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Creating an Accidental Sense of Belonging in a Foundation Flock

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This reflection on the experience of designing, launching and teaching on an Arts and Humanities foundation year in its first year is intended to provide an honest and enquiring account of how the students were served, rather than arising from a formal research project. It will explore what went well but also consider areas for improvement in the coming years. Some plans for how this development might work are shared, with a recognition that more exploration, research and student discussions will need to take place in order to promote and support the best possible learning and development environment. The primary focus here is on the sense of identity that can come from being a foundation year student, and how our role as educators might support a positive learning identity within a supportive set of learning and social groups. Thought is given to the factors which affect both learning and a social sense of belonging, and how these two aspects of the foundation year journey are interdependent and intrinsically linked.

Introduction

In September 2019, the University of Reading introduced its Arts and Humanities Foundation Year. The Foundation Year represents an immersive, interdisciplinary educational experience as part of five BA programmes: Classics with Foundation, Philosophy with Foundation, History with Foundation, English Literature with Foundation, and English Literature and Applied Linguistics with Foundation. It is run out of two schools, the School of Literature and Languages and the School of Humanities. Students can move by right – on successful completion of the year – to any of the degrees listed above; they can also move – by request – to other single and joint honours degrees within the University.

This was not just the first time the University of Reading has run an Arts and Humanities foundation year, it was also my first experience of teaching foundation year students. I am director of the programme and I also designed, or co-designed three out of the four compulsory modules on the Foundation Year. This reflective essay brings together the students' responses to the experience some reflection upon my growth as an educator, and a consideration of some of the research into this area of Higher Education.

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The student opinions given here are drawn primarily from a feedback group of 16 Arts and Humanities Foundation Year students, in a semi-structured session lasting an hour; this has been combined with the results of observations noted during the year.

The University welcomed 28 students as it first cohort of Arts and Humanities Foundation Year students. We had predicted an intake of five or six students, so 28 was a pleasant – and challenging – surprise that had an immediate impact on the organisation of teaching. We opted for a single study group which was twice the size of our usual undergraduate seminar groups. Recruiting only through clearing influenced the dynamics of the group and how they saw themselves; there was anxiety and even some anger from students who had not expected to find themselves on a foundation year, or even at our university. These emotions, although displayed by just a few students, were distributed across the student group; it came from students with a range of cultural and educational backgrounds. It will be interesting to see whether this dynamic changes in the coming year, as we are recruiting directly onto our foundation year via the standard UCAS system as well as through clearing.

The focus of this reflection will be on six misconceptions that I brought to this new teaching experience. This will allow me to share my thoughts and plans moving forward which I hope might be of interest or value to others.

Misconception One: Foundation Year Students have Failed to Achieve

This was, perhaps, the most fundamental misconception at the outset. Six of the cohort had registered with additional needs upon registration and eight more had revealed to me, within the first two weeks, societal factors that could lead to study difficulties. It was therefore easy to assume that the purpose of the Foundation Year was simply to convert these 'failing' students into 'succeeding' students. A deficit model was an easy position to assume; the students had, after all, received grades that were lower than required to enter a three-year standard degree programme; it took a huge amount of listening to grasp the complexity of the situation, and there is much more listening to do.

The structural and psychosocial influences to which Kahu refers in her study of student engagement in university is of interest in this respect, but we need to go further (Kahu, 2013, p. 758). Kahu reviews and critiques four dominant approaches to student engagement and then offers a conceptual framework for achieving engagements, covering 'affect' (enthusiasm, interest and belonging), 'cognition' (deep learning and self-regulation) and 'behaviour' (time and effort, interaction and participation). This framework offers a valuable guide, but we also need to recognise and understand the earlier education experiences of our foundation year students to help them access these aspects of their learning selves and move forward constructively.

The work of Foley and Kazerounian seems more akin to our foundation year students' lives and experiences. As opposed to Kahu's more linear approach to student engagement, Foley and Kazerounian explore, throughout their article, the spurs to creative thinking in a classroom setting, and their diagrammatic representation of how multiple factors, both inside and outside university, can affect the development of individuals is persuasive in its messiness (Foley and Kazerounian, 2009, p. 539-55). It feels more true of the experience of these students, with its potential for variance and fluidity.

Foley and Kazerounian also seem to offer a rhizomatic vision of student experience, similar to that revealed by Gravett's storying methodology. By asking students to tell a story of a student journey (not their own story, necessarily) and then talking with them about how that story relates to their own experience and expectations, Gravett has been able to capture the

innately 'messy' nature of the student experience through a 'messy' analysis of the data this method produced (Gravett, 2019, p. 5). This resonates well with the vision of foundation year students that has emerged for those teaching on our foundation year: students who, like plant rhizomes, have several anchoring roots (family, friends, support networks and academic experience) and will sprout in ambition and activity in several areas.

We must understand, as well as we can, how foundation year students have reached our seminar rooms, in order to see our way forward with them. As Seal and Parkes point out in their article on foundation year students and their transition into Higher Education, 'foundation year courses … should spend a significant amount of time deconstructing and reconstructing students' previous educational experiences to resist … deficit thinking' (Seal and Parkes, 2019, p. 8).

A successful learning journey relies also on academics being 'required not to privilege their own intelligence and insights, but recognise them to be inherently partial and contingent' (Seal and Parkes, 2019, p. 14). My experience of reassessing my assumptions and my role was shared by colleagues who were often startled by the strengths and the weaknesses of these students as they worked with them. The space – physical, emotional and intellectual – that is required to allow this deconstruction, in both students and academics, must be guaranteed to foundation year students.

Misconception Two:
Small Group Teaching would be Prized

In our Department of English Literature, we usually teach small, weekly seminar groups of around 15 students. We value this method of teaching, and have always seen it as a significant benefit for our students. Some brief forays into larger workshop-style teaching in recent years led me to decide on a workshop-style group of 28 without too much trepidation. However, there was still concern amongst colleagues over whether this was an inherently less valuable learning mode for our students.

The work of Spruijt *et al*. is interesting here. Although their field of research was medicine and veterinary science, the project they carried out on small group and seminar teaching gives useful pointers on preparing students and staff for each learning encounter. However, no greater value is placed on small group teaching (12 students, in that sample) than on larger seminar teaching (24 students, in that sample); although some students felt that 15 was an ideal number, they also recognised that something could be lost if no larger group teaching was on offer (Spruijt, *et al.*, 2012, p. 134).

This is where the idea of a 'foundation flock' comes in. In our informal feedback group discussion, students were emotionally articulate about their preference for a larger learning group size, explaining that they had a series of friendship groups, which included:

- Foundation year group
- Seminar group
- Assignment small groups
- Module activity groups
- Destination subject groups
- Part One group (one of our modules has shared activity with a Part One module)
- University club/society group
- Geographic group (similar hometown/area)
- Socialising groups (which could, and sometimes did, include the whole cohort)

We quickly decided that 'friendship group' was not quite the right term for the whole group and they were not keen on the terms 'peer group' or 'cohort', seeing these as educational words rather than their word. We went through several options until I hit upon the term 'flock' to define what they were describing. They seemed to like the idea of themselves as a flock of birds that had landed at university and was now firmly identified as an entity in itself, but an entity that, like any flock of birds, will remain intact even whilst some separate off from the flock from time to time. This led to interesting digressions on what members of the flock might do if they left for some time (such as for small group work, or needing to go home for a while) and how and why the flock would be strong enough to remain secure regardless of any individual activity away from the 'Foundation Flock'.

A learning group of 30 helped facilitate the formation of all these groups, and undoubtedly added to their sense of belonging (even though this had not been the explicit intention, hence the 'accidental' sense of belonging).

Misconception Three: The Overriding Student Need would be Academic Development

Those with long experience of foundation year teaching will be smiling wryly at this point. I do not think I overlooked the complexity of student need (as a School Director of Teaching and Learning and an author of student guidebooks, I had become used to dealing with a multiplicity of student needs); what I did overlook was the necessity of broadening my focus. In preparing material such as study skills guidance to meet the obvious need – to help them improve their educational toolbox and knowledge of their subject areas – I did not prepare adequately for their broader needs. That is, the very needs that for most of them, were hindering their progress.

This is clearly a complex area, but these needs for this cohort could be categorised as:

- They need emotional recognition (I want to stop being blamed for being here; I want you to recognise that I am angry at being here; I am scared that I might fail; this has not been easy for me; this is my last chance).
- They need to learn who they are (I did not choose my A-level subjects; I feel I had to make certain choices; I no longer want to be labelled by failure; I have things to offer that need to be understood and appreciated).
- They need to navigate university life (I am not sure how I fit in; the practicalities are making this hard for me; I cannot get to grips with learning technology; these are my first ever seminars; I am away from home for the first time).
- They want to belong, in all their facets (I need to project an identity that suits how I feel inside; I want to feel part of the University and the town; I want to try out new experiences with new friends).

Many of these feelings are common to all university students, but it is important that we recognise them as expressing key needs for foundation year students.

Kahu's work stresses the imperative to consider a range of relationships when promoting student autonomy and achievement, but also mentions the need to factor in staff workloads and the support staff needed in order to teach effectively (Kahu, 2013, p. 766). Our first cohort were taught by colleagues who volunteered to join the project: for the coming year we have formalised and so recognised the contribution made by staff.

In this context, foundation year work at the University of Surrey can help. Although we have taken the opposite approach in terms of teaching on the Foundation Year, by drawing on

staff from across the University (with no 'reluctant lecturers' yet) as opposed to the dedicated foundation year staff team at Surrey, we can learn from the 'sharing practice meetings' that Dampier *et al.* describe. We held teaching team meetings several times over the year, but should perhaps model these meetings more on the sort of reflective practice that is clearly working well at Surrey (Dampier *et al.*, 2019, p. 45).

Misconception Four: They Would Attend Everything

Whilst attendance is clearly important, and non-attendance can be a sign of deeper problems in a student, in the learning space itself, in the moment, poor attendance might be overlooked to some extent. However, I am used to relatively high attendance at my sessions, so finding that, for one memorable study skills workshop, only six foundation year students out of 28 had turned up, was not a comfortable experience. The reason was simple: we had asked them to read too much in one week on our subject modules and my session on planning did not particularly excite them.

Throughout the year the attendance levels fluctuated more than we might have expected, so in the informal feedback group the students were asked why they sometimes stayed away. A couple of the reasons are perennial for any students: they loathe early morning learning and they dislike having to walk away from their familiar area to attend sessions in other parts of the campus. What was less expected was the pressure these students felt to keep up, to complete every task, to read every page before they were prepared to expose themselves to a learning situation in which they might have to voice an opinion. This has led to us making the reading path through our modules far more even and less onerous. We are going to be relying much more on short extracts that have been sent to the students in advance, but on which they will not be expected to work before the seminar. Having trialled this in a Part One module, we are confident of its efficacy as an approach.

Reading lists are an easy fix – creating a sense of module cohesion and classroom community less so. As far back as 1997, in his research into 'Classroom as Community', Tinto wrote of the classroom as 'the crossroads where the social and the academic meet', and pointed out that '…the educational encounters that occur therein are a major feature of student educational experience' (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). I observed that what hindered that sense of classroom community, perhaps more than anything else, was the introduction of any confusion or uncertainty about what the students were supposed to be doing there. Far more than for our Part One students, our foundation students were made anxious about timetable or location alterations, additional activities, unexpected tasks and anything that blurred their route through the year, including their understanding of how the modules worked.

As an interdisciplinary offering, we have had to make our foundation year modules broad in topics and methodology, but this was not the problem that kept some students away for some weeks. It was their struggle to understand exactly how that week's learning activity fitted with the week before, and would prepare them for the week after, and how that all fitted into the module theme. We have divided our two subject modules into five-week teaching blocks (in our timetabling system, this represents half a term each), which we thought might be adequate for them to feel grounded and secure, but they need more guidance. In the coming year, we plan to make two changes to try to rectify the problem: we will give opening lectures for each five-week block (all our work this year was carried out in workshop/seminar style activities without an overarching lecture structure) and we are producing detailed module handbooks which make the connections clear, and show how our main texts fit into the module; they will also include

all the extracts from which we will be working. We would generally rely on our VLE alone to provide this information, but the feedback group were very clear that they would have found hard-copy module handbooks, as well as online versions, reassuring.

Misconception Five:
The Cohort would Comprise our 'Usual' Students

I usually teach most in an English Literature department, where female students far outnumber male students, so I was slightly surprised to find myself faced with a greater than usual proportion of male students (around a third of the group). I also realised, after some time, that more BAME students were present than is standard in our English Literature department (10 out of 26 of this year's foundation year students).

BAME students and male students were shown in a recent report to be generally less common than white and female students in the subjects covered by our Arts and Humanities Foundation Year (Universities UK, 2018). Although nationally there was near parity between male and female students in 'Historical and Philosophical Studies', as defined and reported by Universities UK in its 2018 report (which would explain the greater proportion of male students in this cohort compared to a usual English Literature cohort), the BAME recruitment gap is wide in all our foundation year subject areas. To see this high proportion of BAME students has led to more questions than answers and will form part of our teaching reflection in the coming year.

The pre-university BAME attainment gap is not something that we can affect, but what is within our purview is how we give a sense of belonging to those BAME students who reach us. During the feedback group discussion, one BAME student explained that she would never have considered a university such as Reading until the foundation year opportunity arose for her. In terms of the 'flocks' mentioned earlier, there was no BAME flock that I could discern, but we do run a thriving BAME student network across some of our departments.

Outreach work over the coming months will link to more BAME students, as we reflect on the best next steps for future cohorts. The work of Seal and Parkes has been helpful in thinking this through. Their advocacy of student-led tutor groups is one that we will trial in future (Seal and Parkes, 2019), p. 16). Our 'Identities' module comprises the themes 'gender and identity', 'race and national identity', 'changing identity' and 'self-identity' and students found these themes engaging, so these might usefully be extended into student-led, reflective study sessions.

Misconception Six:
They would Want to Move On at the End

A foundation year could be seen by students as a stepping stone to their university of choice, with their degree of choice, so we were ready for any of them to move on from our university at the end of the year, especially as they had come to us through clearing. This is not how things worked out. Although we have a few students whose circumstances have prevented them from continuing in Higher Education, none of our students who are continuing in their degrees are moving away from Reading. Six of them are planning to change degree subject, which was as we expected, but they are all going to be with us in the Autumn.

When I asked the feedback group why they were planning to stay, the answers were interesting. Although some were able to talk about how much they appreciated the chance to study at a university for which they would not have applied had there not been a foundation

year, and some told of their excitement about the subject and modules they would be studying in Part One of their BA, for the most part the question was met with slight surprise. Why would they leave, they asked, now that they are Reading students, settled and happy where they are living and studying? This is, surely, student engagement at its most demonstrable: they are staying with us. But is it as simple as that? Bryson talks of student engagement as having

> elements of process, agency and outcome, as it is dynamic and volatile. It is located within the being of the individual. The multi-dimensional nature of the concept and the diversity and variety of relevant concepts makes constructing a conceptual map rather challenging. (Bryson, 2014, p. 19)

Challenging, but necessary, if we are to keep future cohorts of foundation year students engaged and content, able to succeed, whatever success means to them. This is the next challenge with our 'Foundation Flock'.

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