



On the transition to undergraduate studies as experienced by working class students

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ABSTRACT

The scholarship of transition to undergraduate studies offers substantial understanding and guidance to those that work with students in the curricular, co and extra-curricular spaces. However, students can still experience transition as a single event that has been crammed into a broader general programme of induction. The potential fragility of the process of transition is yet to be taken as seriously as it should be on campuses across the country. The particular experience of working-class students during this process of transition is often obscured due to the class-based assumptions of the social origin of the student population. This failure to critically engage with the working-class experience of transition has highly negative and impactful consequences on students and their institutions. Firstly, by ignoring hysteresis, we end up with the misdiagnosis of working-class student experience and outcomes. Rather than questioning institutional habitus and the role it plays in the inequitable structures of higher education, working class students are frequently cast as problematic. Secondly, by failing to properly acknowledge the ontological fractures initiated by habitus clivé, institutions run the risk of further isolating and marginalizing working-class students as they decide whether they are willing to shed their working-class origins in order to fit in and succeed. In the absence of an overhaul of institutional culture and behaviour, the applied academic responses to such circumstances are proposed as two-fold. Firstly, a peer mentoring programme rooted in Freirean hope and love – that through collective labour facilitates relationships of solidarity based upon senior working class students providing mentorship to new first year working class students. Secondly, the need for reflexive continual professional development for all staff. So as to develop an active compassionate understanding of the diversity of the student population and the reality of the various lived experiences.

Keywords: working class, mentoring, widening participation, life event, habitus

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss key areas of the scholarship of transition to first year undergraduate study that are particularly relevant to the experience of working-class students. Using Bourdieusian scholarship I will then address two unique, and often overlooked, areas of the transition experience that have a substantial and disruptive impact on working class students – hysteresis and habitus clivé. Finally, I will outline in detail an applied academic practice response – a peer mentoring project built upon a Freirean pedagogy of hope and love. Throughout the paper I will include auto-ethnographic commentary, based on personal experiences and reflections as well as over two decades of work in the field of widening participation. Extracts from conversations with students are included with kind permission.

Transition

Much consideration has been given to the resources that institutions can offer in order to make sure that the process of transition to and through undergraduate life is successful (Briggs et al., 2012; Gale & Parker, 2014; Thomas, 2013; MacFarlane, 2018; Hultberg et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011). There have also been a number of models that attempt to quantify this process of transition – for example Bridges Transition Model (2009), the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment as proposed by Risquez et al. (2007) and The Model of Student Adjustment as proposed by Menzies and Baron (2014). Likewise, there is a substantial body of scholarship that specifically addresses students' transition to the first year of undergraduate studies (Kantanis, 2000; Meehan & Howells, 2018; Blair, 2017; Gall et al., 2000; Scanlon et al., 2007). Despite the voluminous scholarship that exists, many students still experience transition into undergraduate study as a series of bullet points or boxes to tick. We might be advised to start from the point that the process of transition is “far more complex than the top ten tips to surviving university would have you believe” (Meehan & Howells, 2019) and reject the “piecemeal” approach that Krause et al. (2005, p. 89) refer to. With increasing diversity in the social and cultural background of students, particular attention is often given to working class student transitions to and through undergraduate life (Breeze et al., 2020; Keane, 2011; Farenga, 2018; Christie et al., 2005). Despite this welcome diversification of the student population, Moreau & Kerner (2015, p.219) warn us that it is still too often the case that “the dominant, default image of the student in the physical and policy spaces of higher education remains those of the carefree”. This mistaken image of the student population neglects to acknowledge the working-class student experience of being “outsiders on the inside” (Reay, 2016). As Diane Reay (*ibid*, p.70) reports, working class students can complete their undergraduate studies “with a strong sense of being bruised and battered by the whole experience”. Reay (*ibid*, p71) argues, “classism is rife in the university sector, particularly the elite sector”. This classism might not be unexpected as Bourdieu (1988, p.41) reminds us that “the structure of the university field reflects the structure of the field of power, while its own activity of selection and indoctrination contributes to the reproduction of that structure”. As a result of this, “due to forces of circumstance, the majority of working-class students were trapped in the present as ‘onlookers’ on student life, compelled by economic necessity to live at home and work in the labour market” (Reay, 2017, p125).

Process, fragility & dislocation

Over the last two decades, my own work with working class student transitions has been particularly influenced by three areas of the scholarship of transition. Firstly, the notion that, as Kift et al. (2010, p.6) assert, transition is “a process, not an event”. We might be familiar with the numerous events that take place at the beginning of the academic year to facilitate transition to first year and indeed subsequent academic years. How often do we hear about the transition processes that are initiated? Transition is not a moment or an event that is completed instantaneously. It might take many months or indeed years for transition to be completed – there is no universal rule applicable to all students. Reflecting on my own experience, I would argue that for many working-class students, transition is often never fully completed during the lifetime of their degree studies. As a student once told me, “I’m about to graduate next week with a first-class degree after four years of study - I’m leaving but I don’t feel that I’ve actually fully completed my arrival yet”.

Secondly, the work of Burke et al. (2016, p.43) outlines how “students’ transitions to university are often fragile”. The authors outline how “students come to university with a range of educational experiences

and expectations and are deeply sensitive to their own position as a university student". As this potentially fragile process takes place, it is vital that the environment that students transition into will not facilitate "fear, shame and anxiety" because "students' are often fearful of being judged or perceived as lacking capability" (Burke et al., 2016, p41). We are aware of how the environment that students transition into "reflects the structure of the field of power" (Bourdieu, 1988, p.41). As a result of this, working-class students find themselves transitioning into a social environment that they are not the product of. They cannot take the world around them for granted and indeed feel the weight of this (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127). Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, p.12) argue that social origin is "of the determinants, the only one whose influence extends to all areas and all levels of students' experience, and first and foremost to their conditions of existence". Whether higher educational institutions believe that the transition to first year is a process or an event, "how can one speak, even by way of simplification, of a common student situation" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p12). There can be no uniformed approach to transition with such diverse student circumstances – certainly one that ignores social origin.

Thirdly, is the work of Vincent Tinto (2012, p.6) – who warns us that "we must recognise that a college or university, once having admitted a student, has an obligation to do what it can to help the student stay and graduate". In order to do this "the institution must begin by focusing on its own behaviour and establishing conditions within its walls that promote those outcomes" (Tinto, 2012, p.6)). How many of our institutions acknowledge the need to modify their own behaviour or culture in order to produce an environment in which all students can succeed? Normative higher education institutional habitus demands that working class students modify their own habitus in order to fit in and succeed. So, while institutions remain rooted in their historical way of being as understood by dominant classes and cultures, working class students experience "feelings of isolation and class-cultural discontinuities" (Scanlon et al., 2020).

It is important to clarify that in Bourdieu's field theory, the field of higher education is an environment that working class students are not the social product of. Regardless of the type of higher education institution, each will occupy the same field – although not necessarily the same position within the field. As Diane Reay (2018) notes, despite working class students making extensive "efforts and struggles, they remain peripheral within the new field". So, while scholarship and experience tell us about working-class students navigating elite institutions, Reay (2018b) also importantly notes how "working class students at the post-1992 universities constitute the marginal, within a marginalised section of the HE field, struggling to achieve a degree of fit". Each institution, present within the field of higher education, will not possess an identical habitus. However, by very definition of being in the field of higher education, institutional way of being is such that working class students will experience class-cultural discontinuities. The extent of this depends on where in the field the institution resides, for example post 1992 universities in the UK have a better record of supporting students from diverse backgrounds.

As the transition process continues, working class students have an increasing "sense of social distance from the dominant culture in universities" (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). With a lack of critical understanding of working-class student experience, we are left with incorrect class-based assumptions being made regarding student success. As Christie et al. (2005) outline, "working-class students are thus presented as 'problematic'non-traditional students are positioned as somehow deficient, or as 'second-class students'". Are our institutions recognising their obligation to establish conditions where all can succeed? Why are we still stuck in a world where "a middle-class way of being a student is given

prominence..... the normalisation of the middle-class route to higher education is continually reinforced through discourses of education which place non-traditional students as the other” (ibid).

Consciousness of constraint

Retracing my own experience, I am drawn to the conclusion that there are two particular areas of working-class student experience that are rarely addressed when considering transitions into first year (and indeed beyond). Hysteresis and habitus clivé, from Bourdieusian scholarship, are two further layers of experience that sit upon the many layers of fragility that can come with transition. However, while becoming familiar with all that comes with the myriad of new experiences associated with university life is acknowledged – the ideas of hysteresis and habitus clivé remain largely unheard of and as a result are not discussed. Without this acknowledgment and understanding – both can add to, in the words of Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972), the hidden injuries of class. Bourdieu writes about hysteresis as a dislocation and disruption of habitus and field – and again (1977, p.83) as “one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them”. During the transition to first year, working class students find themselves in the field of higher education with a habitus that doesn’t seem to fit or work properly - there is a dislocation or disruption. As a result of this, they don’t have the dispositions to grasp opportunities and find success like their more privileged peers do. As Hardy (2014, p.134) notes, there is a “time lag between change in field structure and stabilisation of the habitus” which working class students experience during the transition into first year undergraduate studies (and very often beyond this). I can recall numerous times when students reported to me mis-diagnosed difficulties in navigating campus life and academic outcomes that were much poorer than would be expected. These were not personal failures of the students but rather the symptoms of hysteresis. It is true that “given time, habitus is transformed so that it matches new field structures” (Hardy, 2014, p141). However, until working class students get to this point, when the lag is over, they have to live with the fact that “practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.78). So, as working-class students employ practices that are too far removed from the environment in which they successfully originate, they will likely have to manage negative experiences and outcomes - the very sanctions to which Bourdieu and Passeron refer. It would be prudent for our transitions programmes and pedagogical practice to have a deep and compassionate understanding of this embedded within them, in order to establish conditions that promote the happiness, wellbeing and success of all students.

I have rarely met staff or students critically familiar with the added unseen burden of hysteresis. Because it is widely unknown to staff, they can very often misdiagnose student problems and difficulties as personal failures, which the student in turn accepts. However, I am also cognisant of how the working-class student is often unaware of the limitations in the field of higher education that are set on them by the habitus, as Bourdieu (1991, p.51) asserts, “the choices of the habitus are accomplished without consciousness of constraint”. Unaware of the limits placed on them by habitus, I find that students can have a sense, in the words of Anne Mesny (2002), of “ordinary knowledgeability”. Where a “non-reflexive sens pratique” can dominate – resulting in a lack of the critical consciousness that facilitates the revelation and understanding of hysteresis. After time has passed and the lag dissipates, the developing habitus of working-class students allows them to participate more fully in their first-year experience. However, where in this field are they positioned? It is certainly not in the areas that the

dominant classes and cultures find themselves. As Hardy (2014, p.130) describes, it is those who are from “privileged family backgrounds that will be best equipped to recognise (or assert) the desirability of new field positions”. In turn, these particular individuals “will have acquired the dispositions and practices that allow them to recognise the symbolic capital to be gained from early occupation of the freshly created field positions” (Hardy, 2014, p.130). Once again, we find working class students playing catch up with their more privileged peers in this injurious game of achievement (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). It starts as the transition to first year begins, with the onset of hysteresis. After some time, the dislocation of field and habitus starts to be loosened - but it is too late, as the prominent positions in the field have already been occupied by the dominant classes and cultures.

The divided self

There continues to be a growing interest in intergenerational social mobility in the UK and abroad. This interest has generated a large body of scholarship (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Major & Machin, 2018; Brown, 2017; Goldthorpe, 2016; Blandford, 2017; Reay, 2017b; Friedman, 2014). While in the policy field, we have the UK Social Mobility Commission website that states that they aim “to help create a country where the circumstances of someone’s birth do not determine their outcomes in life”. At the same time the Scottish Government has set a target that “by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of full-time, first-degree entrants to higher education”. The OECD tells us that “promoting social mobility benefits individuals, the economy, and social cohesion”, while the world bank states that “upward mobility in higher education is positively associated with gross domestic product per capita in Europe” (Foster et al., 2025). The momentum to increase social mobility across the UK and beyond takes place in a context outlined by Paterson et al. (2025), where “in many European countries and the United States, mobility increased in the decades following World War II, this increase has stalled in more recent years and for more recent birth cohorts”. Is everything about social mobility purely positive as we might believe from the policy field? Diane Reay (2017b, p147) asserts that there are always “tensions and troubles surrounding social mobility”. Reay (2017c, p45) argues that what we now have is “the twenty-first-century version of the rat race in which social mobility is the new panacea, operating as a very inadequate sticking plaster over the gaping wound that social inequalities have become”. She concludes (2017b, p147) that social mobility is a “politically driven distraction that diverts our attention from the real problems that need to be addressed, problems of increasing social and economic inequalities that require redistribution not social mobility” – in essence, redistribution is required not upward mobility. Nevertheless, how is social mobility actually experienced by working class students as they transition into first year? Reay (2017b, p148) is clear that “working-class origin, and the attempts to leave it behind, leave not only psychological and emotional imprints but also physiological ones”. What we find is that as the first-year experience continues and the habitus responds to the new field that it finds itself in, working class students face another layer of burden – one that can be truly embodied, that of habitus clivé. Bourdieu writes of habitus clivé, or the divided or split habitus, and how it can cause unease, anxiety, dislocation of family bonds and indeed question the “ontological coherence of the self” (Friedman, 2016). He notes (Bourdieu, 1999a, p.511) that upward social mobility can “produce a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities”. It is important to note that Bourdieu, contrary to critics, was clear that the habitus could change over time. He argues that this could happen through “new experiences” (Bourdieu, 2000).

p.161). Although childhood dispositions are long lasting, “they are not eternal” (Bourdieu, 2005, p.45). With the family as the primary field (Bourdieu, 1977), this is where the habitus is first established and developed – “class culture embedded” (Costa & Murphy, 2015, p.7). However, the first-year student, with their developing habitus, now begins to function within the new field of higher education - but in doing so, this developed habitus no longer truly resembles that of the student’s social origin. This can lead to the students feeling that they neither truly belong to the university environment in which they live and learn or indeed to the place where they grew up and where family and friends still live. They can be caught in “double isolation” (Bourdieu, 1998, pp.106–107) or exist “between two worlds” (Bourdieu, 1999, p.511). Pierre Bourdieu (2000, p.16) himself, has talked about his own journey of social mobility and how he was “torn by contradiction and internal division”, even referring to his assent to the College de France as an act of “transgression and a treachery” (Bourdieu, 2004, p.109). How can the working-class student focus on the daily asks of academic life and the process of transition while they are experiencing such a deeply ontological crisis? Sometimes doing your homework is not the priority. I can recall many stories told to me by students over the years that were examples of the divided self – and while the students were never explicitly aware of how to name the process, they were always able to describe it eloquently. For many, although they knew they were loved at home and friends and family were proud of them, there was forever a sense of melancholy associated with the loss of how they and things used to be.

A pedagogy of hope and love

How might we respond to the complexities that are inherent with the transition into first year undergraduate studies for working class students? As Hughes & Smail (2015) point out, “a student’s transition into university is a key element in determining future academic persistence, satisfaction and attainment”. We need to get it right, so as to maximise persistence, satisfaction and attainment for our students – but we know that transition is a potentially fragile process and is enrobed with intricacies that can result in hysteresis and habitus clivé. We also know that “the structure of the university field reflects the structure of the field of power” (Bourdieu, 1988, p.41) and so we are not surprised to bear witness to the classism that working class students experience on campus (Speirs, 2020; Speirs, 2023; Cattaneo et al., 2019; Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Walkerdine, 2021; Reay et al., 2009). Classism, as Bernice Lott (2002) writes, results in students being excluded, devalued, discounted and separated. We can think about the “two potential domains of classism as institutional classism and interpersonal classism” (Langhout et al., 2007). Institutionally, we can think of the organisational structures, policies, curriculum, pedagogy and procedures that facilitate classism. While at the interpersonal level, we can think of the interactions that students have with other students as well as staff. So, if we are to make sure the transition into first year is successful then we must be cognisant of the various structures, policies, curriculum, pedagogy and procedures that working class students will find themselves surrounded by. Just as Vincent Tinto (2012, p.116) wrote, we need to “stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life” and “move beyond the provision of add-on services” for our students. While we progress from delivering simple add-on transition events and services we must not “leave untouched the essential educational character of student experience” (Tinto, 2012, p.116). Because that is where change is required. This particular work, when it is at its best, is aware of how “feelings of belonging are complex and tied to social relations and inequalities”. (Burke et al., 2016, p.41). We want a campus life that embraces the notion of caring about

others; that it is warm, with a humanising pedagogy that rejects the culture of indifference and is full of Freire's pedagogy of hope and love (Freire, 2021).

My response has been two-fold. The first was to create a series of seminars that address the dislocation and ontological uncertainty provoked by hysteresis and habitus *clivé* through discussions on the origins of inequity and the transmission of classism through the hidden curriculum. These seminars have been (and continue to be) delivered to staff as part of a broader educative and developmental process. A body of staff that better understands class-based inequities employs pedagogies and policies that better serve working class students. The details of this response are not discussed here, but this staff focused response runs parallel to a student focused response that I will now review in some detail. Some two decades ago I set up a peer mentoring project where senior working class students mentor new students from working class backgrounds through their first year of undergraduate study. This is not a way of tinkering at the margins, but a way to change the essential characteristics of the experience of transition. I can recall clearly when the project began, how one of the student mentees told me "I am so glad that I now know that there are staff and students that actively care for and are interested in me, what I do and how I feel". From the outset, the project has always taken a campus ecology approach (Banning et al, 2001). One that strives to create the environmental conditions where working-class students can flourish and excel. The project did not emerge from a deficit model of our students. The creation and development of conditions for all of our students to succeed should be normal practice across any institution in pastoral and learning and teaching spaces. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and it results in gaps in pastoral care and pedagogical practice, leading to environmental conditions that do not allow our students to flourish and excel. Peer mentoring occupies these spaces, so that staff, mentors and mentees can all stand together in relationships of solidarity that are built from collective labour – not the glorification of entrepreneurial individualism. It is from here that our students can begin to engage fully with the emancipatory nature of education, which can only be found "in the fellowship and solidarity of community" (Darder, 2015, p46).

Mutual exchange and parallel development

Formal mentoring relationships and peer mentoring relationships are different but do have several common attributes. They "both have the potential to support development at successive career stages" while also providing a "range of career-enhancing and psychosocial functions" (Kram & Isabella, 1985). In conventional mentoring relationships, there is very often a strong hierarchical structure that can favour the development of the mentor over the mentee. However, in peer mentoring relationships this is not the case. In fact, peer mentoring relationships provide "a forum for mutual exchange in which an individual can achieve a sense of expertise, equality, and empathy that is frequently absent from traditional mentoring relationships" (*ibid*, p129). Our peer mentoring programme, as a model of applied academic practice – is built upon Freirean relationships of solidarity. Indeed, as McManus & Russell (2007, p.280) outline, peer mentoring "is characterised by increasing amounts ofvulnerability, and authenticity that span both work and personal domains". These very genuine and honest exchanges are specifically characterised by mutuality (Kram & Isabella, 1985). As the authors note, this mutuality can be seen in the fluid way that each member of the mentoring dyad can take on the role of learner and expert at different points of the relationship, facilitating parallel development. One of the key areas of development is, as Bourdieu would say, understanding the rules of the game. The rule book of how to identify and navigate the privileged networks of undergraduate life is well guarded by the dominant classes and cultures. I

remember a student mentee telling me once that it felt to them like there was a book that was passed from generation to generation by those from higher socio-economic status backgrounds on how to succeed in higher education (and in life more generally). Our mentors work carefully with their mentees to share their understanding of the rules of the game and how to make campus life work for them. There is an immense beauty in this practice of sharing – there is no sign of keeping this valuable capital to themselves so that they might be successful and others fail. We have a deeply gentle and quiet act of solidarity in which the development and success of community is placed before the individual. Building on identifying and navigating the privileged networks of university life facilitates personal growth and as many students have told me before, brings both a dignity and a sense of legitimacy to being on campus. This is of course always in contrast with the norm that Bettencourt (2021, p774) writes about where “institutions used working-class students to achieve key goals (e.g. diversity work) without articulating a corresponding value of the students themselves. As a result, working-class students’ sometimes felt that their contributions were devalued and their presence was tokenised”. Many of our mentors and mentees over the years have aligned with one of the interviewees in Bettencourt’s study (p775) who noted that “I belong because it wasn’t made for me. I belong here because I’m here to change something”. On numerous occasions, I have been privileged to witness how the legitimacy to be on campus (nourished through the mentoring relationship) facilitates a feeling and a knowledge in our mentees that they can flourish.

However, at a deeper level we have mentors, through their own personal biography and experience, who are able to discuss and tenderly provide understanding as our new students experience the dislocation of hysteresis and the many ontological issues presented by habitus clivé. As bell hooks wrote (2000, p.37), the assimilation to the norms of the dominant classes and cultures might very well be the “price of the ticket” as there is “no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind”. As Diane Reay (2005, p.921) asserts “discourses of meritocracy encode working classness as something that has to be left behind”. Our mentors are uniquely positioned to provide the support and guidance that our mentees may require. They understand how “defining yourself by your accomplishments seems superficial” (Metzgar, 2000, pp.203–4). And yet the eternal tension with the rules of this game demand otherwise – a world where we reproduce “middle class experience as universal” (Skeggs, 2004, 173). As one mentee told me “I was feeling totally invisible, that I didn’t fit in anywhere, completely in limbo. It was so comforting to know that despite no one around me having any idea of the things I was dealing with, my mentor understood it all – because they had been through every bit of it themselves”. Our mentees do indeed “bear the weight of all the contradictions they had to confront” (hooks, 2000, p.37), but our mentors are perfectly positioned to provide mentorship in this area - because this is also their own struggle and their own story. In fact, over the years most mentors have reported to me that on reflection they felt that they were actually mentoring themselves as they mentored their mentee. As a student once told me, “my three years of experience as a mentor have taught me that every word that I shared with my various mentees were actually simultaneously directed at myself. It turns out that only through the solidarity of being there for others have I guided myself to graduation”.

Transition as a life-event

Let us begin by asserting that the transition to undergraduate study is a life event. Holmes et al. (1967) provide a useful outline of various life events and related stressfulness (the social readjustment rating scale,

SRRS), which has recently been updated by Wallace et al. (2023). Life events are “benchmarks in the human life cycle” (Sugarman, 2009, p.135) that are also processes with “durations, contexts and outcomes” (Reese & Smyer, 1983, p2). As a student makes the transition to first year undergraduate study, they are required to modify their “assumptive world” (Parkes, 1971). Which can be thought of as “the largely taken for granted assumptions we make about ourselves and our world” (Sugarman, 2009, p.145). We can understand the greater distance between the assumptive world of the working-class student and the field of higher education, versus the student from the dominant classes and cultures. Life events, including the transition into undergraduate study, result in “a relatively predictable cycle of reactions and feelings” (Sugarman, 2009, p.144). These are described by Hopson (1981) in a transition cycle (updated from original work in 1976 by Adams et al.) that “is sufficiently generalisable for most people to recognise in their own experience” (Sugarman, 2009, p.144). This transition cycle is sketched in Figure 1, as based on Hopson’s (1981) work. Each of the numbers on the sketch represent particular periods of the transition process over time and mood (originally noted as self-efficacy by Adams et al. in 1976). Sugarman (2009, pp.145-148) provides an excellent description and analysis of these periods of transition in more detail. It is sufficed for the present purposes to note that these periods are described as; immobilisation, reaction (a elation, b despair), self-doubt, letting go, testing, search for meaning and integration.

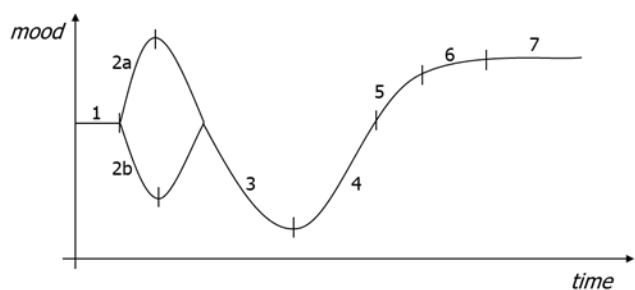


Figure 1 A sketch of the transition cycle as proposed by Hopson (1981)

It is important to note what is meant by integration in the particular context of transition into university study - in doing so we consider Vincent Tinto’s (2012b) student integration theory. For Tinto, integration was both social and academic – and as the experience of integration grows, a student stays in university to “the degree to which they felt academically and socially integrated into the life” of the university (Braxton et al., 1997, p.108). There is no magic amount, level or volume of academic or social integration; it is all a function of the individual student and their personal biography. For some students, we find that social integration on campus is of limited importance as the students in question may spend little time on campus outside of class. This means that the academic environment is key in developing some form of connection via staff and student interactions – or “academic involvements” as Tinto (1998, p.169) says. Bean and Metzner (1985, p.488) noted that for students with fewer interactions with staff and students the social integration element can almost be replaced by an ‘external environment’ set of variables. For example, these could be hours of employment, outside encouragement, or family responsibilities (Davidson et al., 2013). We can think of how working-class students are more likely to experience the necessity of this external environment. Nevertheless, as Davidson & Wilson (2013, p341) remind us, “campus relationships

matter. When students form meaningful relationships with others connected to the institution, they are more likely to persist". So, in order for the student to feel satisfactorily engaged and indeed integrated to their university – which means different things to different students – relationships matter. Our peer mentoring programme provides relationships (or academic involvements) that are highly personal, in turn these relationships contribute to the growing feeling of being satisfactorily integrated which can facilitate the revelation of the possible. A student mentee once told me that "having my mentor provided an anchor on campus that I'm not sure I would have been able to achieve otherwise. It allowed me to think about all the stuff that goes on in and out of the classroom and made me wonder if I could try some of those things – my mentor was key in helping me realise this and actually daring to do some of these things".

The mentoring outcome

The act of peer mentoring can modify the transition profile in two ways. In the first (sketched as a modified transition cycle in Figure 2), it can squeeze the x-axis resulting in a transition process that occurs over a shorter period of time. Secondly (Figure 3), it can compress the y-axis so as to make the transition process less bumpy, so as the intensity of experience (letting go or self-doubt for example) is not too great so as to make students question their place on campus. Given the lack of a singular definition of peer mentoring, I believe that this proposal is valuable in mentoring studies as it allows a clear description of what (peer) mentoring can do when used as a tool to aid the process of transition during a life event. In short, the supportive presence of a peer mentor during the life event of transition to undergraduate study allows for the possibility of transition to occur quicker than it would have done without a mentor and that the process of transition occurs in a manner that is less emotionally challenging than it would have been without a mentor.

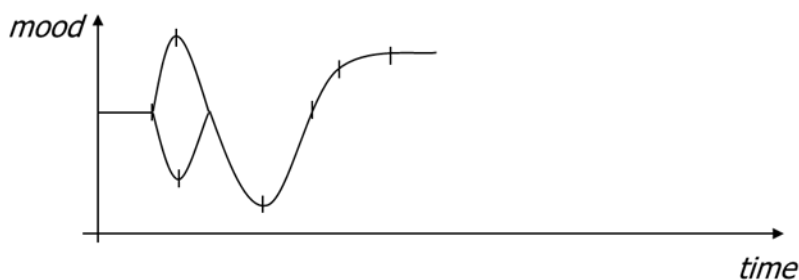


Figure 2 A sketch of the modified transition cycle under the action of peer mentoring

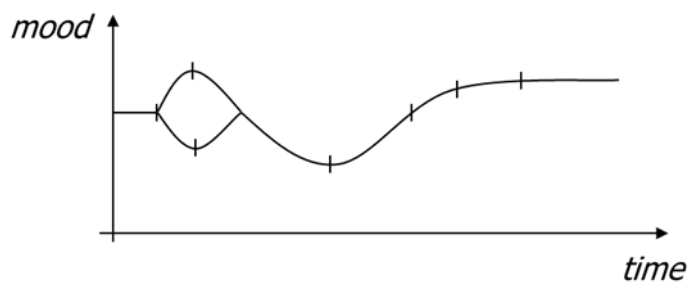


Figure 3 A sketch of the modified transition cycle under the action of peer mentoring

Conclusions

There is no universal student experience of transition to first year undergraduate study – but the large body of scholarship in this area proposes various models, themes and practices that can inform the process of transition for our students. However, the unique experience of working-class students is often overlooked with consequences for both students and institutions. All staff that interact with students are part of the transition process. In the absence of institutional wide cultural change, it is recommended that institutions provide continual professional development for staff that progresses a compassionate understanding of the dislocation and ontological uncertainty provoked by hysteresis and habitus clivé. Secondly, in order to provide immediate connections with these issues it is recommended that working class led student peer mentoring programmes are initiated by institutions. These programmes must value the fellowship of solidarity that provides the meaningful relationships which in turn facilitate development and growth in students while they navigate these extra layers of complexity of transition. I have provided a conceptual description of the outcomes of peer mentoring action during a life event. Namely, a transition process that occurs more rapidly alongside a far less disruptive and emotional set of experiences. I believe this will add value to both mentoring studies as well as those with an interest in working class student transitions. As one student mentee told me, “My mentor is the best thing that has happened to me at university. To know that she is actually invested in working with me and cares about how I’m doing.....seriously, the power in that is simply awesome. I want to do that for a first-year mentee next year, I want to make sure they can feel as good about themselves as I feel about myself right now.”

Biography

Neil M Speirs works as a manager, practitioner and researcher in a number of areas concerning widening participation and related policy. His community-based projects along with his teaching and research are centered around classed based inequities in all sectors of education.

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