn't know, I guess. You're more relaxed and not a uni student. You're just yourself.

Although Stacey did not use the specific door or sanctuary metaphors that Catherine and Helen had used, she focused on the room where the Learning Circle meetings occurred as providing an opportunity to “relax” and “be yourself.” For all three students, the room seemed significant, apparently because it was a place where they could physically remove themselves from the rest of the university environment. Even though Stacey did not explain explicitly what it was about the university environment that she found so difficult, her identification of the “room” in opposition to the rest of the university suggested that being a university student was not always a comfortable experience.

However, despite the significance that Stacey placed on the room where the meetings occurred, the perceived social space that the room afforded seemed to be a particularly important component. For Stacey, the social support included learning more about the friends she had made during the year and getting to know academics. She explained that:

*I guess for me it was we saw you in a different light. Like, you weren't the head of early childhood. She wasn't the head of primary. You were just Karen and Robyn in a room with us having a chat.*

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT**

The three students – Catherine, Helen and Stacey – who were interviewed about their involvement in the first year support program, highlighted a similar set of Learning Circle characteristics as important to their survival within the university context. In particular, social support, getting to know other

students and academics, and the safety of the room where the Learning Circle was conducted were emphasised as making a difference.

According to the three students, they joined the Learning Circle because they needed to find ways of changing their perceptions of themselves as learners in a new context, the university context. They recognised that the context was an important barrier and that finding a safe place was important to overcoming their feelings of failure. It was as though they saw a need to reinvent themselves socially and academically – to find ways of feeling safe and to become successful students in the context of the university.

We know that the similarities that were evident in the students' talk probably originated in the discussions that they shared during Learning Circle meetings as well as during the time they spent with each other. Additionally, we recognise that the fact that one of us was the interviewer may have helped to focus the students on positive aspects of the support program. Nevertheless, we are convinced that social support has an important role to play in helping at-risk students make the transition into university study. Despite the students' at-riskness – through feeling as though they were in an unfamiliar context, as well as being "*second chance*" students, experiencing medical problems, or being nervous or insecure about university study – they identified the building of interpersonal relationships, with other students and with academic staff, and the breaking down of perceived power relations as being instrumental in helping them stay on track with their study.

Using a range of metaphors – including the door, a sanctuary and a secure place – the students identified the physical space of the room, where the Learning Circle was conducted, as buffering them from the outside world of the university. It was as though that space provided them with a way of feeling safe and it allowed them to build connections with their home and community lives. Instead of feeling dislocated, they were able to draw on experiences from their previous contexts to solve some of the problems of their new experiences of university.

We suggest, however, that the place or space alone was not the single critical factor. Indeed, we would argue that it was probably a range of factors – including the sharing of strategies, the willingness of the students to try new strategies between Learning Circle meetings, and the processes of critical reflection – that enabled the students to transfer strengths from their lives outside university to their study. Indeed, as highlighted by Fairclough's (2001) work, we know that social context and interpersonal relations can be both constraining and enabling factors. For the students, the context of the Learning Circle helped to separate them from the pressures of study; yet it also enabled them to develop strategies that ultimately changed the ways they operated in the broader university context.

Even though at no stage did we engage in the explicit teaching of academic skills or strategies, it was apparent that the students had taken ideas away from each Learning Circle meeting and had trialled a range of these. We are aware, however, that the approach to these strategies or skills was different from the approaches often offered to tertiary students at the beginning of a semester or an academic year. In many universities, academic skills advisers or learning support units offer packages of seminars, to ensure that students learn skills that are regarded as necessary for engagement with university study, and make opportunities for peer mentoring available. However, the students who self-identified for the support program described in this paper were overwhelmed by the demands of university study and were not ready to take on more learning in the form of academic support; nor was the option of one-one-one peer mentoring appealing.

As was evident from the metaphors that the students used, what worked for them was the regular time and place for discussing significant events in their lives as students, and opportunities for problem-solving and critical reflection in a context that they regarded as safe. The provision of a responsive, academic-facilitated program that situates students at the centre – rather than bringing students into a regime of university established and initiated intervention – has the potential to foster student success. Although we have only considered three students, it seems that this might particularly be the case for students with rural, regional and low socio-economic backgrounds. Catherine, Helen and Stacey certainly indicated that they did not feel comfortable in the university context. In reconfiguring their place and agency in that context, they were able to build understandings and become persistent about being successful learners (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012).



The Learning Circle assisted them by providing social support, with responsive academic support embedded within the social.

The findings of this small research project suggest that social and academic support in tandem may be a useful approach to helping students cope with the demands of university study, especially when they find that the university context is an unfamiliar one. While university personnel would appear to be under pressure to ensure that students succeed and progress through their degree programs, they are also expected to keep expenditure to a minimum and, in many cases, to do more with less. These tensions can make programs like the one described here seem too personnel-intensive to be a viable option. However, our experience suggests that the supportive social context of a Learning Circle process can facilitate student success, independence and confidence. This paper clearly situates a need to re-examine existing practices within higher education and to consider the importance of place and space to students who feel dislocated from their homes and communities.

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