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EXPLORING LEARNING CONTEXTS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCESS, LEARNING CAREERS AND IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores student experiences in the learning context of an enabling program at an Australian university. Access and equity have long been policy goals and institutional ambitions in Australian universities. Enabling programs are an institutional response to bringing in those who otherwise would not have the opportunity to attend university. In this paper, we present findings from a qualitative study that explores how students who participated in the Monash Access Program negotiate and reconcile the idea of university study with the actualities of becoming a university student. Pedagogies in enabling programs are organised around supporting students to develop the capabilities to know themselves as learners and to experience connections to a learning community and thus, the institution. This paper, drawing on research into student experiences in such programs, illuminates the component characteristics of such an enabling pedagogy.

KEYWORDS: higher education, access, equity, widening participation, pedagogy

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Introduction

Widening participation in higher education is a curriculum and policy response by Australian universities to provide more open access to prospective students who would otherwise be locked out of higher education. Such a response has a long history in Australia: Australia's first university, University of Sydney, founded in 1850, was established in order to enable access to higher education for those "unable to make the long journey to England in order to take up a university place" (Gale & Parker, 2013, p. 5). Australia continues to be seen as a leader in its policy response to widening higher education participation (Gale & Parker 2013; James 2007). Yet, institutions have significant freedom in how they ensure the participation of underrepresented groups, resulting in the offering and delivery of a variety of enabling education programs. Gale and Parker (2013) suggest that the various programs can be categorized as either targeted student support strategies that fall outside of teaching programs (such as child care and housing support) or teaching and learning strategies, often focusing on supporting students in their first year of university. This paper provides a view into the student experience of one university's approach to enabling education, a teaching and learning strategy.

Monash University, located in Melbourne, Australia, is a member of the Group of Eight (Go8), a coalition of Australia's top research-intensive universities. Monash University's Access Program (MAP) was first offered in 2014 as an alternative admission opportunity to students who had experienced educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantage more often than not affects equity groups that are routinely absent in Australian universities. For example, people with high socioeconomic status (SES) are three times more likely to attend university than those with low SES (James 2007). The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, 2008) found in spite of increased participation in university study, indigenous people, those from low SES (working-class), people from rural and remote communities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups and people with disabilities remain underrepresented in Australian universities. The MAP course is aimed at providing an avenue into university for those students in the underrepresented groups who do not meet admission requirements. Principally MAP seeks to prepare the underprepared with the intention to make ways for the underrepresented to successfully participate in the opportunities afforded through a university education.

This paper will present data from student experiences of MAP, detailing their expectations of university and the enabling course, and their actual experience of the course. Specifically, the paper reports on the teaching and learning, the pedagogies that make the transition to university study possible and achievable. Student participants reveal what they identify as central to and constitutive of a transitional pedagogy.

Context

MAP is an enabling program aimed at providing adults with an admission track into undergraduate studies. MAP is a non-award course offered over two semesters that introduces students to the expectations of university study, and provides instruction in academic writing and mathematical reasoning. These units, along with a first-year elective unit made available by participating faculties, iteratively step the student into the cultures of studying and being at the university. The course is an assisted (no tuition fees) pathway into higher education, thus removing the financial barrier for students seeking access.

As such, MAP fits into the discourse of equity, long present in Australian discussions of access to higher education. Equity was formally described in a landmark paper, A Fair

Chance for All, by the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) in 1990:

> The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of the society as a whole. (p.2)

Gale and Parker (2013) show that proportional representation is still the goal: since 25 per cent of the population of Australia is low SES, so too should the population of higher education. Yet in 2011, the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE, 2012) revealed that only 17 per cent of commencing students at Australian universities were low SES. The numbers were worse for the Go8 universities of which Monash is a member: only 9.56 per cent of the student populations at Go8 institutions were from the five target groups (people who are Indigenous, people from low SES, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with a disability, and people from regional and remote areas) (DIISRTE, 2012).

In some ways, enabling programs in higher education attempt to address a lack of equity in education that manifests during primary and secondary schooling. The Organisation of Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) (2007) showed that the relationship between socio-economic background and educational outcomes was stronger in Australia than in other similar countries. Schooling in Australia is stratified with parents with higher incomes often sending their children to private schools, in search of quality education. This is most pronounced in secondary schooling. In Australia, 41 per cent of secondary students attend private schools, this includes non-government primary and secondary schools (Rowe 2017). Gale and Parker (2013) claim that "where once government schooling was the norm for the vast majority of Australians, it is in danger of becoming a residual system for students who cannot meet private school selection criteria" (p.7). Thus, the schools that students attend matter, when considering equity and access to higher education. The most significant indicators of progression from school to higher education are students' SES and the secondary school they attended (Gale & Parker, 2017).

Enabling programs in higher education are thus especially crucial in countries where inequity in earlier schooling is prevalent. James (2007) lauds enabling higher education programs as both important for the individuals who undertake them (offering such benefits as increased social status and career development) and for Australian society, which benefits from increased cohesion and social justice.

Literature Review

The education of adults is premised upon recognising their lived experiences. Knowles' (1984) identified principles of adult learning that include; a recognition that adults have an independent self-concept; that they possess life experiences to draw upon; and are generally intrinsically motivated. The teaching and learning in MAP is underpinned by such principles of adult learning, and are further augmented by a sociohistorical approach that responds to the factors, both personal and social, that have prevented MAP students from accessing university level education. Specifically, the sociohistorical (Rose, 2007) and relational (Llewellyn, 2011; Vaandering, 2014) frameworks highlight how contextual and personal circumstances operate to limit educational opportunities and participation and their redress are central to the teaching and learning design and delivery of MAP.

What emerges in this grounding is a focus on access and participation. Access refers to both admission into the university context, which is premised on past educational

achievement, and the ability to access sufficient resources to fully participate once admitted. The likelihood of admission is determined far before any application is submitted whereby prior educational experiences by underrepresented groups often work explicitly and implicitly to "foreclose their educational aspirations" (Harwood, Hickey-Moody, McMahon and O'Shea, 2017, p. 13). These are the students that Rose (2007) proclaims live much of their lives in "an educational underclass." Disrupting this trajectory of exclusion is a key objective in enabling programs such as MAP.

Rose (2007) uses the metaphor of conversation, and specifically 'entering the conversation' to illuminate how successful participation in tertiary education is dependent upon explicit skills and dispositions. For Rose (2007) these skills and dispositions include the capabilities to competently engage with ideas and texts, and to persist through sustained effort to participate in the 'conversation'. As an organising concept, the metaphor of 'entering the conversation' involves both the person and the institution. Institutionally, Rose (2007) highlights the place of pedagogy and how students feel, relate to and experience, the academic knowledge, the educational institution, their peers (fellow students) and their teachers/lecturers. Those whose educational aspirations were or have been foreclosed as a result of class, status, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability encounter structural and subsequently personal barriers and impediments to participation in further and higher learning and the opportunities that follow. Participation is therefore dependent upon a deliberative pedagogy that makes transition into university possible and does so in ways that equip students with the resources and dispositions to not only enter but to participate in the conversations of knowledge. Enabling those who feel that they do not belong or indeed have a right to be at university requires an explicit pedagogy that paves the way for students to access resources, both external to, and internal within themselves to participate in, and take advantage of the affordances of a university education.

Methodology

Student experiences within the learning context of an enabling program at an Australian university represent the key data of in this paper. Both authors of this paper lead and teach within this program; as such, the study was conducted as practice-close research. Practice-close is a term used in the health sciences. It is qualitative methodology that acknowledges the importance of practice (Baumbusch, 2010). The term highlights a shift from viewing the researcher as an impartial observer to acknowledging the researcher as someone who interacts closely with research participants (Lykkeslet & Gjengedal, 2007). As a consequence, practice-close research is focused upon gaining understandings the experiences of those the researchers work with. In this context of enabling education, the focus is on understanding the experiences of students seeking an admission pathway to university. The research explores the students' experience of becoming a university student, whilst simultaneously reflecting upon the pedagogic practices that shape the enabling program. It is practice-close, because the findings affect the future delivery of MAP and have implications for future students seeking opportunities for admission to university study. Unlike action-based research, the research participants as past-students are not affected by how the findings may reshape the pedagogies of the MAP course.

The study focused primarily on a single year group but is also influenced and informed by the experiences of teaching students in previous years. In the 2017 MAP group there were 24 students who began the program in April 2017 and 18 who completed the program in September 2017.

The data collected focused on two aspects of the students' experience – the *idea of being at university* and the *process of becoming a university student*. Data was collected at three

specific time periods - before the program began; three weeks into the program; and a month after the program finished - and through three different methods. Firstly, before classes commenced, students completed an interview form in which they identified their educational goals and possible impediments to completing MAP. Secondly, for part of the students' first assignment, due three weeks into the program, students wrote a 600-word reflection about their own experience of being and becoming a student and coming to university. All 24 MAP students completed these two research activities.

Finally, once students finished the program, they were invited to participate in focus groups or individual interviews in which they were asked to reflect on their expectations of university, the reality of becoming a university student and their experience of MAP. To date, eleven students have participated in the interviews.

As the study relies upon a practice-close methodology, data about the teaching, learning and assessment practices are premised upon our own reflections which emerged from interacting with students in formal and informal ways within and outside of the classroom. To counter a potential blinding effect, the research relies upon the students' own words and the subsequent use of our observations and reflections to further understand their perspective.

Findings

The data generated in this study explored student perspectives on making the decision to forge a path to university and all this entailed. The data selected and presented focuses on the students' experiences and the impact of participating in MAP.

The idea of readiness for university

Most MAP students identified that the decision to attend university was not spontaneous. It was something one student who had left school early said "always circulated" (David[1]) in his mind. Timing, in terms of where study fit in their lives, was crucial. The students listed many reasons why the timing for university study had not been right in the past: immaturity, family and other life commitments, overwhelming doubt, lack of encouragement, indecision, institutional barriers, along with health issues. Penelope wrote, "I always knew that I would go to university, the only question I needed to answer was 'when would I be truly ready?' For Penelope and the other students, the answer was now, and hence they applied to do the MAP course. In the initial interview students announced their commitment to becoming a university student. Most named university study as their number one priority, exemplified in Lina's comments: "I have wanted to do this for a while and I know that I am prepared and it will be a priority above other aspects of my life." Students in the enabling MAP course had an idea of themselves as committed and ready.

Brandon, a qualified electrician, wanted to undertake university studies but was unsure about how best to obtain access. For him deciding to undertake MAP was strategic: he wanted to use MAP to "turn on the learning side again." What this meant for students like Brandon was a "refresher" course to develop skills such as academic writing, mathematical reasoning, group presentation skills, study skills, and time management. As David put it he wanted a "head start" for the rest of his proposed university study. This an explicit intention that the design of MAP, as an enabling course, is aimed to achieve.

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[1] All names used are pseudonyms

MAP students are underprepared and underrepresented, and the course seeks to build a path for them to access university study. Yet all the MAP students in this study recognised they had skills, knowledge and abilities that would allow them to study at university. Most students named their varied life skills, the ones that "cannot be taught in a classroom" (Josh), as the source of their confidence. Yet equally students did not always feel they belonged and read this as a personal limitation or failing. Terri admitted that she had, in the past, seen her lack of university education as evidence of a personal failing or deficiency: "It took me ten years of learning in different contexts, such as the workforce, to believe that I am a good learner and with the exclusion of becoming an astronaut, I can learn anything if I put in the time and effort." Most students imagined themselves as fully capable of being university students.

Barriers to participation in university study

Being ready or committed did not, of course, preclude having doubts. Some students were treading very unfamiliar water. As Sally, a sole parent, wrote, no one had been to university in her family and, after high school, "it did not seem like a huge disappointment to anyone that I would not be going." Lana, too, was the youngest of 14 siblings and would be the first to attend university. Jess was racked with doubt about her own abilities before starting the program, asking "Could I do it? Am I smart enough? Is it too late?" The first weeks as university students did not necessarily alleviate the doubts. Dennis wrote, three weeks in, that "my anxiety has gone through the roof and I feel out of my depth." Brandon found resonance with words in our readings: "I feel like I'm in a foreign land, an Academic world that I don't understand. Rose (2007, p. 54) writes 'I was encountering a new language-the language of the academy-and was trying to find my way around in it.'" Brandon writes "This is me." For many students, there were occasional feelings of uncertainty about their identity as university students. These feelings would change over the time in the MAP course. Using Rose (2007) as instructive in the design of the MAP course as well as a resource for students provided a way for students to consciously recognise their intentions in pursuing a path to university level studies. It also allowed them to reflect upon the barriers they faced both structurally (external) and personally (internal).

The process of becoming a university student

The ideas of being at university balanced with the actualities of participating in university studies involved a process of becoming and identifying with being a university student. In this section, students expressed their developing understandings of the process of becoming a university student, the importance of the collective experience in this stage of becoming and the pedagogies that facilitated these transitions and transformations.

The students' understandings evolved during their five months of participating in MAP as university students – experiencing university as a place and site for learning, and of their own abilities and interests as students. Terri's understanding of the purpose of university evolved from using her studies as a path to a specific career to recognising university as "a place for personal and intellectual growth and I know I will learn life skills." Penelope on the other hand recalls thinking of university as the "place where all the really, really smart people go" and now realising that they are "just here to learn and I can learn at that same level." Both Terri and Penelope, by participating in university study through MAP demystified university as something separate from them. Similar feelings were echoed by many students, and equally surprised them, particularly around their own capacity to study and their interest in learning. Nathaniel shared his reflection: "The effect that university has had on me thus far has been something I never expected; I'm finding myself looking forward

to class, I'm finding that I'm actually motivated to perform well as opposed to just looking to satisfy the teacher's requirements and above all I'm finding that my attitude towards myself, towards other people and towards my daily surroundings are changing for what I believe to be the better." Students identified changes in themselves such as becoming more positive, feeling pride, taking ownership in their decisions and acquiring an openness to learn. Issy referred to the joy she felt as her outlook on the world and herself shifted through what she called "my educational transformation." Students recognised and embraced the evolution in their self-understandings and their new-found appreciations of the social worlds they inhabit.

University was seen as a place uniquely suited to those social worlds. Some students saw themselves as being linked into a communal quest for knowledge and understanding. The university was seen as crucial since for such a quest, "a space is required. An institution. One filled with all the minds that wish to meet all the others, just to share notes" (Bill). For other students, they expected university study would allow them to build connections outside the university, to "contribute to society to help make it a better place" (Terri). These students had an idea that being at university provided them with resources to be active members of a variety of communities - both within and without the university campus.

Pedagogies of belonging

In the classroom, the social contexts of learning in MAP allowed the students to recognise that everyone was there with similar goals. Jenny voiced her appreciation this way: "Being in a class with people in the same situation, I believe it to be easier to make connections with fellow students and not feel like I'm the odd one out, that in return has made it easier to find my place in this new world and has instituted a feeling of belonging as well as a sense of being able to accomplish this course successfully." That sense of belonging was reiterated by most participants. Students felt connected to and supported by their peers in MAP. MAP, as Sally said, "prepared us to belong" and James recognised that they were "teaching each other." Students voiced appreciation for the close relationships with both their peers and the teaching staff. This was contrasted with the lack of unity seen amongst students and teaching staff in the elective units they undertook in the faculties into which they were seeking admission, after completing MAP. Partly due to this recognition that the culture in MAP was different to the rest of the university, some students only felt "truly a student" once they started and were comfortable in studying in their elective unit. This also resulted in others being worried what next year would bring without MAP. For many, they came to identify a sense of connection and belonging as the key benefits of MAP - not, as they first believed, the skills they developed within the program.

Pedagogies of becoming

MAP as an enabling program is premised upon a staged immersion into the cultures of university study. The pedagogies are focused on developing within students the skills needed for university study and this practical focus was appreciated by students. As Michelle stated, "MAP was the bridging I needed." With a focus on such specific yet necessary skills as referencing, these underprepared students grew to feel "better prepared than the kids" they encountered in their elective classes. And yet much more important than skill development were the pedagogies in MAP, organised around supporting students to develop the capabilities to know themselves as learners and to experience connections to a learning community and thus, the university institution. The program unfolds iteratively, with small achievements creating platforms to build further capabilities for progress and eventual success. As Josh explained: "They are slowly taking their hand away from us, removing one

floaty from us and we are learning how to tread water with one hand rather than just being thrown straight in." For Josh, the support was necessary at the beginning of MAP but the preparation allowed him and others to feel comfortable with the gradual withdrawal of that direct support.

Important to the transitional pedagogy were assignments designed as critical reflection activities, providing insight into the process of becoming a university student at the same time that students were experiencing it. Issy, researching a topic on student transition to university, found it motivating; her research "established a newfound confidence within myself and has also given me insight on how to alleviate some of my concerns." Students frequently referred to quotations or ideas found within assigned texts such as Rose (2007) when reflecting upon their own transition experience. In doing this, they explained how what they read resonated with their understandings about their experiences inside and outside education, and their quest to access university studies.

Another pedagogy used in MAP are circle discussions. Circle pedagogy connects individual students to one another in a learning community and facilitates deeper engagement with class content and personal experiences. Each class involved a circle discussion in which students linked class material and texts to their past and present experiences, as well as to the insights shared amongst the group. Students were aware that within circle they had the responsibility and opportunity to co-construct knowledge. In the focus groups, students named this pedagogy as helping to create "a positive learning environment." Michelle discussed how the circle evolved: "You realise as the program progresses that everyone is sharing more and getting more comfortable and you see how far you've developed as a person in the course." Brandon added that being encouraged to speak in circle made it easier for him to voice his thoughts, something he previously found difficult. David noted the circle as helping him feel like he belonged, teaching him how to ask questions "without shame" and to feel comfortable in a learning environment.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, for most students who completed MAP, university was seen as a key to "unlock doors" (Josh) to futures that would otherwise not be possible or available to them. Several students mentioned how their university experience was the chance to focus on a career goal of the past, one that had been lying dormant "for a very long time" (Bill). Beyond future careers, university was seen to be a facilitator of change, allowing students to become "better versions of ourselves" (Penelope). Although recognising that being at university takes "dedication, discipline and willingness" on the part of an individual (Oscar), students had the sense that this change was beyond their individual capacity. Jamal saw university as actually turning a "pupil into an intellectual." Being at university, for many, was the idea of moving forward on a personal yet facilitated "journey of self cultivation and growth" (Oscar).

Thus students had an idea of being at university as taking their first step toward more meaningful livelihoods and lives. This first step, given the past foreclosure of their educational aspirations (Harwood, Hickey-Moody, McMahon and O'Shea 2017), is dependent upon and informed by a pedagogy that allows students to access resources in themselves to participate in, and take advantage of the resources afforded by a university education. The challenge, James (2007) writes "is not only to remove or reduce barriers, where they exist, but also to build possibilities and choices" (p.11). Students identified component characteristics of such an enabling pedagogy as: iterative immersion in the cultures of university study; building explicit connections between learning contexts outside and within university walls; constant critical reflection on the process of becoming a university student;

co-constructing knowledge; and building a supportive and rigorous learning community of peers.

Importantly, Gale and Parker (2013) point out that many enabling projects in Australian higher education institutions tend to "adopt an institution and system-serving stance rather than an equity stance, upholding the interests of higher education (embedded in pedagogy and curriculum and the implicit epistemological assumptions of academic knowledge) by placing the onus on students to adapt or conform to institutional expectations" (p.41). If only serving the institution's needs, enabling programs become skill development programs, devoid of the pedagogies of belonging and becoming so necessary to the MAP program. MAP was seen by the students to serve *their* needs – practical, social, intellectual – and allow them to find their own ways participate in higher education.

Conclusion

The students who completed MAP felt as though they had accessed the resources within themselves, between themselves and within the institution to be able to 'enter the conversation' (Rose, 2007). Interestingly, they did not expect that conversation would reach its anticipated depths in MAP. Rather than simple preparation for the conversation, MAP was their first experience of the conversation personally and in a knowledge sense. It was within MAP that they raised their voices, dialogued with texts, ideas and one another, and began the process of becoming and belonging.

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