

Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds:

Resources for Australian higher education

Conceptual framework

Marcia Devlin, Karen Nelson, Sally Kift, Liz Smith and Jade McKay

Bridging socio-cultural incongruity

The project has developed a distinctive conceptual framework that avoids adopting either a deficit conception of students from LSES backgrounds or a deficit conception of the institutions in which they study. Rather than being the primary responsibility of solely the student or the institution to change to ensure student success, we argue that the adjustments would be most usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' toward *bridging socio-cultural incongruity*.

The notion of socio-cultural incongruence is adopted as a way of conceptualising the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and the high socio-economic institutions in which they study. The polarised deficit conceptions commonly resorted to for students and institutions, and the conception of socio-cultural incongruence, which challenges these perceived deficits, are outlined below.

The first deficit conception: Students are the problem

The suggestion that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students can presuppose a level playing field in relation to socio-cultural and background characteristics. It can be seductive to think that if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try hard enough, or persevere enough, or believe enough in their own ability, they can engineer their success at university. Devlin (2011) suggests the tacit expectations inherent in university practices are within a socio-cultural subset that is peculiar to the upper socio-economic levels. Unless these implicit expectations are made explicit, they may operate to exclude students from low socio-economic status who are not familiar with the norms and discourses of these other groups.

The second deficit conception: Institutions are the problem

The other conceptual frame is to problematise the institutions that are responsible for the success and progress of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Some suggest that rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, institutional cultures be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Zepke and Leach, 2005).

Other authors suggest that situational and dispositional barriers are created by institutional inflexibility (Billingham, 2009) and "...the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating inequalities" should be taken into account (Tett, 2004, p. 252). In work undertaken in the Australian context, James, Krause and Jenkins (2010) suggest that universities should make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students. However, Devlin (2010) argues that to genuinely contribute to the success and achievement of non-traditional students, universities need to do much more than to spell out their expectations for student involvement in learning.

The socio-cultural conception: Incongruence must be bridged

The project proposes a conceptual framework of 'socio-cultural incongruence' to describe the circumstances in which students from low socio-economic status attempt to engage with the particular socio-cultural discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. Murphy's (2009) UK study of factors affecting the progress, achievement and outcomes of new students to a particular degree program found a number of characteristics specific to the institution and to individual students that promote progression and achievement. These factors enable the incongruence between students and institutions to be 'bridged'.

Hence – 'bridging socio-cultural incongruity'.

An empathic institutional context

Based on the national study, a review of the relevant literature, an environmental scan of effective practice, interviews with 89 LSES students and interviews with 26 staff known for their effectiveness in teaching and supporting LSES students, the project team argue that socio-cultural incongruity can be bridged through the provision of an empathic institutional context that:

- Values and respects all students;
- Encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum;
- Incorporates inclusive learning environments and strategies;
- Empowers students by making the implicit, explicit; and
- Focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

Synthesis and analysis of the interview data revealed four key themes to which institutions need to attend to ensure the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status. The study found that the empathic institutional context:

- employs inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies;
- enables student agency;
- facilitates life and learning support; and
- is cognisant of students' financial challenges.

This framework underpins the deliverables from the project, which will be completed and launched in September 2012.

References

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