

A Brief Reflection on the Implication of 'Deficit Model' Considerations within Foundation Year Provision

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This short paper presents a personal reflection on the concept of deficit as perceived in foundation year provision. It considers the extent to which a coalescence of perspectives can enable positive developments in the diminishment of 'deficit' and a consequent realistic expansion of students' indigenous academic strengths.

Introduction

The 2019 Foundation Year Network Annual Conference addressed itself to the 'deficit model' and its inherent presence within foundation year delivery. In considering any model in this way, there is an implication of a dominant paradigm in the general worldview of foundation year delivery. It is good that some critical review of this should take place because, as concerned practitioners, we should be aware of both the strengths and weaknesses in the embodiment of any model within our pedagogy. Insofar as one may pursue a certain logic in trying to locate any polar opposite, namely a 'strength model', the latter is difficult to specify precisely. However, it is to recognise the sense in which embodied 'life experience' (not just within any formal educational arena) plays an obvious role that can be embraced positively in the learning trajectory of foundation year students. It is also worthy of note that "an application of the deficit model ... is often indicative of an over-simplified view of the issue in question" (Wallace, 2015).

Discussion

At the outset, it may be felt that the identification of any deficit present has automatically negative connotations, but this is to restrict interpretations of deficit to that of definitive gaps in the knowledge and skills base of foundation year students. Now such gaps may indeed exist but immediate points arising from such a perspective are:

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(i) there is a tendency to try to fill these gaps (if one may continue the metaphor) via some kind of 'remedial' provision with potentially unfortunate perceptions and implications therewith;

(ii) there is a failure to recognise a notable diversity and heterogeneity in the previous experiential 'lifelong learning' of foundation year students;

(iii) there is a failure to recognise the fact that a deficit may actually have been identified not so much in a student *per se* but rathermore in the educational trajectory of that student and the lack of exposure in that trajectory to any properly structured and formative learning experience. A deficit predicated on this lack of exposure will consistently permeate subsequent engagements with any learning activity, directly influencing cognitive and emotional perceptions. This is uniquely challenging for the practitioner to intercept and it extends beyond empirical intervention. It highlights the singular importance of relevant professional experience and expertise in foundation year practitioners.

Our task may prove daunting, especially when it is considered in juxtaposition with theoretical and academic arguments seemingly removed from practical application. Nevertheless there is also the recognition, not unduly grandiose, that we can in fact directly enable a transformative activity in our encounters with our students. Is this simply a rhetorical idealism? Implicit in our attempting to enable this practically, is the fundamental acceptance of initial value, namely the identification of previous experience (in all its manifestations) as contributing to the life-tapestry of a student embarking on a foundation year course. Indeed, Rachel Dunn (2019) highlights that often "... an element of negativity surrounds their entry to university...".

The successful eradication of this negativity, often implicit in the students' own personal perceptions, is central to our task as foundation year tutors. However, naïve attempts at any condescending erasure will not work with mature students and thus the proper encouragement of tutor and peer support is to be emphasised. This is not to diminish individual dialogue between a tutor and a given student but it is the case that the recognition of commonalities in students' previous 'educational' experience can often be fundamentally affirming in any supportive group dynamic. It also celebrates the differences present and indeed, insofar as deficits are identified (if not explicitly stated) tutors themselves can become aware of lacunae in the formative components of their course delivery.

To this extent we can capitalise on the unique position of foundation year provision in that rather than try to focus on ostensible deficits as such, we adopt our concept of initial value — as above — and utilise a fundamental supposition, albeit consciously promoted in reflective group work that "... everyone could be creative ..." (Eaglesfield and Stan, 2019). Of course, as foundation year tutors we are well aware of the pragmatic requirements of later undergraduate years but insofar as arguably the final product of a university graduate's ability is some sense of critical metacognitive engagement with the real world, this is superior to a simplistic accumulation of subject material alone.

At this point, one might well comment that the central arguments here concerning the ideal 'student experience' — a term now used with a variety of connotations — are largely self-evident. If so, why do we seek to analyse and revisit our provision in questing for improvement? A possible answer could lie at a deeper level of enquiry in that we may resonate with the observation that "... students' difficulties with academic tasks often stem from epistemological assumptions rather than from a lack of techniques ..." (Lea and Street, 1998). That is, whilst there have been excellent explanatory dissections of the minutiae of given disciplines, these activities have not necessarily nurtured the formative learning experience to which we alluded earlier. Well-intentioned forays, especially in recent decades, into the isolation of ostensibly necessary 'study skills' and the

development of programmes therewith, have often produced artificial teaching and learning infrastructures which have been fundamentally disagreeable to both providers and recipients alike. It has indeed been argued that "... the term 'study skills' itself has misleading implications, which are counterproductive to learning ..." (Wingate, 2006). The "misleading implications" to which Wingate refers are not easy to identify precisely, but we can undoubtedly recognise here our subjective reservations concerning the addressing of a 'deficit' through distinct study skills initiatives. The corpus of evidence in exploration of this is relatively limited, but one interesting investigation lies with Hopkinson (2011) who, in her particular case study, notes a "dominant staff perspective on key skills is that of a deficit model".

It cannot be denied that the successful possession of certain core/study skills are desirable requirements for a student's academic progress. The problem lies, as we are aware, in the precise definition of those skills. We know (a) that they can be both generic and subject specific as well as (b) having variable relevance and application to any given student. As practitioners sensitive to the nuances of our task, we recognise the value of properly integrating those skills with the exploration of our particular disciplines with students.

This integration has been reiterated in recent foundation year considerations (e.g. Walmsley, 2019) and we do indeed seek to find an ideal synthesis of foundation year delivery to students — the reification of this ideal is the aim for every group we teach! We can see that this is markedly at odds with any simplistic deficit adjustments which have permeated historical perceptions of addressing disparate student engagements.

One Foundation Year Network conference participant drew upon his own experience when he stated clearly his view that the "... role of higher education is not to assume a deficit but instead build upon skills students already have ..." (Bartoli-Edwards, 2019a). This is an excellent summary statement of what is at once an obvious but often paradoxically elusive goal, one that highlights again the professional capacities of practitioners seeking to establish this 'building upon'. The same student notes the development of an evaluative judgement as a basis for supplanting a deficit model (Bartoli-Edwards, 2019b). The cultivation of this evaluative judgement can also be favourably contrasted and compared with an academic literacies model. The latter derives from the evolution of purely empirical study-skills considerations to that of a distinct 'academic literacy'. This model, albeit discussed initially in reading/writing contexts but having a generic relevance, is especially interesting in its recognition of the fact that "... an approach using the academic literacies model foregrounds the variety and specificity of institutional practices, and students' struggles to make sense of these ..." (Lea and Street, 2006).

We can recognise the need to consider what has been described as an embedded approach that "... develops the learning of all students in a progressive and *holistic* manner ..." (Wingate, 2006). There is also the due suggestion, within a foundation year mathematics focus, of "... alternative inclusive strategies so students may bring their past experiences and use the opportunities afforded to maximise success ..." (Craven and Sharp, 2019). It is instructive here to mention the 'Growth Zone' model (Lee and Johnston-Wilder, 2018) which builds upon the concept of every student starting initially from his/her individual 'comfort zone' and expands from that accordingly. I have utilised this very successfully in my own mathematics teaching with foundation year students. It has particular resonance with the basic recognition in this discussion of a valued starting point for each student in their subsequent explorations. It devolves upon a mutual acceptance of past experience (not always 'positive') that students share in group encounter. From this there is then a joint, tutor-supported endeavour to move to individual 'growth zones'.

Clearly, there is a distinct move away from any ‘finding and filling gaps’ inherent in a basic deficit model; nevertheless, we must acknowledge too, the argument that “... conflating diverse issues into a single, universally condemned ‘deficit model’ is incoherent and unhelpful ...” (Howes, 2019). This criticism has some significance in the addressing of particular subject areas such as those within a STEM delivery; however, it is the case that scientific knowledge is often cultivated through notably creative environments and an over-emphasis on a detailed understanding of specific components may be stifling to exploration and subsequent discovery. There is of course, variable precision in the identification, interpretation and ultimate resolution of ‘deficit’. Discussion herein has sought to highlight the fact that any recognition of deficit as such, implies a necessary consideration of contingent issues especially in the context of foundation year students.

Conclusion

Foundation year students possess a complex amalgam of social and academic strengths and weaknesses and any attempt to provide a suitable working model to guide our interventions in working with those students is bound to have its limitations. Utopian solution to our endeavour is unattainable but we can identify and critically evaluate any interim model of foundation year provision (in this discussion, the ubiquitous deficit model) and seek constructive alternatives. As foundation year practitioners we are in the business of enabling not only progression but also transformation and thereby the rectification of any deficit, however the latter may be perceived.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for having the concept of liminality drawn to my attention by my colleague Emma Wheeler at the University of South Wales. I have felt that the environment of social and educational change experienced by foundation year students can be viewed in the perspective of their occupying a uniquely liminal space of transition at that point in their lives. As a concept that enables a particular interpretation of the intermediate position of foundation year students between their ‘past’ and their ‘future’, it is especially illuminating.

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Charles Reynolds has taught on the Foundation Programme at the University of South Wales for many years and has a vast experience of supporting students who are returning to learning. He is the Statistics/Further Maths lecturer for the course and is especially concerned that this subject area (often a prerequisite for progression) is made accessible to students entering a whole range of disciplines in their future degree studies. Charles is concerned to help and encourage those who do not feel very confident in approaching any mathematics or have not practised their skills in this area for some time. He has a research interest in reducing 'maths anxiety' in mature and non-specialist students and holds Fellowship of the Chartered College of Teaching as well as membership of the British Educational Research Association, the British Psychological Society, the British Society for Research into Learning Mathematics, and the Mathematical Association. Email: charles.reynolds@southwales.ac.uk.



