

“SOMEWHERE AND SOMETIME I CHANGED”: STUDENT VOICES FROM AN ENABLING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Post-modern society requires many adults to embark on higher education and to become effective lifelong learners. The success of the STEPS pre-undergraduate program illustrates that an important prerequisite for successful lifelong learning is a curriculum that promotes consciousness raising and an understanding of the interconnectedness of change. As a result, transformed worldviews are possible; and enthusiastic, committed, lifelong learners are created.

INTRODUCTION

The fast onslaught of the information age is consuming our minds and inciting our citizens to quickly fill places in our higher-education institutions. Driven by the demands of a society that regards knowledge as a valuable commodity, growing numbers of Australian citizens of all ages and socio-economic and other backgrounds are seeking entry to, and embarking on, higher education. Through initiatives such as the “Nelson Review”, the Commonwealth Government (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003a) is recognizing the need for enabling programs as a transitional phase from the ordinary world of work and home, to the world of higher education. One such enabling program is the pre-undergraduate program called STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) on offer at Central Queensland University. Learners aged 19 years and beyond are eligible for entry to a program that is fundamentally designed to provide a pathway to higher education. The STEPS program was first offered as a Commonwealth-funded equity pilot initiative in 1986, and then grew in subsequent years when the higher-education reforms of 1987 resulted in major expansion in the number of student places and increased opportunities for participation in higher education. The aim of the program is to equip learners with the lifelong learning skills, confidence, knowledge, and independence to successfully enter and complete their tertiary studies.

This paper begins by presenting the context of higher education in Australia and gives some indication of the increasing proportions of the population embarking on higher education. The notion of interconnectivity between dimensions of society and how systems within each

dimension impact on the other, is supported. This notion is carefully examined in terms of the impacts that consciousness-raising can have on the individuals, and the dimensions and the systems of which they are a part. A small group of students tell their stories of STEPS and of the program’s impact on their university learning, and how, through increased consciousness, their pursuit of lifelong learning has been enhanced and facilitated.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

In Australia, and indeed worldwide, higher education is becoming more necessary for, and accessible to, more sections of society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002), in the ten years between 1990 and 2000 the total number of higher education students rose by 69 percent. This trend has resulted largely from the phenomenon of globalization and the worldwide trend to place great value on the acquisition of the commodity of knowledge. As a result, large numbers of citizens from different social, economic, religious, ethnic, cultural, and other backgrounds are embarking on higher education to obtain such knowledge. As the current Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, Brendan Nelson, explains, “Globalization, massification of higher education, a revolution in communications and the need for lifelong learning leave Australian universities nowhere to hide from the winds of change” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003a, p. 3). Higher education is now an option more and more citizens are choosing as an avenue of lifelong learning.

To ensure a broad range of citizens is eligible for higher education, the Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Education, Science

and Training, 2003a, p. 34) is committed to creating initiatives to guarantee that “there are no barriers to access to higher education for any groups in Australia”. As part of the current higher education reforms, the Department of Education, Science and Training, (2003b) announced an increase in funds to support a range of equity initiatives, with specific mention of enabling courses. The potential of these enabling courses in promoting lifelong learning skills is powerful, for programs such as the STEPS program can have a significant impact on learners, who in turn can have significant impacts on the dimensions of which they are part. Higher education represents one of these dimensions.

INTERCONNECTED DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE

Higher education does not exist within a vacuum. It is embroiled in a multidimensional system, as illustrated by figure 1. The inner circle or individual dimension represents the learner, situated at the centre of all dimensions. The next dimension, the institutional dimension, represents the higher-education context of which the learners are a part. The relationship between these two dimensions can be reciprocal, for what happens in one dimension inevitably impacts on the other. The third dimension is the societal dimension, which impacts on and is impacted by, both the individual and institutional dimensions. Bounding all dimensions is the global dimension, which, again, both impacts on and is impacted by the dimensions it bounds.

The cyclical representation indicates that ripples created by change in any one of the dimensions impacts on others in both a forward and reverse direction. Furthermore, change lies both in the interstitial space between the dimensions, and across and within each dimension. The varied directions of the circles indicate both the harmonious and the discordant nature of change. The opposing directions of the circles also imply tension and mismatch, as change has to be grappled with across and within each dimension. The concept of interconnected dimensions illustrates how the lifelong-learning skills of those enrolled in a university preparatory program within a higher-education institution can be impacted on, and how, as a result, they themselves can impact on the dimensions of which they are a part.

THE STEPS PROGRAM AT CQU

The STEPS program at Central Queensland University is a thirteen week, full-time or a twenty-six week part-time program designed to give learners the education, skills, and confidence to embark on tertiary studies. It comprises four components: Language and Learning, Mathematics, Computing for Academic Assignment Writing, and Tertiary Preparation Skills. A great majority of the students who have completed the STEPS program have gained successful entrance to Central Queensland University, while others have moved on to other rewarding careers (Karen Seary, STEPS Coordinator, personal communication, January 17, 2004).

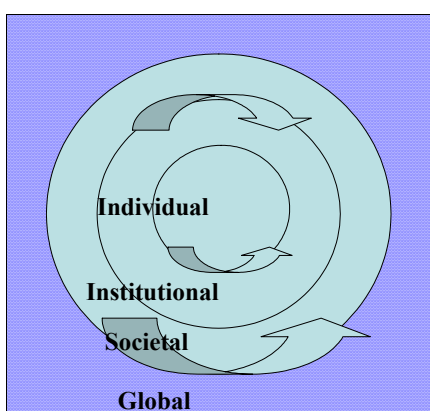


Figure 2. *Interconnected dimensions of change*¹.

¹ This diagram was developed by the senior author and initially presented at an unpublished colloquium, “The case of perspective transformation” at Central Queensland University, Rockhampton on November 26, 2003.

Recent statistics from the Analysis and Planning Unit at Central Queensland University (2003) indicate that the retention rate for 2002 STEPS students in undergraduate courses at the university was 76.9 percent; comparing favourably with the 48.6 percent apparent retention rate for all undergraduates at Central Queensland University. This posits the STEPS course as a very powerful vehicle for lifelong learning.

However, an effective enabling program such as STEPS does much more than just give students basic skills for university. In these times of change and relative uncertainty, particularly in regard to the nature of future occupations, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish the specific lifelong skills learners need in order to successfully negotiate their paths through higher education and to secure a position in a workforce that will create jobs presently unknown to us. As Ellyard (1998) notes, “the pace of technological and social change means that work skills are made redundant at increasingly fast rates” (p. 71). This places new challenges and pressures on universities as they strive to cater for the needs of their learners. With such a broad cross-section of citizens currently attending universities, each in the pursuit of diverse bodies of knowledge, the need to promote and practise lifelong learning is of great importance to ensure ongoing success and satisfaction in our contemporary society. Therefore, a successful enabling program must do more than teach the rudiments of the academic essay and how to comprehend algebraic fractions. It should aspire to produce self-aware lifelong learners who will take responsibility for their own learning. The STEPS program endeavours to achieve this outcome. Its *Language and Learning* course is underpinned by the tenets of transformative education espoused by Mezirow (2000), the aims of which are to help learners with their comprehension of the meaning of their experiences, understandings, and beliefs; engage in critical reflection of both their own and others’ beliefs; and then act on their judgments.

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

For students, reflecting on their learning journeys, both during and after the program, is an invaluable part of STEPS. Chaplin (1985, cited in Cranton, 1994, p. 174) shows that consciousness raising, “the process of developing self – knowledge and self –

awareness”, is one vital part of transformative learning. Hart (1990, cited in Cranton, 1994, p. 173) describes one important condition of consciousness raising as the “acceptance of the importance of personal experience”. Students’ personal experience is valued highly in the STEPS program and its recounting is encouraged throughout the *Language and Learning* course as adult learners become active learner–researchers into their own learning. Many arrive with good measures of ambition and enthusiasm, with the intention to change their lives in some way. Other STEPS learners tell of disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of lack of opportunities to complete schooling, little financial and moral support to undertake studies, or great personal upheavals. However, these experiences then serve as their introduction to the changing social values of Australian society as, through research, students gain a greater understanding of the interdependence of both their stories and the story of their country as it faces 21st century challenges. Through their engagement in critical reflection throughout the program, most learners achieve a better understanding of the dimensions of which they are a part, and come to appreciate the interconnectivity between these dimensions.

WHO ARE THE STEPS STUDENTS?

STEPS students hail from a variety of backgrounds, bringing with them a wide range of skills, experiences, perspectives, apprehensions, and stories. Many have not completed formal schooling, a large percentage come from low socio-economic backgrounds, and most are the first in their family to actively pursue a university education. Housewives, single mothers, fathers, grandmothers, retrenched workers, people with minor disabilities, people with trade qualifications, some who may have completed degrees many years ago, and those who have more recently finished their secondary education are some of the people represented in a STEPS group. Some bring strongly entrenched views; others are naïve and ignorant of social issues occurring within their world. For some, the STEPS experience is a catharsis; for others it is the mere acquisition of lifelong learning skills to accompany them on their journey through university and beyond. All learners arrive with a story of their lives, and many leave with new stories to tell after completing the STEPS program, recounting how STEPS has impacted on their lives and how, as a result, their lives

have been transformed. They have progressed through various developmental dimensions (Taylor, 2000, pp. 161–162) and can apply much of their learning from STEPS to the next phase of their journey.

TRANSFORMED STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Student voices that tell stories of transformation are a valued part of STEPS. At the end of each program, and later during their university study, students are invited to take part in focus-group interviews. Kreuger (1988) defines a focus-group interview as a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (p. 18). Over the years, such discussions have provided the STEPS team with invaluable data, not only on the degree of consciousness raising that takes place in many of these learners during the preparatory program, but also on their successes at university. One theme that comes through strongly from these interviews reflects the changes that occur when student expectations become optimistic. Seligman (1990) shows that pessimists can learn skills to become optimists; in other words, optimism can be learned and can predict academic success (Simpson & Coombes, 2004). Often, students tell of seriously-damaging, lasting effects of their primary or secondary schooling, and this perception is not discredited in STEPS classrooms. Developing optimism in STEPS students is therefore necessary if they are to gain success in future university study. For this reason, to help students gain the expectation that they will be successful in such a challenging program, courses are designed to allow students early successes. An important precursor to consciousness raising is focusing on students’ temperament types and learning styles and helping them to acquire the understanding that everyone learns differently. Many speak about how this alone in the first week of STEPS helped them to gain an appreciation that past failures are not insurmountable.

The following student, Sam², although academically able, had worked for most of his adult life in a Rockhampton abattoir that had recently closed. He was a young, unemployed, married man with a family, and his future

prospects prior to STEPS were decidedly pessimistic.

...STEPS for me has filled a void in my life...a void where I felt I was ripped off by the education system...outdated methods of a dinosaur type....I thought I had no brains and was never going to make a contribution to society because of my learning experience at school. Got to STEPS and realize, hey, learning’s fun! It doesn’t only have to be about facts and figures. It’s about the whole world around you and how you relate to it and that’s exciting and that’s what I want to pass on. I want to be an educator and help fix the system that failed me so badly and get into a job where I’m going to be a role model to students. (Student, Sam)

Sam’s story did not end there. His parents, after years of running a small business in a country community, were so impressed at the change in Sam’s attitudes to learning that his father intended spending some of his retirement years at another Central Queensland University campus, firstly doing STEPS, and then studying for a business degree. At the age of 56, this adult learner was continuing his journey of lifelong learning in an environment that formerly had been beyond his expectations.

Amy is another so-called “failed learner” who shows that, when expectations change in a positive way, university successes can follow. Having been expelled from school at the age of 14 and been a classic 1970s dropout, Amy spent over 30 years believing that she did not have a chance of higher education. After enrolling in various courses over the years and dropping out of all of them, she was concerned that STEPS was going to become yet another failed project.

I wasn’t to know that STEPS would start me on a journey, not only into the academic world, but also into a world of self-discovery. STEPS taught me that my life experience is my most valuable asset and that my prior knowledge is a considerable resource at my disposal. Another equally important lesson gained during STEPS is that I now understand my own learning style. I realise why I failed at school.

I count STEPS far more valuable than the high school education I missed.

² Pseudonyms have been used for the student respondents in this article.

University can be an overwhelming experience, but when you enter a bridging course believing that you're an academic failure and nearly three years later find yourself with a grade point average of 6.429 you know that you were given more than adequate skills to achieve success. I am very grateful that I was accepted into the STEPS program and that I was taught by people who could see in me what I couldn't see myself. (Student, Amy)

HEALING NATURE OF ADULT LEARNING

Many students tell stories of healing that has come from the consciousness-raising nature of some STEPS courses. Many enter the program in fear, with learning blocks from past negative encounters, and the program undertakes to change damaging perceptions. Parker Palmer (2001) is an American educator who writes about "the violence of our knowledge" (n. p.) because he believes that the Western adherence to objectivity has created disconnectedness in education. He writes in *The courage to teach* (Palmer, 1998),

The mode of knowing that dominated education creates disconnections between teachers, their subjects and their students because it is rooted in fear. This mode, called *objectivism*, portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know. (p. 51)

Palmer believes that teaching must heal rather than wound, and echoes the belief that learning is "enhanced by teachers and pedagogies that pay attention to the inner life of students" (n. p.). The *Language and Learning* course of the STEPS program, through encouraging reflexivity as well as an academic appraisal of the changing social values in Australian society, aims to create a balance between subjective and objective modes of thinking. Many students will attest to the effectiveness of this approach.

John had spent his life as a farmer and came to academic lifelong learning to fulfill an ambition that he never believed would be achieved. Today, at the age of 64, almost at the end of a double Business/Arts degree and hoping to study for his masters, he comes to each STEPS testing to speak to new applicants about the program

and sometimes tells them about the time when life was so bleak that he tasted the oil from the gun he had put into his mouth. Soon after this episode, he found his way to the STEPS program, but the language course challenged so many of his old worldviews that he strongly resisted the new ways of thinking that were being opened up to him. However, he stayed. The healing was just beginning.

I hated it when we left the farm and came to Rockhampton. I hated school. I hated the teachers.... Why with my hatred of teachers I wanted to go to university at the age of 60 is a story in itself.... Looking back on it, it is difficult to say just what it was about changing gender roles that I took exception to, but I did. Sometimes my face felt really hot, as I had to sit in class and listen. I wouldn't take part in class discussions.... Once again I hated.... Looking back, I clearly came to understand what they were trying to tell me.... Somewhere and sometime, I changed. (Student, John)

POSITIVE WINDS OF CHANGE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Through this preparatory program, STEPS students can gain an understanding of the interconnectedness and positive nature of change. There are countless stories that could be related, and a great many are inspiring, especially those from the failed learners of the past. However, numerous student testimonies over the years have shown that the greatest STEPS successes come from the program's affirming, learner-centred nature.

Acknowledging the lived experiences of its students, the STEPS curriculum is one that both actively encourages reflective practices and celebrates change. For post-modern Australians, many of whom have seen themselves as victims, a broader understanding of worldviews can be a very powerful and transforming catalyst for change. Such change can impact across the interconnected dimensions and both energise and motivate adult learners to continue in their quest for lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION

Rapid changes in contemporary Australian society have created new clientele for higher education. As the Commonwealth Government pledges commitment to the creation of a more

equitable share of higher-education places, and the demand for the acquisition of knowledge continues, a far broader range of citizens than ever before is embarking on higher education. Many adults fear this huge transition, highlighting the valuable role that enabling programs and their curriculums can play not only in providing the knowledge of academic skills for a successful university experience, but also in promoting a greater consciousness of the interconnectedness of change. As we transform, we contribute to the transformation of all the systems of which we are a part – from families, workplaces, and communities to our country and the very planet itself (Pearson 1998). Many STEPS students, like William, are part of that change.

If I look at my life seven years ago I never dreamed I'd be able to go to university. From my background, it seemed that only rich people went to university – the people that had a decent sort of education – whereas my family had no striving whatsoever to better themselves in that vein at all. So generations to come are going to be changed because of my involvement with the STEPS program. (Student, William)

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