Knowing our Students: The Transition Year Program at Dalhousie University

Abstract

How well do we actually know and understand the students that we teach? Are we aware of their motivations, goals, learning styles, fears, expectations, and needs? How much do we know about their past educational experiences? What should we try to better understand with regard to our students, and what are some ways to increase our understanding? These questions will be examined and discussed, especially as they pertain to teaching and learning in the Transition Year Program (TYP), a one-year program designed to increase the successful participation of African-Canadian and First Nations students in degree programs at Dalhousie University. Many of our students overcome great hardships and obstacles to achieve academic success. Several graduates of the program are the first in their families to get a university education. In order to try and answer some of the identified questions, and to demonstrate the tremendous impact that the program has had in the lives of our students, some students’ stories will be told.

As I was walking down the front steps outside the TYP house the other day, a young student who happened to be passing by piped up, “What do they teach in there?” I told him it was the home of the Transition Year Program, designed to prepare African-Canadian and First Nations students who do not meet standard entrance requirements for degree programs at Dalhousie University. “Wow!” he said, processing the obviously unexpected answer to his innocent question. As he walked me to my car, he continued to ask questions and expressed his surprise that there was a need for such a program. That student’s surprise is fairly typical of the reactions I have received when explaining what I do. Despite our best efforts to ensure equality and to promote and celebrate diversity within the education system, many students remain disadvantaged, be it socially, financially, or psychologically. The fact is that still in 2006 we need programs such as the TYP to increase diversity on our campuses and to encourage pursuit of university studies by disadvantaged students. To some, TYP is an expensive and unnecessary program, a strain on resources, especially as not all of our
students graduate (though 27 out of 30 graduated in 2005) and not all of those who do, complete a degree. The fact is, when given adequate academic, psychological and financial support, many of our graduates go on to earn at least one degree and enter the workforce with a competitive edge, inspire others around them, and, having broadened their minds, increased their self-confidence as learners, and achieved great personal growth. Many of them choose to give back to their communities as social workers, educators, researchers, businesspeople, artists, and community leaders.

While pursuing a doctoral degree in French Studies at Dalhousie University, I worked part-time as a Study Skills instructor, a job which proved to be immensely rewarding and the perfect complement to the teaching I was doing in the French department. I was invited to serve as interim coordinator for the program one year, still as a PhD student, so I was very fortunate. The experience I gained there has proven to be extremely valuable in terms of my teaching in French and in Gender and Women’s Studies. I feel that I have developed what may be termed a holistic approach to teaching. It is also my belief that education should be challenging but liberating. The Transition Year Program should inspire hope and empowerment. As bell hooks writes, “My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness.” (hooks, 2003, p. xiv). I work hard to understand my students, to get to know what drives them, what, if anything, they think is holding them back, and where they see themselves headed in the adventure of learning. Besides the satisfaction I derive from witnessing students grow and gain confidence in themselves as learners, the biggest reward for training as a study skills counselor came in 2003 when I got the opportunity to work in the Transition Year Program. Since accepting that offer, I have learned a lot about myself, but, more importantly, about students who are new to university study, and, more specifically, students who find themselves in racial minorities. This paper is designed in part to provide some general information about the Transition Year Program, but also, perhaps, to provide some food for thought. Most importantly, I would like to introduce some of our students, and, in keeping with the theme of the conference, to share their stories. To this end, my paper will be interspersed with student success stories, each of which has been featured on the Dalhousie University web page (www.dal.ca).
The Transition Year Program

The Transition Year Program was born in 1970. It is a one-year program designed for Aboriginal and Black students who do not yet meet standard Dalhousie entrance requirements. Dalhousie University, in partnership with the two communities, established TYP to redress educational inequities faced by members of the First Nations and African Canadian communities. The program’s staff includes members of the Dalhousie University community and the First Nations and Nova Scotian Black communities. We prepare students for university in a number of ways. The core curriculum includes five full-year courses: Native Studies, Black Studies, English, Mathematics (one of three courses, depending on individual objectives), and Strategies for University Learning. Additionally, with the approval of the Director, students can take a credit course at Dalhousie. For example, some students this year are taking an introductory sociology course, others are taking courses in introductory Spanish, theatre and music. Last year one student took a course in International Development Studies. He wants to ultimately combine that area of study with Architecture, and one of his goals is to design housing in poor countries. This demonstrates once again the desire of our students to give back in some way to those less fortunate. If students successfully complete TYP with a ‘B’ average, they become eligible for tuition fee waivers for their first degree, as long as they remain in good academic standing.

Success Story – Diane Obed

Diane Obed comes from Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador. She successfully completed the Transition Year Program two years ago and is currently working conscientiously, as she always did, on her courses in sociology, psychology, French, and environmental studies. Diane first heard about the program from a friend, so she decided to apply and was chosen by the Labrador Inuit Association for sponsorship to travel to Halifax. Diane, like many of our Aboriginal students who come from living on the reserve to life in the unfamiliar city of Halifax, was extremely homesick at first, but she stuck it out. She now realizes the benefits of having a strong support system and how that helped her to reach her goals while living away from home. She was one of two
recipients that year of the Morris Saffron Prize for highest academic standing. Diane plans to pursue an education in Social Work, before returning to her hometown to contribute to the Aboriginal community.

Diane gradually became more confident in herself as a learner as her year in TYP progressed. By the end of the year, she was able to very competently deliver an in-class presentation, which was something she admitted she never thought she’d be able to pull off. Not only was that presentation confidently delivered, it was also brilliantly structured, highly informative, and academically strong. As Diane deftly fielded questions from her audience, I remember feeling quite astonished at how far she had come in such a short time. At the graduation ceremony, as she accepted her certificate of completion and then the Morris Saffron prize, we the instructors and the Director felt extremely proud. Moments like that one make all of the daily frustrations – and they are plentiful! – worth it. Diane’s story clearly illustrates the effectiveness of the program and the positive impact it has in students’ lives.

The call for papers for this conference prompted me to pose some simple questions. How much do we know about our students? What motivates them to succeed? What can we at TYP do to learn more about these things? What am I doing to increase my understanding of my students? I pose these questions because although I think I am already doing quite a good job at trying to understand my students, I suspect I could do a lot more.

**What do we know about our students?**

First of all, we know our students’ ages. We accept students of diverse ages, from teenagers to elders. We know where they are from and which target group they belong to (which is sometimes both). Most of the students come from Nova Scotia, many from local communities, primarily in Halifax Regional Municipality. Some Aboriginal students come from various Cape Breton communities – Chapel Island and Whycocomagh, for example, and occasionally we accept students from other provinces. Though the Program still serves the local communities, recently we have had increasing interest from students residing in Nova Scotia, but originally from elsewhere. Currently, we have
students from Jamaica, Sudan, and Ethiopia, and some of our graduates are from
Kenya and Sierra Leone. So, we have an increasingly diverse student population
in several senses.

Applicants submit to us a standard application form, their high school and any
other educational transcripts, three reference letters, and a personal statement in
which they explain their reasons for applying to the program. From those
statements we can glean certain details about their family situation, their past
educational experiences, their sense of direction, and their career interests. The
application package thus provides our first opportunity to learn a little about our
candidates. Occasionally, the application is so strong that without further ado we
offer the person a place in the program. Usually, though, we sift through the
applications – typically around 75-85 applications per year for 30 spaces – and
we select the stronger applicants for interviews. First, they are required to
complete a math test and an English test. The interview provides a great deal of
additional information, such as how the student heard about TYP, how much
they already know about it, and if they know any graduates. We learn more
about why they are interested in it, what strengths they think they have as
students, and whether they enjoy reading. One interviewer often attempts to
determine if potential students are serious about attendance and strongly
committed to academic success, while another will try to ascertain what the
candidates do for fun. We ask if they have a sense of what they might do for a
career. We are seeing increasing evidence of what has been termed the ‘CSI
factor’, as many students express a keen interest in majoring in forensic science!

So, these first two steps in the application process – the personal statement and
the interview – provide crucial information, but still, what we learn about our
potential students at this point is restricted to what they want us to know about
them. It is useful, but it is only a start.

How can we learn more about our students?

The obvious response is to talk to them. I learn a lot about my students in the
short time immediately before and after class. My office door is always open,
which encourages students to drop in if they need to talk to me. Another way to

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get to know students is through some orientation activities. This year, in an effort to give students a chance to get to know each other early on, we extended our orientation from one to two days and during the second day had some small group discussions about their goals and expectations. We then had a scavenger hunt, designed to help students find some useful resources on campus and required them to collect information from several locations including Dalplex (the sportsplex), the Counselling Centre, the Career Centre, the Black and Native Student Advising Centres, the library, and the math help centre. Prizes were awarded for information gathering and for team names, which included Logical Diversity, Divided Minds, and The Power of One! The general idea behind this second day of orientation was that, unlike the first, which is information overload day, it should be community building and should encourage teamwork, and help students to relax.

Where possible, we organize visits to sites of historical and contemporary significance in the local communities, such as the Native Friendship Centre or the Black Cultural Centre. It is not just about what we learn there, but also, little stories tend to come out about students’ relatives and friends. Last year, students visited the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, where there was an exhibition on ancient Egypt that coincided with the topic they were studying in the Black Studies course. One year the students had an exchange visit with students from the Transitional Year Program at the University of Toronto. Last year the students organised a movie night and invited the instructors. So, there are fairly frequent extra-curricular events and activities, which allow instructors and students to interact in a more relaxed environment. I think we learn a lot about our students and what drives or motivates them from these sorts of activities, as we get to see a side of the students we wouldn’t otherwise. These activities help develop a rapport between students and instructors that, I think, helps us understand our students a little better. On graduation day last year, students took over a portion of the ceremony and presented each of the instructors with a fun certificate. There is usually a fairly good atmosphere in the TYP.

Each student is assigned an academic advisor – one of the instructors – so that person tends to get to know the student a bit better and can keep an eye on how they are doing. In the English course, taught by renowned writer Lesley Choyce, the first assignment is to write about a life-changing moment or event. Students often choose to write about a negative time in their lives. Some students have
expressed that they found this cathartic and that they felt that the instructor(s) knew a bit about them which made them feel a bit more accepted and understood. In Native Studies, the group project and accompanying presentations on a book often reveal personal stories about parents, grandparents, or other relatives who experienced life in the residential schools. These are often painful stories, but we do not believe that that means they should not be told. Ultimately, it is the students’ decision about what to include in their essays and presentations. This course component has shown that other students learn in a very profound way about the realities of what they are reading about.

Indeed, our students have a lot to learn from each other and a lot to teach the instructors. Personally, I have learned about all kinds of things from the horrific to the ridiculous. I now know, for example, about flocabulary (rap lyrics). When I asked for a metaphor, one student suggested ‘my words are cannibalistic, they will eat you up!’ On another occasion, a student presented his reflection on how his year had been in the form of a study skills rap. I have to admit that as he began, I was grimacing, but by the end, I was enjoying it so much that I was hoping he would give me a copy!

TYP students represent different stages of life, and diverse life experiences. They have varying abilities, and some language issues. They are not necessarily the fairly typical, computer savvy, short-attention span, millenial students, as focused on in some other papers in this collection. Rather, many arrive with a limited familiarity with computers, uncommon stories to tell of troubled pasts, but with a great deal of drive and determination and gratitude for the chance at proceeding to university. When I was a first year student, I can honestly say that I did not have that drive. What I most certainly did have was a great deal of invisible privilege, to use Peggy McIntosh’s term. I rely, therefore, on my students to teach me what it is like for them as they prepare to enter academia.

Success Story – McCollins Jones

One student who taught the others a lot, especially about Africa, was McCollins Jones. McCollins is a recent TYP graduate who has overcome many obstacles in
a journey that has taken him from civil war in Sierra Leone to Nova Scotia. When the civil war broke out in 1991, McCollins was enrolled in community college and was unable to finish his studies. A national sports star (he won a track and field gold medal for his country, and he brought it to the interview), McCollins used his talents to help child soldiers, working to get them out of the war and involved in sports programs. He volunteers with the organization Right to Play. A family connection brought him to Nova Scotia. Sierra Leone shares strong historic ties to the province. Black Loyalists who left Nova Scotia in 1792 settled in Sierra Leone. McCollins was always interested in re-establishing this link with his ancestors. His is now exactly where he planned to be - in the Bachelor of Management (Recreation) program at Dalhousie.

**Strategies for University Learning**

Study skills courses are often undervalued. This is a shame, as they can often be the most important components in the academic success of new students. The course that I teach, Strategies for University Learning, is designed to provide basic study skills and a lot more. There are sessions on motivation and goal setting, dealing with distractions, and learning styles. Many of our students are visual learners, so we discuss ways to compensate for a teaching/learning mismatch. Another topic explored is culture and learning, as discussed at the Teaching Showcase in 2004. I try to give some assignments that require a degree of subjectivity, so that students can put something of themselves into their work. I regularly ask what, if any, difficulties they are having studying. I encourage them to work with each other and to create study groups. There are a few now that meet each week, and are completely student-driven.

When we talk about motivation, money always comes up, as does being a role model. I have never experienced poverty. I have never been a single parent. Most of my teachers at school and university were White. Though I pride myself on being able to recall what it felt like for me as a new university student, I’m not sure I can ever fully understand what it is like to be a TYP student. I have not experienced many of the personal problems that I know my students have. In school classes, people didn’t turn and stare at me whenever there was a reference to white people. I never hid in the basement when my grandparents
who raised me thought I was at school. If the teacher didn’t ask me for an answer even though my hand was up, I didn’t feel it might have something to do with the fact that I was White. So, our discussions about how to get and stay motivated often provide important insights into the nature of privilege and oppression.

We regularly share successes and brainstorm ways to address challenges students are having. Sometimes, through our discussions, I can detect possible learning disabilities, so I refer students to the Learning Disabilities counselor for what is called a pre-assessment. Typically, we detect real learning disabilities, such as ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, and sometimes dyscalculia, many of which have somehow gone undetected in school. We then have to ensure that the student has the necessary support for note taking or exam writing or whatever is required. The alarming part about this is that students frequently tell us that they were put in resource or special education or just that they felt stupid throughout their school years. This is surely an area for further research.

I hope to have outlined some of the ways I try to get to know and understand my students and support their learning in a holistic way. I try to help them develop more self-awareness and more independence as learners, and hopefully to realize that education is liberating and empowering and can be transformative. One of the readings we do in support of this is from the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, where he writes about how reading and expanding his vocabulary gave him a sense of hope and of freedom.

At the heart of most of the learning strategies we explore is the crucial role of good time management. Interestingly, some of our most successful students are single parents, often mothers, because not only are they driven but they also seem to manage their time extremely well. Many students are obliged to work part time, and at least three this year have horrible work hours. We talk about how much work is too much and how that can affect concentration and academic success, but that they need to support themselves financially. Striking the balance between studies, work, and other responsibilities is one of the greatest challenges faced by our students.
Success Story – Ashley Paris

One student whose time management skills were spectacular was Ashley Paris, of Truro, Nova Scotia. Ashley successfully completed the Transition Year Program in 2004, and plans to pursue a career in nursing. She also received the Morris Saffron Prize for highest academic standing. Ashley had a busy year, balancing her studies with several jobs in the customer service field. She has been involved with figure skating for most of her life and has competed in various competitions throughout Canada. She has received numerous skating medals and an award for Female Athlete of the Year, awarded by Sport Heritage, Truro. She has also volunteered as an amateur skating coach and enjoyed helping her community by teaching children the joys of skating. Ashley taught me about time management!

Conclusion

The seemingly straightforward question we were asked to reflect on for this conference, ‘who are our learners?’, is certainly the first question we must consider before embarking upon any journey into teaching and learning, and it is perhaps the most important question we as teachers can ask ourselves. The answers to that question can help us ensure that our teaching is effective, engaging, and relevant and, in the case of the Transition Year Program, that the program will not only ease the transition to university, but will demonstrate the transformative power of education. Our students have stories to tell us. We must take the time to listen and to learn.

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References

