

Title: **Developing learnership: engaging experienced students as academic mentors in support of first year transition**

Presenters: **Kay Sambell and Linda Graham**
Northumbria University

Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

Appreciate some of the benefits of engaging second-year students in the academic induction of the first years

Compare and contrast the project's approaches with the strategies used to support first-years in their own institutional contexts

Session Outline

Key issues:

Discussion will focus on students' views of their involvement in a project which engaged second-years as agents in first-year students' transition to university-level study.

Second-year students were trained as academic mentors ('Learning Leaders') who, working in collaborative partnership with staff, were supported to work closely with first years at key points within a core academic induction module: 'Approaches to Learning at University.' As relatively experienced learners, the Learning Leaders were uniquely placed to act as 'intermediaries' between the expert (lecturer) community and 'newcomers.'

They explicitly supported first years to develop learnership by

- Working collaboratively with the first years on small-group activities in lectures
- Co-producing, as part of the module, student publications and theorised learning materials on approaches to learning at university

The project activities were based on a model of 'epistemic apprenticeship'(Claxton, 2011). This foregrounds the social nature of learning and the significance of learner identities. From this perspective, first year transitions are supported by activities which focus attention on the sorts of things that experienced community members do 'behind the scenes' as they strive to make sense of a topic in the subject domain, so that newcomers become gradually

apprenticed into the processes of academics' ways of thinking and practising (Meyer & Land, 2005) and the principles underpinning effective approaches to learning (Ramsden, 2005).

Research indicates, however, that the necessary shift in learning relationships, with students becoming involved in the co-construction of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of teachers' knowledge, presents a challenge for many first years (Christie et al, 2007; Haggis, 2003). Carefully designed pedagogic strategies are typically required to help them take increased responsibility for their own learning in the subject domain (Boud & Associates 2010; Sambell, 2010).

The paper will present students' experiences of the project for delegates to discuss. These will be analysed and related to the literature on transition and engagement (Nicol, 2009; Kuh, 2005; Trowler & Trowler, 2010) in order to

- draw out emerging themes and issues,
- consider the ways in which the work might be transferable to other disciplines,
- enable participants to focus on lessons learned.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

15 minutes : Presentation outlining the project's approach, rationale and activities. Rather than simply describing our innovations, this will position our work theoretically, enabling delegates to

- make conceptual links between this approach, and other ways of supporting first year academic induction
- perceive its relevance beyond the immediate context.

10 minutes delegates' read and discuss samples of student-produced publications/materials about effective learning.

20 minute facilitated delegate discussion about the following types of questions

- what are the implications of lessons learned from this pilot project?
- what are the relevant themes, challenges and issues for anyone wanting to consider using similar approaches?
- how does this approach to first year transition differ from delegates' own approaches? Does it have anything else to offer (and, if so, what?).

References

Boud, D. and Associates (2010). *Assessment 2020: Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education*. Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J. and McCune, V. 2008. A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(5): 567–81.

- Claxton, G (2011) Higher Education as Epistemic apprenticeship. Keynote: NAIRTL.
- Haggis, T. (2006) Pedagogies for diversity: retaining critical challenge amidst fears of 'dumbing down' *Studies in Higher Education* 31, 5, 521-535
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh J.H., and Whitt E.J. (2005) *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. Jossey-Bass
- Mann, S.J. (2001) Alternative Perspectives on the Student Experience: alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*. 26, (1), 7-19.
- Meyer, J.H.F.& Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49(3): 373-388
- Nicol, D. (2009) *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year*. Mansfield: Scottish Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- Ramsden, P. (2003) *Learning to Teach in HE*, (2nd edition), London: Routledge Falmer.
- Trowler, V & Trowler, P. (2010) *Student Engagement Evidence Summary*. York: Higher Education Academy