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The uncontrollability of the first-year experience: Balancing chaos and control in students' transition to HE

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Abstract

The beginning of one's academic journey is often filled with uncertainty and worries. We usually tame these feelings by setting clear goals and rigid structures for the first year. We plan, structure, and safeguard. We do all we can to make the transitions as smoothly as possible.

But what if we flipped the script? What if we saw the uncontrollable aspects as catalysts for student growth and learning, rather than obstacles to overcome? What if we saw the bumps and friction of this transition as a valuable source of personal insight and attunement to this new world as it reveals itself.

Drawing on Hartmut Rosa's concept of uncontrollability and Gert Biesta's notion of subjectification, this article explores how overly controlled FYE designs may undermine students' opportunities to grow—not despite discomfort, but through it. When we try to remove friction with hacks, handbooks, buddy systems, and safety nets we risk framing struggles as failures. But if we engage with the uncontrollable instead of avoiding it, transformation becomes possible.

The article proposes four practical principles for FYE design: face the uncontrollable together, create spaces for resonance, celebrate subjectification, and embrace the transformative. A successful FYE is not one that removes all struggles—but one that supports students in making meaning from it.

Keywords: first-year experience (FYE), student transition, educational transformation, uncontrollability, unpredictability, resonance, subjectification, pedagogical design

The conventional script of FYE initiatives

The first days of university are often filled with uncertainty and unease: nervous smiles, confusing campus maps, name tags, timetables, welcome speeches—and a flood of new faces. As educators and advisors, we do everything we can to tame this experience. We plan, structure, and safeguard. We offer hacks, handbooks, buddy systems, and safety nets, all designed to smooth out every bump in the road. And if things still feel difficult, we encourage students to seek our professional help immediately.

No matter our position in the higher education landscape, we contribute to the first-year experience (FYE) and to new students' sense of well-being and belonging. They should feel welcomed and know they are becoming part of a community. That is what Vincent Tinto and others have taught us for decades. It's what many of us work tirelessly to provide throughout the academic year.

The logic seems simple: the less friction new students encounter, the better. We assume this leads to happy, motivated, thriving students. We picture the polished stock photo in our minds—the smiling faces on an imaginary satisfaction survey. But in doing so, we risk devaluing the ordinary, natural, and often difficult experiences that arise in moments of transition—when one enters unfamiliar territory. As if we refuse to admit that transition is, by its very nature, uncertain, disorienting, and at times uncomfortable.

But what if the uncontrollable elements of the transition aren't flaws to fix but necessary conditions for learning? What if our efforts to smooth out the First-Year Experience are precisely what robs students of the chance to grow and transform?

Why uncontrollability matters

In education, we try to plan and control many things—most importantly, that our students learn what they need to—and become employable graduates. To achieve this, we design structures and develop formats that aim to make learning predictable and efficient.

But when the desire for control and predictability shapes the very purpose and nature of education, we risk losing what makes education truly meaningful.

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa offers a profound critique of modern society's obsession with control (Rosa, 2020). He argues that our attempts to make the world controllable, predictable, and useful often leave it silent—unable to speak to us, move us, or transform us.

Rosa introduces the concept of Unverfügbarkeit—or uncontrollability—to describe aspects of the world that cannot and should not be made fully available, predictable, or useful. These are the kinds of encounters that can generate what he calls resonance—a meaningful and transformative relationship with the world (Rosa, 2021). According to Rosa, resonance occurs when we engage with something we do not fully control, something that touches us and changes how we see ourselves and the world—not according to plan, but in unpredictable ways.

A similar line of thought is developed by the Dutch educational theorist Gert Biesta, who directs his critique specifically at contemporary education systems (Biesta, 2013; 2022). He observes that modern European education increasingly seeks to eliminate risk to guarantee learning outcomes. But in doing so, we lose sight of what Biesta calls subjectification: the process by which students come into their own as autonomous, responsible subjects through their engagement with knowledge. This dimension of education cannot be measured or guaranteed—indeed, it involves what Biesta calls "the beautiful risk of education." It is unpredictable by nature, and that is precisely where its value lies.

Together, Rosa and Biesta throw light on why so many students—and educators—today feel caught in a paradox: they are constantly busy, but not truly engaged; productive, but not fulfilled; efficient, but exhausted. Much can be controlled in education—but not the most valuable part: its transformative potential. This arises only through encounters with what is uncontrollable, risky, and unknown.

The solution is not more control, but rather making space for, and placing value on, the uncontrollable and the risky. We must learn to see unstructured interactions and open-ended experiences—not as failures of planning—but as crucial conditions for real learning.

Balancing chaos and control in first-year experience

Does this mean we should simply lean back and let chaos reign in our approach to the First-Year Experience?

That would be a tempting—but deeply mistaken—interpretation of Rosa, Biesta, and our critique of the desire for control in modern education.

The point is not to abandon students to the unpredictability of transition. Our role is still to support them—to help them engage with what is new, to be moved by it, find their way through it, grow with it, and discover its value.

But doing so still requires a degree of control. Resonance, as Rosa emphasizes, emerges in the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar—not in total chaos. He calls this the realm of the 'semi-controllable': situations in which we have a footing, but no guarantee of the outcome.

We can—and should—provide clear frameworks, directions, and academic intentions in our FYE-activities. Not to dictate results, but to offer students the foundation from which they can venture into the unknown.

We should recognize and emphasize that transformation and the meaningful First-Year Experiences cannot be delivered on demand. They can only emerge when we are willing to be affected by the unpredictable.

Four recommendations for designing FYE

So, what does all this mean for the design of FYE initiatives?

We suggest that FYE should not aim to make the transition into higher education as smooth as possible. Transitions are, by nature, difficult—and it is precisely the well-dosed, relevant and manageable friction that makes them transformative.

For some the friction is the hesitation before asking a question in class, unsure if it's appropriate. For others, the frustration of not understanding a key concept after hours of effort. Or asking peers for company in the coffee break.

We can try to remove the friction with coffee-break-buddies, confidence mentors, and reading-technique hacks. But in doing so, we risk framing friction as experiences to be avoided, and the students as somehow 'wrong' for feeling confused or out of place. Instead, we can acknowledge these feelings as natural—even necessary—elements of meaningful transformation. When recognized as such, the struggle can become a resource.

We offer four key recommendations for how to build this into FYE design.

I. Face the uncontrollable together

When we show less worries about students' struggles, they will too. Stay with them in what's difficult. Encourage a shared, constructive discourse around the struggles—so students don't feel alone or wrong when things get hard. Help cultivate a language of shared difficulty, not one of hacks, quick fixes and avoidance. This should influence both our professional discourse and the culture we foster among students.

II. Create spaces for resonance

Even structured activities can invite the uncontrollable. Group exercises can encourage students to explore a question, share an experience, or follow a curiosity—without being steered towards a predetermined outcome. Events can be designed to maximize the chance that students become gripped by something they find personally meaningful and exciting in relation to their studies—and that can serve as a starting point for connecting with others.

III. Celebrate subjectification

In our FYE initiatives, we should encourage students to express how they experience the transition differently. We can invite them to reflect on and share their own perspectives—without seeking consensus.

When we let go of the idea that FYE should lead everyone to the same outcome, we open up for the possibility that students begin to appear as subjects: individuals who relate to their education with responsibility, agency, and voice.

IV. Embrace the transformative

The start of university should not only be filled with useful tools that make the transition smooth. It should also include moments that spotlight the transformative dimension of this time of life—the change, learning, development, and the new ways of seeing oneself. Help students recognize their own small transformations—and how those came about through friction and struggle.

Conclusion: Aiming for the important things

The first-year experience should not be judged by how easy or frictionless it feels—but by how well it supports students in growing through the inevitable struggles of transition.

If students end their first semester saying, "Everything was easy—I barely noticed the transition," then we may not have done our job. If they end it saying, "It was difficult at times—but a lot of people helped me find my way and navigate the uncertainty," then we've likely succeeded. After all, growth rarely comes from smoothness. It comes from tension, risk, and moments that cannot be fully controlled.

So let us rethink the first-year experience: Not as a project of eliminating the uncontrollable, but as a careful balance between chaos and control. Not as a promise to remove all discomfort, but as an invitation to transform through the right amount of struggle.

Biographies

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