



The Relation Between Orientations to Higher Education and Curricular Experiences



Rachel Spronken-Smith, Nell Buissink-Smith, Carol Bond and Gabrielle Grigg
Higher Education Development Centre, University of Otago, New Zealand

Introduction

In a recent qualitative study of university graduates' views and experiences of higher education, Spronken-Smith et al. (2008) found four orientations to higher education:

- (A) gaining a qualification for a specific job;
- (B) preparation for a job;
- (C) developing life skills and learning how to think;
- (D) education for its own sake: growing as an individual.

Graduates' notions of a degree, of knowledge, and of skills varied in complexity across the orientations. This dimensional variation was supported by other research, such as that on conceptions of learning (e.g., Marton et al., 1993), in which students' experiences ranged from superficial views reflecting external authorised notions of knowledge to deep transformative personal change. Whilst the authors found that the level of parental post-secondary education had a strong influence on orientations to higher education, they also suggested that curricular experiences could be influential.

Aim

This research explores the relation between graduates' orientations to higher education and their experiences of the curriculum.

For brevity, only orientations (A) and (D) are considered in this poster presentation.

Method

- Qualitative approach using an interpretivist framework
- Data collection
 - Participants were 24 Humanities or Science graduates from 1999 or 2000 at the University of Otago.
 - Interviews were held about five years after graduation and probed: views on the purpose of higher education; their experiences and expectations; their most memorable curricular experiences; and possible benefits to themselves and society.
- Data analyses:
 - Phase I (previous study): use of phenomenographic principles, but with whole transcript as unit of analysis, to determine orientations to higher education.
 - Phase II (this study): using data from the previous study, case studies from two graduates whose data contributed to orientations (A) and (D) were used to illustrate the relation between views of higher education and the curriculum. Analysis focused on the perceived role of teaching and approach to teaching, valued and disliked curricular experiences, valued and disliked teaching methods, and the meaning of a degree.

Results – Orientation A “Craig”

Orientation A focused on gaining a qualification for a specific job:

I think basically a degree should just be physical evidence that you've done these courses and you've obtained this knowledge and you'd be a useful person to employ.

Craig valued teaching that helped him gain the necessary knowledge to pass the course. He appreciated his Classics lecturers: "They were very good in imparting information". In contrast, of his Design lecturers he commented: "He was terrible.... I found that I just wasn't getting the information I needed to pass my courses. Craig opted not to go to Design tutorials "because – especially design ones because they just sat around and talked..."

One Design assignment was singled out as being a "really stupid" learning experience. The assignment involved defining and designing a book. Craig struggled with this assignment, which required abstract thinking, commenting: "And I was like: what? What's a book?... I decided to do like an actual book, like hollow it out and fill it with information ... I don't know what they were looking for". He achieved a lower grade than a friend who had done a more abstract piece and said "Maybe they were looking for something more abstract, which I wasn't really leaning towards, I didn't like abstract stuff, I liked more realised pieces."

Craig was unable to identify the skills he might have acquired through his study. However, he recognised that his Classics study had led to an unexpected passion and a personal enthusiasm in the topic, and hoped that his Design degree would open up business opportunities.



Results – Orientation D “Barbara”

Orientation D focused on education for its own sake. The purpose of a university education was to:

...open up new worlds of ideas and study for the individual ...to show people how studying can actually be rewarding in itself and for its own – for its own reasons, not for any particular job or anything like that.

For Barbara, valued aspects of teaching were those which broadened her views, challenged her thinking, and gave her the opportunity to undertake research:

Results – “Barbara ” (cont)

I think the university is a very intense experience... It can be really upsetting for people but it's part of its raison d'être you know, you'd have to be challenged.

She placed high value on learning research skills, and recounted a pivotal moment in her music degree when she realised the focus of the music degree was not about how to teach children music – rather it was about furthering knowledge through research.

I noticed that the main thrust of the course was not how you can use this in the community or how you could use this in the school or how you could use . . . it was: this is what we're studying, this is what we've found out, this is what needs to be done, these are other areas that need to be explored. And that was very interesting. Because for years and years ... easily 30 years – I had actually been focusing on: how can I use this at school? How can I – you know – how can I teach the kids this? But this is not the focus of the university.

Barbara felt that she was being “groomed” as an academic through such curricular experiences involving research. She was aware that she had developed a host of academic, generic and transferable skills. She had clearly become a lifelong learner, and was not focused on specific vocational outcomes from her degree:

Sometimes in my music degree I thought ... I don't know whether I can ever use this ... but I still did it and it added to the whole because things that I learned in that area were actually able to be applied in the other.



Discussion and Conclusions

Table 1 summarises the findings from this research. Although participants' approaches to learning were not directly probed, it was possible to infer their likely conceptions based on their recall of teaching and learning experiences. The two cases show a clear internal relation between graduates' orientations to higher education and their curricular experiences. Although we have chosen to illustrate the internal relation using only two examples, it was apparent that these relations were borne out in the other 22 cases. Barbara's case shows that the design of learning tasks and assignments can be a significant factor in triggering changes in orientations to higher education

Table 1: Summary of Results

A. Gaining a qualification	D. Growing as an individual
Role of teaching	
To impart the knowledge necessary to pass exams	To enthuse and challenge, to transform thinking
Valued curricular experiences	
Being told what to learn; learning practical skills	Being challenged; gaining different perspectives; developing critical thinking; learning about theory; interaction with lecturers; study for its own sake
Disliked curricular experiences	
Learning about theory and abstract concepts; interacting with lecturers	Semesterisation
Valued teaching methods	
Well-structured lectures; practical work	Group discussions; research-based teaching; authentic assignments
Disliked teaching methods	
Tutorials and group work; interacting with lecturers	Boring lectures
Inferred approach to learning	
Surface; reproductive	Deep; transformative
Notion of a university degree	
Physical, external object – piece of paper; 'ticket' to a job; the degree achieves the job	Internal – part of who you are; integral to the person

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by two University of Otago 'Research into Teaching' Grants.

References

- Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G., & Beatty, E. (1993). Conceptions of learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 19, 277-300.
- Spronken-Smith, R.A., Buissink-Smith, N., Grigg, G & Bond, C. (2008). Millennium graduates' orientations to higher education. *College Student Journal* (in press).