

Recognizing diverse capitals through reflective learning: An argument for transforming the first year

Zach Simpson

Engineering Education, University of Johannesburg, zsimpson@uj.ac.za

Helen Inglis

Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering, University of Pretoria, helen.inglis@up.ac.za

Celeste Combrinck

Science, Maths and Technology Education, University of Pretoria, celeste.combrinck@up.ac.za

Abstract

Successful learning, particularly at the first-year level, is strongly influenced by students' incentives and ability to conform to inflexible academic norms. This is problematic as students enter higher education with diverse backgrounds, resources, and motivations. We argue that the ways in which we teach and assess at undergraduate level foster what Macfarlane, in his conference think piece, calls 'strategic deception' on the part of higher education students, leading to a 'fake it until you make it' approach to meaning making and causing students to frame 'success' in limited ways. Our paper engages with the challenge of acknowledging and incorporating more diverse student experiences. This requires student reflection, not just on what is taught, but on what it means within their own and others' frames of reference and imagined futures.

Hlengwa, in her think piece, emphasises that any attempts to 'transform' the academy will be hampered because graduates entering into academia are those who have managed to master the discursive 'rules' of higher education. We argue that this begins with first-year teaching and learning, which tends to embrace students who fit a narrow 'normative' profile. Those who do not match this normative profile (too often, black, rural and other marginalised groups) are at risk of being alienated at this crucial juncture in their academic careers. The university fails to acknowledge and employ the array of resources and capitals that students bring into higher education, resulting in students not feeling that they 'belong' at the university and forcing them to engage in 'emotional performativity' (to use Macfarlane's phrase).

In this paper, we use a social justice lens as well as elements of an academic literacies perspective to frame our argument for transforming the first year. Throughout, we draw on data collected as part of various projects. Our analysis merges the empirical, the theoretical and our positionalities as higher education teachers and researchers. We discuss how first-year curricula could be redesigned to better embrace, recognise, and employ the diverse skills, histories, and perspectives that our first year students bring to higher education, and highlight the critical role of student reflection in this regard.

Keywords

First-year experience, teaching and learning, higher education, social justice, academic literacies.