HIDE AND SEEK: HOW IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT PRACTICES SHAPE LEARNER IDENTITY DURING TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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There is a paucity of literature in transition to H.E. which examines transition through the context in which students learn. Transition is not simply moving from one physical location to another but instead involves changes to identity as the individual adapts to new social and cultural worlds. Transition is a negotiation between the individual and the social contexts they inhabit. This way of theorising transition demands ethnographic data to fully explore the interaction of person, process and context.

The current study explored and analysed the academic practices which construct the transition environment, leading to a reflection on professional practice in planning and delivering undergraduate curricula. A socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning was taken drawing upon the work of Lave and Wenger to understand the practices which influence transition. The research investigated the experiences of first year undergraduate psychology students making the transition into Higher Education. The data sources included observation, informal conversation, semi structured and focus group interviews and document analysis. Narrative and theoretical thematic analyses were undertaken.

The analysis considered practices which enabled participation during transition and also practices which delayed or prevented successful engagement. The key findings indicate that whilst explicit practice enabled participation, there were many implicit practices evident in the everyday world of the academy. Students were seen to be actively seeking to participate but often not sure of what they were required to do. In everyday conversations, the social context supplies a frame of reference to enable participants to understand immediately most of what is said. However, academic discourse is by its very nature often decontextualised and abstract. To access meaning requires a frame of reference supplied by purposes shared within the community rather than the immediate social situation. These frames of reference are often taken for granted by fully participating members of a community so that newcomers get few clues to help them access meaning. Students need to see how academic practice works, the nature of the questions asked, the forms of evidence and argument employed and the types of conclusions arrived at. These are important skills in terms of reading and critical analysis, both highly valued practices within the academic community and yet these practices were often hidden from students. A central recommendation was made to reconceptualise the foundation year as a transition enabling year. This would involve critical reflection on practices at the institutional, departmental and individual level.