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**Supporting African Canadian and First Nations Students: Strategies for Success**

**Abstract**

*The Transition Year Programme (TYP) at Dalhousie University is designed to increase the successful participation of First Nations and African Canadian students in university studies. This paper provides some general information about the TYP, its genesis, current structure, and some of the challenges faced by students, then focuses on the evolution of one component of the Programme, a course entitled Strategies for University Learning. One particular assignment in this course was inspired by discussions with the students about how they believe their cultural background and experiences influence their learning and motivation. The interaction between cognition and culture is infinitely complex, and any attempt to understand it must take into account not only contemporary theories of learning, but also information from students themselves about their own educational struggles and successes. Since many of our students have encountered racism and prejudice and some seem to have very little moral support as they embark on the often intimidating journey into academia, the instructor decided to include in the course an assignment that would allow some of these issues to be explored in greater depth. Included in this paper are some of the responses to that assignment, especially what it revealed about the students’ prior learning experiences and their educational role models. Also discussed is the question of independent versus collaborative learning and whether students’ comments confirm what researchers have discovered about cognitive and motivational styles. The final section of this paper explains the ongoing support provided to students upon completion of the Transition Year Programme.*

The Transition Year Program at Dalhousie University, housed in the College of Continuing Education, has opened the door to university studies for over seven hundred African Canadian and Aboriginal students over the past thirty years. Our graduates have gone on to complete degrees in such areas as social work, law, education, political science, sociology, and dental hygiene. TYP prepares students for university. To this end, we offer five courses, Native Studies, Black studies, Math, English and Strategies for University learning. TYP is housed in the Dalhousie University College of Continuing Education. The purpose of this paper focuses on one of the courses offered by TYP, Strategies for University Learning as one example of the skills taught in TYP.
Course Context

Many of our students come from backgrounds of poverty and oppression. In fact, the genesis of TYP came directly from the target communities who recognized that systemic racism in the secondary school system limited the participation of Aboriginal and Black students in post-secondary studies. Moreover, both communities experienced segregated school systems. Particularly, the First Nations students and their parents suffered the indignities of residential school. Both systems based their assessment of students on outdated stereotypes, thus preventing our students from reaching their full potential. TYP increases Aboriginal and African Canadian representation at the University by preparing them for university admission. Unfortunately, systemic racism continues today in secondary schools and our students face significant limits in achieving their potential. TYP breaks down these barriers for students from both communities.

In 1989, Dalhousie initiated a review of the program. The Committee, chaired by Professor A. Wayne Mackay, created the “Breaking Barriers” report.\(^1\) First and foremost, the Committee identified economic need as a major barrier for students from these communities. To alleviate some of the economic strain, TYP provides tuition waivers, living allowances, bus passes, books, and supplies to all qualified students. Once a student completes TYP with a “B” average, students have a tuition waiver for their first degree as long as s/he maintains a C average.

Our students nevertheless face daunting challenges. Students from both communities face issues of making the transition from work to school, negative stereotyping, family and community issues, debt and financial issues, low self confidence, and learning styles that may differ from the mainstream. We also have students who speak their indigenous language as their first language and English is their second language. Students in TYP often have left secondary school prior to completion or have completed high school with marks insufficient for them to gain admission into Dalhousie in a regular degree program.

As a result, we have a very diverse student body. Our students range in age from 19 years to 55 years. For example, we have students who have completed high school, mature students with a GED and students who are single parents. Our admission process examines a student’s marks, references, test scores and work history. Each student must also have an interview with the admissions committee. We usually receive seventy to eighty applications for twenty five to thirty places in the program.

During their year here, TYP faculty and staff recognize the needs of our students and not only do we teach our students the necessary skills for success in university but we also provide services such as financial aid counselling, personal counselling, and we pair each student with a faculty advisor. While our courses still are not for credit, we certainly continue to press for recognition of two of our courses for credit with the University administration.

We have also made the program available part time to students who have compelling issues that prevent them from attending the program full time. For example, we have accepted students with disabilities who cannot manage a full course load. In these instances, students with disabilities may use the services of the advisor for students with disabilities.

On campus, we also have access to the Black Student Advising Centre as well as the Native Education Counselling unit. All TYP students have access to all services at Dalhousie. We also have, a psychologist on staff who will see students dealing with personal crisis. We also utilize the career counselling centre to assist students in selecting a career path. Through interest tests and access to materials, students can begin to plan their degree program. TYP also has workshops for students on topics such as parenting, handling stress, dealing with procrastination and budgeting. If students required more personalized help, we can refer them to financial counsellors.

Recently, TYP has been able to use the services of Counselling Services for students with potential learning disabilities. We are also exploring the use of standardized testing for selected students to ensure our courses meet their needs.

All TYP courses focus on the development of university level skills. With the addition of Dr. Melanie Farrimond to TYP, the course, Strategies for University Learning, has further developed closer ties with TYP faculty to encourage students to enhance their study skills. In the next part of our paper, Dr. Farrimond discusses the evolution of the Strategies for University Learning course in response to the learning experiences of the students.

**Strategies for University Learning**

*Strategies for University Learning* is a course which covers a wide variety of basic study skills and self-management strategies designed to help students effectively prepare for the demands of full-time university studies. Students learn about many topics, including time management, increasing concentration and avoiding procrastination, math strategies, delivering effective presentations, and optimizing your learning by becoming aware of how you learn. All TYP students must take this course.

**Learning Styles**

One of the most important strategies for academic success is, to become aware of how you learn most effectively, including understanding your circadian rhythm (or energy levels at various times of the day), your most productive study area, and your ability to focus, among a whole host of other factors. It depends to a large extent on motivation and your learning or cognitive style or your preferred learning modality, that is, the way you like to take in and process information and express yourself. In my first year teaching the course, I covered the four learning styles of visual/graphic, auditory/oral, reading/writing, and kinaesthetic (involving various senses). The students responded well to this, so in
second term we looked at Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Once again, this was a popular topic as it seemed to encourage those whose self confidence may have taken some serious knocks from past learning experiences.

Students develop self-confidence by recognizing that people are intelligent in different ways. Students are cautioned not to use this new knowledge as an excuse for not doing well in certain courses. Rather, they should realize that we all learn differently, and that there are things they can do to compensate for what we might call a teaching / learning mismatch. For example, a visual learner might convert her lecture and reading notes into a more visual form by adding lists, charts, diagrams or even just some symbols. Kinaesthetic learners may be more drawn to courses that involve field trips, experiments and labs. Students studying history could enhance the course content by visiting local museums to learn differently about what they are reading.

I recently started to look at some of the research that has been conducted in the area of learning styles, particularly as they pertain to mathematics, and especially with reference to Black and First Nations students. I read about the contrast between reflective and impulsive learners (Shade, 1982), analytic and relational styles (Cohen, 1969), and field-independent and field-dependent learning (Witkin, 1981). A field-independent learner may easily perceive hidden figures, be a more independent learner, more able to think in an abstract way, and understand abstract concepts. A field-dependent learner, on the other hand, may need to see things in context in order to fully understand them, and may work more effectively in a collaborative learning environment.

Field articulation, as developed by Witkin (1981), can also be thought of in terms of how well one can extract useful information from an embedding context, such as a reading comprehension or deciphering a math problem from a word context. Researchers such as Witkin and Shade (1982) have found that African-Americans tend towards field dependence. Cohen (1969) found that these styles are produced by the kinds of families and groups into which students are socialized.

Cultural Context

While such information may be useful to instructors, it seemed to me that it also might be useful to discuss with students how they thought their cultural background affects their attitudes towards learning. Some of the students we work with talk of having frequently encountered racism, of having had little moral support from family and community and of receiving a fair amount of negative feedback which has, in some cases, shattered their self confidence as learners. I decided to create an assignment that might allow us to address some of these issues in more detail.

The interaction between cognition and culture is, of course, extremely complex, but I asked them to try to think seriously about this topic and to teach me about how they learn. I asked them to consider whether they prefer learning independently or in groups, to reflect on their cultural background, their community, their family, and help me work through the questions that arise when we try to understand how culture affects learning. I
was curious to see if their comments would confirm what researchers have found about cognitive and motivational styles.

Students responded that it was difficult to comment on how their culture influences their learning. Many had never really thought about it. Some students said that in high school they were rarely called on to answer questions, even if their hand was raised. One mother spoke of seeing the same thing happening to her children who are now in school. Her daughter’s teacher reports that she works well in groups but needs assistance to complete work independently. One student talked of the teacher not thinking she was capable of helping her child with homework. Of herself as a student, she commented that disappointment is so ingrained that every day in the TYP she thinks she is going to fail. In actual fact, she is doing very well.

Another student reported feeling that the teachers in her high school expected so little of her that she would not even bother to do assignments. This is an attitude that we sometimes encounter in the TYP, where the notion that assignments are optional or deadlines are not serious can persist. As instructors, we must respond to such beliefs as soon as we encounter them in order to dispel them. It is important to let students express their feelings about prior learning experiences and to acknowledge them, but it is equally important to encourage them to think of university as a fresh start and to realize that everyone in the TYP is there to support their learning and academic progress.

*Family and Community Role Models*

Some students reported having very supportive families. Others say they had very little parental guidance as far as education is concerned, and were expected rather to get a job and earn some money. Many wrote about being the first person in their family to attend university. This is sometimes met with negativity from the community, in the sense that the person at university thinks they are superior to others. Both Black students and Aboriginal students commented on this. One student talked about there being very few university-educated people in his community. Those who are educated tend to seek jobs in government agencies but are not always successful. Many wonder why they should bother to spend money on education when they still won’t be hired. Some students reported having low motivation, whereas others felt highly motivated. Some Black students described their high motivation as being fuelled by the desire to prove themselves. Aboriginal students frequently commented that they want ultimately to return to their community in order to work for the improvement of the lives of others.

I asked students who their role models are in terms of education and careers. The most common response was family members and teachers, though two Black female students mentioned Oprah Winfrey. Some Black male students mentioned male relatives in entrepreneurial positions. One student brought up a very interesting point: Blacks in Nova Scotia are in communities separate from everyone else. Young people are surrounded by others unable to attend school but who raise a family and have a fairly comfortable life, so the kids growing up tend to want the same things because that is what they know and see.
On a more positive note, aboriginal students wrote about the respect they have for the elders in their communities, as they pass down knowledge. This leads often to a respect for educators in general and to an appreciation of history. One student also wrote about her natural curiosity about phenomena in the natural world, her desire to seek explanations for events, and how this was a direct result of her cultural background.

As for the question of independent versus collaborative learning, many stated they prefer to work in groups. However, one student, whose cultural background is Creole, wrote about the emphasis in her culture on working independently as this is believed to lead to much better focus and concentration than in collaborative tasks.

This proved to be a very stimulating assignment, both for students and the instructor. It was a challenging question, but one which led to some interesting insights and raised yet more questions for further exploration. One of the main strategies for success for students in the Transition Year Programme is for them to identify how they learn best, to reflect on how their confidence may have been affected in prior learning experiences, and to maximize their learning by compensating for any teaching/learning mismatches. We must work with students to help them see the relationship between their effort and their academic performance and encourage them to have positive expectations. As instructors, we have to let them know when they are improving, even if at times the improvements may only be marginal. Most importantly, we must encourage students to move beyond negative feelings and attitudes towards the academic environment and help them to assume responsibility for and control over their learning.

*Strategies for University Learning* is very student focused. Based on research that discusses different learning styles that arise due to upbringing, culture, and economic status, we have tried to incorporate this research to increase their self confidence, overcome negative learning experiences, and to empower the students with skills that will help them navigate the next phase of their academic career: their degree programme. In the final section, we discuss some of the support mechanisms in place for Post TYP students.

**Post-TYP Support**

At TYP, seventy percent of our students successfully complete the program. Our students go on to degrees in arts, social work and law, to name a few. Early on, when students completed TYP, the program did not follow up on their progress and offered limited support. In the past six years, TYP recognizes that students face yet another transition as they move into the academic program. The first two years of study are pivotal to the students’ success. We offer support to students making that transition in various ways. First, we track each student’s progress. We encourage students to return to TYP for academic and personal support and provide tutoring services if they are required. The Employment Equity Office also initiated an Aboriginal and Black student mentoring program, for all students from each community. TYP also offers an academic scholarship, available in January, in amounts up to one thousand dollars for those
students with excellent GPAs. We also honour our graduating students at the TYP closing ceremony and give them a small financial award for successfully completing their degree.

Financial pressures continue to create problems for our students. Despite the tuition waiver, (which is significant), students may face problems in gaining student loans due to new rules for mature students whereby the student loan office examines their credit rating. As a result, if a student cannot access student loans for living expenses, s/he may be forced to work full time and attend school part-time.

TYP has been at Dalhousie since 1970. The Program still serves a need in the communities. Proactive plans, based on students’ needs, still remain the linchpin of the program. Dalhousie University has made available significant resources to allow TYP to flourish and we trust that our Program will continue to serve the African Canadian and Aboriginal communities and through their success, the communities at large.

Selected Bibliography


