Curriculum, Classroom, Culture and Connectedness

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Abstract

Curriculum and pedagogy are central to many contemporary debates on fostering a successful student experience, particularly in a massified higher education sector. These themes are evident in discussions from policy level to the staffroom in many countries. Attention has been specifically directed at the transition point from 'second level' to 'higher/third level' education, resulting in the development of many initiatives and materials around the 'first year experience' ('FYE'). Central principles have been identified as curricula that engage students in their programme, modules and learning. Indeed the term 'student engagement' has evolved as a focal point of these debates as the search continues for a magic wand to tackle what are perceived to be problems of student disengagement and preparedness. Although a newer phrase in the Irish lexicon, first year experience programmes have quickly emerged which typically attempt to develop varying blends of academic and generic skills such as information literacy, student engagement, resilience and confidence, and preparedness for the workplace among others. Such widening of the curriculum has many potential benefits, but in reality, institutional and individual barriers, resistance and a lack of measurability can often result in frustrations and disappointments. Building connections, in terms of curriculum, people and structures is at the heart of a successful FYE programme.

This paper will draw on the example of the "Get Smart!" initiative, which is a bottom-up approach to integrative curriculum developed in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Dublin Institute of Technology. The initiative sits laterally across modules and attempts to form an integrating mechanism. It also looks to extend the Orientation beyond the initial few days of a student's commencement on their programme, using academic and quasi-academic elements. Over the six years of the initiative many challenges have emerged, including connecting the curriculum to the workplace, career preparation, securing staff and student buy-in, and the development of student resilience. Tellingly, the over-arching challenge of how the curriculum can be more than the 'classroom' remains largely unsolved. The paper further highlights the notion of "roles" adopted in the implementation of Get Smart! and whether these are typical of curriculum redevelopments. How can one person's passion be institutionalised into a school or faculty-wide programme? How can 'doubters' become 'doers' and how can momentum be maintained as resources dwindle? Finally, the paper presents experiences of communicating the curriculum in the context of new learners. There is considerable awareness of the abilities and expectations of the tech-savvy 'Gen. Yers' and now 'millennials'. The need to communicate differently should be driven more from the perspective that, if the curriculum is changing, shouldn't the communication and conversation vehicles similarly be re-imagined? Get Smart! has used Facebook, Twitter, ezines and a bespoke app to communicate with students in language they understand. Difficulties and opportunities will be assessed, drawn from ongoing research carried out with students as part of the management of Get Smart!

Keywords: Curriculum; connections; roles, communication, Get Smart!

Introduction

Considerable attention has been directed at the transition point from second-level education to higher-level or third-level (university/institute of technology) education. This is a result of several strands of discussion. Perhaps the most

obvious and often heated debate is often found in the staffroom; many comment regularly on students' lack of preparedness for the demands of a third-level education, and the resulting frustrations for lecturing and administration staff. While these concerns will be dealt with in this paper, and did indeed form the original impetus for the development of the programme featured in this paper (Get Smart!), they are already extensively explored by the literature. Indeed, McInnes (2001, p. 40) warns of the "danger of building a massive but trivial literature." Therefore, is important to have a deeper and more mature debate around maximising the student experience.

In taking the view that some of these wider debates are outside the remit of this paper, the author chooses to concentrate on themes of curriculum, pedagogy, building connections, and their links to a successful first-year student experience. Central to this discussion will be the importance of connections, how the connections proposed may be directed at key transition points in the student journey, and the challenges and results that may be encountered. It may usefully and rightly be asked: what's so different about first-year? Do students who join a programme after first-year not assume similar challenges of self-efficacy and engagement? This is a very valid debate, but is outside the scope of this paper. In discussing the theme of connecting students, of course it is important to view the debate from the provider side as well as the consumer side. The role of the lecturer could be considered under fire to some extent in the rising tide of 'flipped' classrooms, MOOCS and online/blended learning. What role is there for academics in re-imagining the curriculum and building connections and how can the curriculum be more than the classroom in a digital age?

The paper presents the example of Get Smart!, a first-year initiative developed by the author in the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism, D.I.T. which looks to address levels of student disengagement, embed academic skills such as information literacy and build connections. Such connections include: connecting the curriculum to identified graduate attributes, the workplace and to students' programme of study; connecting students with each other through managed team-building and socialisation; connecting the student to some elements of self-development. All of these elements have the over-arching aim of helping the student to become an engaged, independent and active learner.

This is in line with D.I.T.'s range of strategies to enhance engagement at the first-year level, e.g. the STEER (Student Transition: Expectations, Engagement, Retention) initiative and the DIT Strategy on Student Engagement. Also pointing the way is The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2012). In fact, much of Get Smart!'s work pre-dates these strategies.

Transition and engagement in a massified higher education sector

The growth in third-level education in Ireland has been extraordinary. The HEA (2011, p. 31) states that the participation rate has risen from 5% in 1960 to 65% in 2010. Walshe (2015, p. 8) puts the current participation rate at 56%

and points to significant growth ahead. Such growth has occurred from a range of factors, but the Access & widening participation debates and policies have had a central role. These participation rates have, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to an increased drop-out rate. Around one in six of those who commence a third-level programme do not continue into second year (Donnelly 2014, p. 1), although this figure varies from one discipline and college to another. This picture is mirrored elsewhere. In a U.K. study of 3,000 students, Foster et al. (2011) (as cited in Xuereb, 2015 p. 206) concluded that approximately one third of first-years had "doubts," described by Xuereb (2015. p. 205) as "seriously considering terminating one's studies". Yorke and Longden's study (2008) is hugely valuable in uncovering a wide range of determinants and barriers to a successful first-year transition in the U.K. context, as is Redmond, Quin, Devitt and Archbold's ongoing Irish study (2011).

Understanding of transition

Much valuable literature now exists to aid our understanding and provoke our thoughts on issues around transition. Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding and Rose (2010, p. 13) point to the "reconceptualistion" of the transition process and its dimensions. Hussey and Smith (2010 p. 157, 158, 159, 160) present a framework for broadening understanding of transition centered on transitions in knowledge, autonomy, and approaches to learning and social cultural integration. This offers many different connections and challenges. However, it is still crucial to manage these transitions along various points that punctuate the student journey.

This paper concentrates on the specific transition point from second to third-level education, the most obvious point of transition but also arguably the most important. Many key writers have identified this point as the key transition point and highlighted students' engagement with the total first-year university/college experience as being critically linked to their likelihood of succeeding (Crabtree, Roberts and Tyler 2007; Mayhew, Vanderlinden and Kim 2008). However, it is important again to point out that students face many transitions, all of which can affect a successful student experience or otherwise. Interestingly, the Irish Teaching & Learning Forum's 2014/15 National Seminar Series offers 48 different seminars on all aspects of transition, chosen to support the priorities of the National Strategy for Higher Education (http://teachingandlearning.ie/national-seminar-series-2015). Such transitions also include undergraduate to postgraduate study, college to work, work to college, national to international study and international to national study. All of these themes benefit from continued research and focus on literature around preparedness, student retention, engagement and success.

Moving beyond retention as a metric of successful transition. We can see that it is important to adopt a broad approach to the term transition. It is equally important to view it as more than an exercise in preventing or lessening 'drop-out'. Such a narrow focus on retention or drop-out at the end of the continuum detracts from the need to manage all students' transition as an embedded process. Managing transition solely from the retention perspective is too

narrow. Engagement and indeed disengagement take many forms, and it is important to drill down to the everyday, such as a "general lack of interest in academic work" (Lowe & Cook 2014, p. 1).

It is also notable that there is much less focus and research on students who are highly motivated on entry and become disengaged for a variety of reasons, and thus can similarly fail to make a successful 'transition' to third-level. The author would argue that metrics such as retention statistics and indeed performance/failure should be treated as a by-product of engagement rather than a specific target. Metrics do not provide a full picture. How do we measure levels of student empowerment and the extent to which they feel connected and enabled to become active learners, the type of learners and individuals proposed in Hussey and Smith's conceptualisation above (ibid.)? Building a connected and supportive learning environment requires focus on a myriad of aspects of transition and engagement, many of which cannot be measured.

Dimensions of engagement

Linking to Bloom (1956), Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, p, 62-63), discussed the broad dimensions of engagement, encompassing feelings of 'emotional' involvement (sense of belonging and enjoyment) as well as 'behavioural' engagement (attendance at class, supportive behaviour towards the lecturer) and 'cognitive engagement' (invested in their own learning, seeking challenge). The author would also point to a very specific aspect of engagement which could usefully be added: Procedural engagement e.g. students opening their email and staying engaged with the processes of the department such as exam registration.

All these dimensions of engagement require differing strategies and management. Interestingly, often overlooked and of course central to any debate on a connected curriculum is the aspect of curriculum engagement. Are students involved in the design of curriculum in general, or first-year curriculum and supports in particular? Although there has been increasing discussion of the "student voice" (Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding, and Rose, 2010, p. 13), the author's experience is that students are consulted much less often than other key stakeholders such as key industry informants and the competitor set. MacVaugh, Jones and Auty (2013, p 770), also point out that curriculum is often designed 'behind closed doors,' certainly as students see it.

Can students expect to feel 'ownership' over something they were not involved in developing? It is acknowledged that many students embark on a third-level programme with little specific preparation. A deeper level of analysis has emerged with studies focusing on variables such as gender (Yorke 1988, as cited in Lowe & Cook, 2003, p. 55) and age (Johnston 1994, as cited in Lowe et al, 2003, p. 56). Such directions in the research are extremely valuable, even to merely reinforce existing results. Entry expectations of first-year students are increasingly hard to collate and

tabulate, however there is no doubt that unrealistic expectations, both pre and post entry are linked to disengagement (Lowe et al 2003, p.75).

Two focus groups on student engagement carried out by the author and colleagues in April 2014 sought feedback from first-year undergraduates on their expectations, experiences and perceptions of college, pre and post entry. In discussions on non-attendance at lectures, responses included "classes are too early - 9am starts,, "working part-time," "will not go in late...if the lecture is two/three hours long," "depends on the quality of the lecturer," and "no routine." In response to the aspects of prior expectations and whether it resulted in poor engagement and transition difficulties, comments included "college is an eye-opening experience," "school does not prepare you," and "…thrown in at the deep end." Positively, however, some students also felt that college was "more mature" and "less pressure." Such insights are valuable and interesting with implications for pre-entry marketing, the Orientation process, tutoring systems and building a culture of attendance. However, they are too individualised to manage realistically. Indeed, any notion of providing tailored programmes of transition to students is an "unlikely luxury" (Hussey et al. 2010, p. 162).

Unfortunately, it would seem that many staff see the root causes of disengagement as lying outside their control. A questionnaire carried out by the author in February 2104 as part on ongoing school review research received responses very much in line with those put forward by Wallace (2014, p. 347) whereby non engagement behaviour is seen to be a characteristic of the age group in question and to some extent someone else's responsibility.

First-year initiatives and their role in building a connected curriculum

The introduction raised the issue of the specific merits of favouring transition to first-year as the most critical point for re-imagining the curriculum. Lowe and Cook's study (2003, p. 53) confirmed that students' inbuilt study habits and perceptions (i.e. from secondary school) persist to the end of the first semester of college. So there is a certain element of "undoing" implied in developing first-year initiatives. The author has reviewed many initiatives and materials which are now in place around supporting the transition to first-year both in Ireland and internationally. Indeed, the term "first-year experience" is now firmly implanted in the Irish lexicon. Such programmes typically attempt to develop academic and generic skills such as information literacy, student engagement, resilience and confidence and preparedness for the workplace. Such widening of the curriculum is of course welcome, and has many potential benefits (Hussey & Smith, 2010, p. 161, 162), but can be haphazard and unmeasurable. Moreover the word "potential" as ascribed to benefits is key. Many factors interfere with the success of such programmes and can even prevent their effectiveness completely. Specific interventions are also popular (e.g. contacting students with poor attendance), but reactive approaches by themselves are not sufficient. A broader perspective is required with deliberate connections between all elements.

Constructing a programme to support first-year transition

The Get Smart! initiative was developed on the underpinnings of key transferable/generic skills. The impetus was the experience of staff that the student cohort had a changed level of skills in a range of areas. The concerns were a mixture of anecdote by staff, and some more empirical evidence that preparedness had shifted (unpublished research carried out by the author as part of a School Review 2007-8). Original concerns centered on academic skills: students' lack of ability and confidence to use library resources, lack of knowledge as to which were acceptable internet sources to use, and poor writing skills. Although academic skills are only one facet of the scaffolding required, they are often the most tangible one, where the results of improvements and interventions might be at least observed if not measured. Building connections was a key aspect of the development and roll-out of Get Smart! Connections were made with other key stakeholders in D.I.T. such as careers teams, library services and retention staff.

Categorising or even explaining Get Smart! is not always convenient as it is multi-directional. The new raft of terminology which has emerged in the last decade, and must be grappled with in curriculum, programme and support design and delivery also makes it difficult to typify the initiative. 'Transferable' skills, 'generic skills' 'graduate attributes' and 'academic skills' are all now frequently discussed by programme committees. We can see clearly that these are not the same things: Some are more higher-order than others, and some are conceptual, others more practical. Do they fall on a continuum, how connected are they? The development of Get Smart! was initially done along the lines of the approach supported by MacVaugh, Jones & Auty (2013, p. 757) as concentrating on academic skills. But clearly the debate and indeed the initiative should go much wider. Xuereb (2015, p. 209) points to the importance of students developing "self-efficacy." Academic skills are not sufficient. Integrated skills supports to enhance academic ability are not sufficient. A wider view of connecting the curriculum, including aspects of managing emotions and motivations are required. Robbins, Oh, Le & Button 2009, (as cited in Xuereb, 2015, p. 209) identified that academic skills are not sufficient for a successful academic transition, but that interventions should also be put in place for emotional, social and motivational engagement, all aspects pointed to earlier in the paper.

Stand-alone or embedded initiatives: which model works better?

Such skills can be taught separately such as in a "learning to Learn" type module. Indeed, this can be very effective, giving an element of specialisation to the delivery and assimilation of such skills, which can subsequently be assessed or at least deployed in modules. Jones (2009) debated this in a range of dimensions citing useful arguments. However, arguments in favour of embedding these skills can be more powerful. Misko 1995 (as cited in MacVaugh et al. 2013, p. 758) cites better transferability and students perceiving that the acquisition of such skills is more important as it carries assessment marks (Biggs 1999, cited in MacVaugh et al., 2013, p. 758). Taking a student perspective rather than a pedagogical perspective also

reminds us that students generally do not want to undertake any work that is deemed "extra," i.e. not contributing marks and requiring time commitments outside the formal timetable. This was unfortunately, but realistically, an underpinning in the development of Get Smart!

Generally however, it can be concluded, and supported by the author, that it makes for better pedagogy to connect the skills to disciplinary knowledge and learning development. MacVaugh's comparative study (2013) of first-year approaches to developing such skills through both an integrated format and a stand-alone format, presented significant and clear results in favour of integrated approaches. These implications should not be overlooked in curriculum planning.

Starting at the start: Orientation's role in successful transition and building connections. All the prior discussion clearly points to the need for a good start. Typically, incoming students' first experiences of their programme and institution are at Orientation/Induction. This is increasingly identified as one of the key points of transition in the student journey. "The potential for enthusiastic engagement in the curricula should be harnessed in the critical first days of the first weeks of the first year, thereby promoting a sense of belonging, so often missing for the contemporary learner" (Kift & Nelson 2005, p. 229)

 For years there was an excellent orientation/induction day in D.I.T.'s School of Hospitality Management and Tourism. In attempting to point towards graduate attributes required on exit, Get Smart! has revised a number of Orientation components on entry. Techniques such as mind-mapping have been used to aid new students' understanding of how all modules inter-relate, as well as their own role in maximizing learning through self-management, professional responsibility, group management and information management. It is based on understanding that giving students the skills to derive knowledge is as important as the knowledge itself. Get Smart! has attempted to view and roll-out Orientation more as a process than a stand-alone event, supporting the 'integrated' model of curriculum development and engagement. A more social and sociable element has been introduced to attempt to achieve the emotional engagement referred to earlier in the paper.

Surveys carried out by the author in November 2013 (n=111) and November 2014 (n=138) to assess feedback on students' experience of and satisfaction with their Orientation, found that constructing an engaging Orientation is a finely balanced act. Despite 50% of respondents being "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with Orientation as a preparation for their programme, it is clear that students want the emphasis on the non-academic elements, less information, and more peer and staff-student engagement. One student branded the "academic bits" ('Learning to Learn/ Get Smart! sessions) as "boring". Another urged "more sports and games". This was typical of the social approach they expected, and indeed the need to view socialisation as a key aspect of engagement.

The skills approach: embedding information literacy skills

Concentrating in the first semester, information literacy Get Smart! seminars are then integrated into the tutorials of all modules which are scheduled during the relevant semester. This takes the form of basic library skills, building confidence in library searching and database management, referencing, citing and plagiarism among others. Critically, modules draw assessment/module marks from the embedded Get Smart! component. Embedding skills is, as debated above, not a new suggestion, but in the context of Get Smart! it can be restated. This is also supported by online quizzes. Increased deployment of assessment support materials and transferable marking templates was encouraged, supporting Hussey et al.'s view of such templates as "guide posts" for the autonomous learner. (2010, p. 158).

While no-one can argue against the case for improving academic skills such a writing, information and digital literacy, this has opened a Pandora's box to some extent. Not only do students and lecturers have different perspectives on the importance of good academic writing and what it constitutes, lecturing teams themselves often argue the case. Different disciplines and modules/subjects have varying roles, levels of importance and perspectives on the extent to which good writing skills are important. Barriers identified in Itua, Coffey, Merryweather, Norton and Foxcroft's study (2014, pp. 315, 316, 317) included lack of time and confidence, limited experiences of extended writing, inability to read, understand and synthesise academic texts and "jargon," and referencing.

Building social and emotional engagement. Get Smart! workshops each year further attempt to inter-relate modules by combining module lecturers, students and guests in a fun and engaging manner, tailored towards career awareness, professional and personal planning. Get Smart!. while not a longitudinal study in the methodological sense of the word, has consistently evaluated its elements and success every year. Thus a broad picture has been built up.

 Student feedback from the workshops included comments such as "Get Smart! was inspirational and motivating", "fab!" and "extremely useful." A bottom-up approach. Get Smart! was referred to as evolving from a 'bottom-up' approach. There is less evidence of debate on the merits or otherwise of adopting a top-down or bottom-up approach to developing skills modules and linking them to curriculum planning. This term has been used in the literature in a number of guises. e.g Kift (2008, as cited in Wood, 2010, p. 32) sees 'bottom up' as being broadly student-oriented, while 'top down' points to the need for institutional actions and supports. But in this specific context, the term 'bottom-up" denotes the simmering of ideas from front-line lecturing staff which were then consolidated, formulated into a programme with a number of other hugely valuable inputs and presented to Management.

Difficulties and challenges of building a first-year initiative

It has become clear in Get Smart! that engagement and ownership are key to the longevity of such initiatives. The need for this 'buy-in' becomes even more critical, but also more difficult to maintain as time progresses.

Reconceiving the lecturer's role

For many years, the lecturer's role was perceived as being one primarily concerned with the transmission of knowledge and skills so that students could succeed in exams (Owen 1979, as cited in Boylan, O'Keeffe, O'Rawe, 2011, p1). In re-imagining the curriculum perhaps we also need to re-imagine our own role. The shift from "controllers of the classroom" to "influencers" (Siemens 2010, as cited in Boylan et al. 2011, p.2) may sound somewhat trite, but in fact it is at the core of changing to a 'learning to learn' culture.

Institutional & individual. Resistance has been observed by the author from a number of directions in the development and operation of Get Smart! Evidence from the literature indicates that this is common. McGoldrick (2002, p. 18) pointed to barriers such as inflexibility and resistance on the part of colleagues arising from lack of resources and "managerialism". Get Smart! saw it arising from asking more of colleagues with an increasingly over-burdened workload, and some conflict with professional relationships and autonomy. Lecturers value academic integrity, and in some cases can see skills aspects as a form of "dumbing down."

Lack of measurability of the specific outputs of a programme such as this, and therefore perhaps its value is viewed by the author as a challenge. It is important to review arguments presented earlier in the paper against retention statistics being held to be the over-arching target, as budgets tighten and what cannot be measured easily may fall from favour.

Changing the focus of transition to the pre-entry stage

A key flaw of many first-year initiatives is that they have a sole focus on the student post-entry. Successful programmes work to engage students pre-entry. Open days to meet students and lecturers, ezines and Facebook communication are all valuable, but a more personalised approach would not just add value, but help set manageable expectations. But expectations must be set realistically by all stakeholders. Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding and Rose (2010, p. 12) point to the mismatch between students' previous educational experiences and academic expectations. They highlight that academics do not take account of students' history of rote learning and prior preoccupation with model answers, as an example. This has been a key lesson learnt in the journey through Get Smart!

Such frustrations and disappointments can be expected in the early stages, but if evident repeatedly, clearly point to the need for a change in culture and the learning environment. Staff are not exempt from this. The question was posed at the start of the paper: How can 'doubters' become 'doers' and how

can one person's passion be institutionalised? Building connections has been reasonably successful, changing culture much more difficult. The author would like to be able to say that Get Smart! is embedded in the curriculum, but perhaps it is truer to say that it sits alongside. In such a position, it requires more than determination to maintain its momentum.

Communication and conversations: rethinking practices

Students' methods of engagement in third level education are very different to those of a decade ago (Cloete, de Villiers & Roodt 2009). There are a number of factors impacting on these changes in students' profiles, expectations and willingness to engage. It is normal practice that students can be more engaged with their phone in a lecture than the topic under discussion, a characteristic of a new generation of "digital natives" (Prensky 2001, p. 1, as cited in O'Rawe, 2010). Popular technologies such as wikis, blogs and podcasts are now being used for academic purposes as we search for ways to encourage active student engagement in learning. And the rise and rise of apps has rapidly found its way into the curriculum and extra curriculum supports. But what are the roles of such tools? Do they merely aid staff-student communication and student-student communication, do they help lecturers seem more relevant and current, or can they provide an interface for better engagement? In summary, can such tools actually support and enhance the learning environment and build connections? In employing such tools, Get Smart! has found a contradiction in that these digitally competent generations have in fact less willingness to applying these skills in what they perceive to be an academic context (O'Rawe, 2010).

Get Smart! has experimented with a range of communication modes, both formal and informal. An ezine provides programme-related information from study skills and features on current students activities, connects to Facebook, and offers prizes. In 2014 an app was launched to help first-years engage better with their programme and selected industry sector, from Orientation to year end.

A survey by the author in November 2014 to assess uptake and usage of the app found that only 28% of first years had downloaded the app from either Google Play or the App Store. Students cited technical difficulties and procrastination as factors, but a large cohort (41%) also claimed that they did not know there was an app thereby, pointing again to the need for continuous staff and student motivation to build a connected curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the critical, and increasingly complex, area of transition and how it may be better managed through a wider approach to connecting the curriculum. The lack of empirical and evaluative research into measurable benefits of connecting the curriculum and building a first-year experience can mean that not all stakeholders are convinced that it is worth moving from the status quo, and investing the considerable resources needed. In this debate, Get Smart! does not contribute any diagnostic tools.

However, what it may contribute is a first-hand, longitudinal observation of the journeys involved. These journeys relate both to the student's transition and its multiple dimensions, the journey of the lecturer in perhaps reinterpreting their role, and to the need for a cultural shift in school and faculties. There are many difficulties in building a model that can be transferable. The many variables and dimensions mean that personalised transition programmes are not yet practical.

A FYE programme should not be seen a goal in itself, but it is very easy to slip into that mode. This is where connections become paramount; Collaboration between departments and support services, connecting the first-year curriculum to graduate attributes and outcomes, connecting the development of academic skills to generic and transferable skills, connecting pre-entry expectations to post entry realizations and perceptions, connecting the student voice to the development of curriculum. And, not forgetting that pedagogy must have a role to play. This is an ambitious task, but it is vital that this culture of connections is developed. It is too easy to approach this debate from a deficit perspective. However, this limited view gives no inclusion of the student voice, and the bigger debate around empowering students to be autonomous learners as they make their difficult transitions to, and through, their higher level education.

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