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## IMPROVING THE FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ACADEMIC SKILLS, INCLUDING AEW

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### Abstract

Considerable attention is being afforded to the First Year Experience (FYE) of University students to enhance student retention and success. The literature highlights the importance of social capital (Bourdieu, 1993; Engestrom, 1987; Tinto, 2012; Wacquant, 2014), acquiring academic skills and in particular, argumentative essay writing (AEW), in the FYE and if it is seen to be influential for student success (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2013). The aim of this study is to identify implications for informing the improvement of AEW and academic skills within the context of the FYE. Moreover, the study will use a mixed methods approach by way of survey and semi-formal interviews. I will analyse the data and make deductions regarding the findings. I will code the data – this will be done as it is collected and will include, among other things, the date of the survey and interviews, who completed them and the number of returns. In conclusion, locating the study within the theoretical and conceptual framework of cultural activity theory (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 1993) provides a means to describe the dynamic interactions of the various personnel including lecturers and students in teaching and learning. Balancing the descriptive and interpretive elements of this study with structure and organisation will enhance the explication of the findings. In doing so, this study represents a credible contribution to the field and offers a viable approach for future investigations.

**Keywords:** Activity Theory, Social Capital, University

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### 1. Introduction

For many academics and students at university, the first year experience (FYE) is critically important as it largely determines student success and retention. The role of social capital and academic skill development, including the role of writing when considering assessment tasks and design, particularly argumentative essay writing (AEW), is the focus of this research proposal.

This document presents an outline of the proposed research that I intend to carry out for the completion of the Doctor of Education (EdD) candidature, noting that I have successfully completed all of the assigned coursework requirements for the EdD. This is organised in three sections. Section 1 introduces the research problem, aim of the study, the research questions, and significance of the study. Section 2 introduces the literature review and the sources that prompted and motivated the project. It also outlines the educational philosophies and pedagogical approach that will guide the project implementation. Section 3 outlines the methodology that will be used to design, implement the study, with specific discussion about the implementation on an activity theory approach. This includes the research population sampling and data analysis strategies.

**The Aim of the Study and the Research Questions:** This study aims to better understand how university students in the FYE make decisions about learning new academic

skills, including AEW, in a contemporary education environment. Understanding the cultural, social and mediated nature of learning (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 1993; Wacquant, 2015), the intent of this study is to describe and interpret the multi-faceted nature of learners in the first year of study in an institution of higher education. Unless first year students are aware of their own cognitive disposition of the dynamics that influence their decision making regarding academic skills and AEW, they may become a statistic of those who choose to withdraw from study in the FYE (Tinto, 2012). Further, this study will assist in understanding how the attributes of the individual (such as their beliefs about learning, academic skills, AEW, personnel available at university to help) connect, interact and sometimes conflict with their surrounding academic, cultural and social context. The study will also contribute to discussions about the use of Activity theory as a research tool in institutions of higher education. The review of the literature, outlined later in this document, informed the formulation of the main question that will specifically guide this research project; that is, *What approaches are most effective in developing students' academic capital through AEW?:* **The research problem: an Activity Theory:** The main concepts gleaned from a review of the relevant literature indicate the importance of particular areas that influence student success. Another important issue to consider with institutions of higher learning is that of equity of all students on campus, off campus or other. Therefore, the purpose of this study, relating to the conceptual framework, has been guided by this information and an Activity theory (Engestrom, 2001) approach will be used. Activity theory is a cross-disciplinary, theoretically based, conceptual framework stemming from Vygotsky's work on the nature and development of human behaviour in the 1920's. Vygotsky proposed that culture and social interactions are not external to the mind, but instead they are part of the way that the mind is formed. In addition to the main research question, the following questions will also guide the research project:

The guiding research questions include:

*In what ways does academic skills development, including AEW, influence student success in the FYE?*

*In what ways does social capital influence student success in the FYE?*

*What implications are there for the roles of personnel in assisting students to be successful in the FYE?*

This study also aims to investigate key areas of student retention and success through drawing upon Activity theory and social interactions. In particular, this will be aimed at uncovering facts about the students' learning and understanding of the FYE skills and who helped the students to apply them. There are many studies identified in the literature that point to the importance of academic skills and its link to success of students in tertiary studies. According to studies, much of the students' time at university will be spent on critical academic thinking, reading, research and writing. Two key elements of student success include AEW and social capital. Over the years, researchers (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012) have identified the need to monitor students in the early stages of their coursework.

**Significance of the study:** The scope of this research project is concerned with the design, implementation and analysis of the effects of social phenomena on student success in relation to academic skills development, including AEW, in the first year of university study. The aim is to inform improved student success and retention. Significant examples of these problems, as reported in the literature, are high attrition rates, lack of preparedness of self-study, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, lack of IT skills, and general dissatisfaction with

the learning environment (Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2014). These crucial aspects are also substantiated via recent studies on attrition from many universities including Southern Cross University, Griffith University and University of Wollongong.

This is reinforced by many studies that emphasise the importance of social aspects relating to student success. Engestrom (2001) notes that there are contradictions and tensions within any activity system and, if not monitored correctly, these tensions can disrupt the flow resulting in disruption and discoordination. These tensions referred to as *contradictions* in activity theory (AT) are the underlying causes of visible problems and conflicts. While contradictions generate disturbances in any activity system, they are also seen as important drivers for innovation and change. Indeed, they are seen to have the potential to transform an activity system. Furthermore, Wacquant (2014) also shows that any social system will have tensions and that when they are acknowledged and acted on by the participants, can transform the system in a positive way. This is also strongly supported by Tinto (2012) as well as Kuh (2014) who emphasise the point that the FYE in higher education does have multifaceted tensions between students and students, students and staff, staff and staff and these interactions, if handled well, will transform the institution in a positive way.

The research problem can be succinctly formulated and summarised as poor academic performance is linked to a number of problems affecting tertiary learners, especially those enrolled in the FYE. The most important of these problems as reported in the literature are:

- high attrition rates,
- lack of preparedness of self-study,
- lack of confidence,
- lack of motivation,
- lack of IT skills and general dissatisfaction with the learning environment (Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2014).

It must be noted that there is a reciprocal relationship between poor performance and the problems mentioned above, for example, poor performance can quickly lead to a lack of confidence and vice-versa and so on. Guided by the research question and the relevant literature, the purpose of this research study is to inform the importance of the relationship of the first year student to the key personnel who are available to help with AWE skills. In order to investigate the research question, the project includes the design and implementation of a FYE system which aims to enable student success and assumes the importance of social capital on student performance. The proposed study aims to provide information that will enable the university being studied to implement and/or modify the way in which social capital principles are followed in order to increase student engagement and success in the FYE at university.

**Theoretical framework:** The theoretical starting point for this research emphasises the social connection of specialised staff on student engagement and success. The key researchers and theorists who highlight the importance of social connection include Vygotsky (1978), Engestrom (2001), Bourdieu (1993) and Tinto (2011). Drawing upon their theorising, the proposed study will focus on students from a regional university to determine the impact the specialised personnel have on the students' success with AEW skills. The ideas of Bourdieu (social capital) are relevant here. Other theories with explanatory power and connectedness (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012) include *belonging* and *belongingness*, *identity*, and *sense of place/place-making*, to name but a few. These ideas will be explored in the context of social connection to student studies with AEW skills and relevant ideas will be drawn upon for the thematic analysis presented within the study.

This introductory section described the overall aim of the study, provided a background and context for the inquiry, indicated the significance of the research, articulated the research question and sub-questions and outlined the structure of the thesis. The following section extends this introduction to further develop the rationale, highlights the gaps in the understanding, and constructs the conceptual framework underpinning the study.

## 2. Literature review:

This study aims to better understand how university students in the FYE make decisions about new pedagogical aspects and academic skills, including AEW, in a contemporary education environment. Understanding the cultural, social and mediated nature of learning, the intent of this study is to describe and interpret the multi-faceted nature of learners in the first year of study in an institution of higher education. The development of AT is discussed to build a picture of the theoretical constructs employed to characterize and interpret the complex activity of student learning in the FYE at university in an academic context including AEW. An examination of the contradictions and tensions will also be presented to determine the extent of which these can, when handled correctly, can enhance learning in the FYE. Vygotsky's main work was in developmental psychology, and he proposed a theory of the development of higher cognitive functions in children that saw reasoning as emerging through practical activity in a social environment. During the earlier period of his career he argued that the development of reasoning was mediated by signs and symbols, and therefore contingent on cultural practices and language as well as on universal cognitive processes.

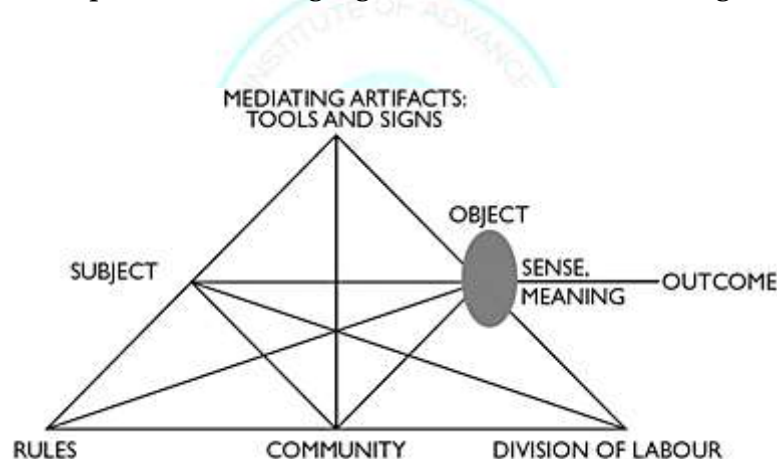


Figure 1 the structure of a human activity system in second-generation activity theory (Engestrom, 1987, p. 78)

In summary, this section has positioned itself within three broad fields of research – the problem of student attrition, personnel/social aspects of learning and activity theory. The purpose of this section is threefold – to provide a conceptual review of the theoretical aspects underpinning the current study, to provide a critical overview of the literature in order to identify issues and gaps, and to show how this study is related to AT. The *Activity theory* section introduced and described the principles of AT as a conceptual framework underpinning the study. The AT section also served to provide a link between AT as a conceptual framework and its application as an interpretive framework which is presented in section 3 of this study. The lens of AT is particularly useful for the current study in its capacity to provide insights into how university students negotiate the challenges of grasping academic skills including AEW. AT moves the focus from the academic tools of critical thinking, research and writing themselves to the way those tools are intentionally acquired by the students via the various university personnel. In doing so, AT affords insights into the

dynamic nexus of people, purpose of study and academic skills including AEW in the FYE of university students.

### 3. Methodology

This study will use a combination of exploratory and descriptive research methodologies to investigate interactions between key university personnel and the students pertaining to academic skills and in particular AEW. The exploratory approach will ensure that all relationships among the study variables are investigated and their effects on one another are identified and explained. The descriptive method will complement the exploratory study and provide the means to organise the findings in tabular and graphic format ready for the final data analysis in order to validate the explanations. Another reason for this is to ensure that all patterns and general trends in the data set are identified. This research methodology will enable the research questions to be addressed through a mixed methods approach to enable the Activity theory lens. Therefore the methodology will employ data collection through the administration of a student survey, as well as individual interviews with students from this regional university who have completed at least one semester of study. The survey and interviews will include a series of questions that will be aimed at identifying key aspects of academic writing including defining AEW and listing key personnel who help the students to develop these skills. **Example of questions:**

- What is your definition of academic skills?
- How would you define AEW skills?
- To what extent has the university helped you with AEW skills in the FYE?
- Are there any other personnel who have helped you with AEW in your FYE?

Further questions will be added as a basis of retrieving information using question samples from the Survey. It is planned that the research plan will be implemented at the beginning of Semester 2 and involves a survey of one hundred education students (approximately 10-15 questions) and interviews (approximately 30 minutes long) with a sample of 4 students from the main group. It must be noted that ample time will be given to prepare and obtain ethics approval. The students will be selected from the Faculty of Education from this regional university, all of whom will have finished at least one semester of university study. The managerial and organisational aspects of the interview method will enable me to save time as well as collect accurate unbiased information through an effective method.

Once the data have been collected, data will be analysed and discussed. I will analyse and deduce some findings. Firstly, the data will need to be coded and this is best done on or close to the day of the interview. Indicate the date of the interview, which students completed it, the number of completed surveys and interviews and the duration. Ensure that the interviews are also categorised according to aspects such as, gender, age, origin etc. Much of the categorising should have been done leading up to the interview, but it needs coding in how I have the data so that it matches the coding. For more open-ended interviews I will need to read through them carefully and code them after the event. This means that the coding should relate to the kinds of answers, themes and issues, and categories of response. Therefore it can be seen that managing mixed methods data accurately, is essential for the overall success of this research project. **Data analysis considerations:** A number of analytical strategies will be employed for this mixed methods study. As mentioned in the previous section, the data collection will involve two phases: the survey and interviews. This will provide a progressively more layered and complex picture of each participant's history of the FYE in academic skills including AEW. Prior to commencement of phase 1, the survey, a

framework will be developed from the literature, and linked to Activity theory on student engagement and success in the FYE at university. This tool will help in profiling participants' understanding and beliefs relating to the FYE in the first phase of data interpretation. Phase one questions of the data interpretation will attempt to gather a quantitative representation of each participant. Phase two will involve four participants recruited from the phase one survey, to be involved in individual semi-structured interviews. Phase two of data interpretation will involve the AT theoretical framework in order to ascertain the social and cultural impacts that university personnel have on the engagement and success of first year university students in the field of academic skills including AEW.

#### 4. Summary

The research reported in this paper was motivated by an interest in exploring the extent to which a range of social aspects within a first-year experience program were recognised and valued by students in the first year of a study at university. It also sought to establish whether there is the need for further research into how students make sense of, and respond to, their first-semester experience, and in particular, the personnel who offer support to the students. Analysis of two different data will aim to show that what the students think about social interactions and success with their studies in the first-year experience. The increasing diversity of student cohorts and the complicated range of factors that combine to shape how students react to their first months of university study make it necessary for staff to continue to engage in ongoing evaluation of first-year practices and particularly in the social arena. In this context there is the need for ongoing analysis, not only into how different students make sense of their first-year experiences and of the personnel who are available to support them, but also into how they come to understand the multiple, day-to-day ways that staff members ensure that students believe themselves to be supported. This research, therefore, provides the basis for further, Activity theory - related investigations into the practices of academic staff, who play a vital role in implementing successful first-year practices.

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