



Supporting the transition of undergraduate student teachers to strengthen their sense of mattering in one university in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

This vignette is a snapshot of the support we planned and delivered at the start of the academic year 2025/26 to help our students feel that they matter. We explored the first-year experience from our perspective as course leaders in a Scottish university. This included capturing our discussions around mattering and the initial steps we took to support our students as they transitioned into higher education. We framed our thinking using Brookfield's (2017) four lenses, considering the different ways we are trying to support our students and identifying relevant next steps. Through our discussions, however, it became clear that this was the start of something bigger than we had originally anticipated. Although our actions were small, the ripples were far reaching. The encouragement and enthusiasm shown by colleagues filled us with excitement and hope - and led to some very interesting discussions in our own school and across the university. We were interested in writing about these students because they will be entering a caring profession. We wanted to model that caring ethos here at the university through our work on mattering. This paper will discuss that journey in its early stages and consider the next steps that have emerged from this.

Keywords: initial teacher education, educational transitions, higher education support, first year experience

Introduction: Our context

We are two course leaders on different first-year undergraduate initial teacher education (ITE) courses in Scotland. Discussions at the end of last year highlighted that we could do more for our students in terms of strengthening their sense of mattering (Seary et al., 2023). We reflected on what we thought could make the biggest difference to the students transitioning into an undergraduate primary teaching degree to improve resilience and retention. This vignette follows that journey, sharing reflections from our conversations, discussions with staff and delivery of key messages at student induction sessions. We have reflected critically on events through Brookfield's (2017) four lenses, looking at ourselves, colleagues and students, and weaving theory throughout.

Conversations as methodology

We have chosen conversation as the methodology to allow collaborative and systematic enquiry to take place (Stenhouse, 1975, cited in Feldman, 1999). This has allowed us to work methodically together, coming to a new and shared understanding (Seary et al., 2023). This project seeks to improve understanding of the sense of mattering in first year undergraduate teaching students and ensure that the teaching community is

aware of our findings, a key step in enquiry (Feldman, 1999). This involved us meeting weekly to engage in structured discussions and exchange ideas electronically. We also reflected on discussions with colleagues as well as feedback from students. Between these careful conversations, we considered the new information together. This led to continual collective understanding in a less time-consuming way than other research methodologies (Feldman, 1999).

The lens of self

We began this journey considering belonging as the original concept. However, working with the Student Learning Development team in our university has evolved our thinking from belonging to mattering and we wanted to share this thinking with colleagues. There are varied definitions of mattering, but the definition "Mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate..." (Rosenberg & McCollough 1981, p.165), resonated the most with us. Within our context, we found the five tenets discussed by Seary et al., (2023, pp. 6-7) useful to underpin and represent the ideas that we wanted to share (see table 1).

Upon reflection, we experienced "lost innocence" (Brookfield, 2017, p.203), realizing that there were no neat answers to this issue. We also felt our own sense of mattering improved greatly through collaboration with several colleagues and their engagement with the project. Closer involvement with the students during the induction process also helped us get to know them quicker and identify concerns we would not otherwise have been aware of.

Table 1 Five tenets (Seary et al., 2023) and the relevance to our context

	Tenet	Relevance to our context
1	Border crossing	These students are transitioning into higher education from several destinations including secondary education, further education, or another university course. Multiple identities can be at play during this time and may be experienced differently by all. Communication with students is crucial when navigating this. We need to communicate clear expectations "to reduce the sense of isolation and otherness they may be feeling" (Seary et al., 2023, p7). Signposting clearly where to go for support with study (including assessments), work, personal commitments throughout the first semester is important.
2	Engaged learning/sense of belonging/mattering	These students have chosen the vocational course that will allow them to achieve a primary teaching qualification. Therefore, we assume that most will be engaged in their learning. To assist with this, we want to promote "a feeling that the individual student matters to others" (Seary et al., 2023, p8). One way to do this could be through increased student voice. We need to consider how to do this on our courses and identify what this will look like.
3	Academic skills and independent learning	Some of these students have undertaken summer school as a part of their entry requirements. Others have studied at various college settings that endeavour to prepare them for academic skills needed for higher education. However, many have transitioned straight from secondary education and may lack the academic skills required (Crozier & Reay, 2011). We want to signpost and normalise getting support, as well as promoting independent learning skills.
4	Self-efficacy	We think this will look like timely feedback with formative assessments where our students will meet with success and grow in confidence.

5	Resourcefulness and personal management skills	<p>Incorporating ‘what if...?’ scenarios for the students during induction to help them manage expectations.</p> <p>Our conversations with the Student Learning Development team have helped us identify services across the university we can signpost to our students and that we should be signposting regularly throughout the year.</p>
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Colleagues’ lens

Initially we thought the discussion with colleagues would focus on what anti-mattering looks like - for example, explicitly showing interest and concern for students. We planned to use this information to build a consistent message that all staff could utilise as examples of good practice. We looked to existing university policies to help guide this, in an attempt to show that this was already an implicit university priority. However, those discussions changed our thinking from a deficit model to a more considered idea of how students’ previous experiences could influence their thinking.

The Student Learning Development team helped move our thinking on to reflect on why mattering is so important for this group of students. They will be entering a caring profession with a set of professional standards – such as the promotion of social justice, trust and respect and integrity (GTC Scotland, 2021).

The student lens

From the student's perspective, we considered the trials and tribulations of group work. We noticed students did not always find it easy to engage with one another and required more explicit help with this. We wanted to encourage groups to work in a professional manner and provide them with the tools to identify ways to support each other, framing this as their duty of care to one another. Our hope is to give the students tools to do this well, allowing the university community to have a positive influence on them, as well as promoting their ability to positively influence and increase their self-efficacy (Seary et al., 2023).

We thought that including icebreaker activities as part of induction would help students feel more comfortable with one another and realised that we had not given this idea time or space in previous years. These activities were structured to begin generically - for example, asking students to find commonalities in an attempt to begin to build cohesiveness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In the second session, we put students into the groups in which they will be working during seminars over the year to discuss scenarios around group working. This was to help them identify what good practice should look like, thereby promoting uniformity and conformity in an effort to build closeness within the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Conclusion and next steps

We started this process thinking that we needed to fix student resilience by enhancing mattering using practical steps. To an extent that has been useful but through this process we have realised that it has more to do with our thinking and that of our students. We are keen to build student resilience and hope that strengthening feelings of mattering will help with this. We are also keen to understand mattering more fully, particularly the links between mattering and self-image. This could allow us to support students experiencing a low sense of mattering more fully using services within the university, recognizing that mattering is not fully within our control.

Our next steps involve more formal data collection to carefully examine themes from both students and colleagues. We will continue to work closely with colleagues to understand better what they are noticing and formally document this at the end of the academic year. We plan to ask the students how they feel using a shortened version of the university mattering scale (Moschella & Banyard, 2021, p.61) in order to gain more insight into how they perceive their level of mattering within the university.

An unexpected benefit of undertaking this research was the increased sense of mattering that we felt. Spending time in structured conversations with colleagues across the university and students, as well as publicly sharing our thinking and findings with other colleagues has helped us to feel more connected to others and to the university itself (Shulman 1986, cited in Feldman, 1999).

Biographies

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