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'For the life of me, I can't see why those students were let go on so long': Educating the educators, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-style

Suzanne Plater, 2013

Abstract

In 2008, almost 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion at The University of Sydney failed to complete the course. Although this was not considered unusual when compared to previous years, the decision was made to investigate why so many students struggled to meet the expectations of a course that was pedagogically progressive, culturally affirming, taught by highly regarded academics and strongly supported by the University and its stakeholders. A qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured interviews was conducted and many complex and interrelated issues were explored. One issue that was raised both unexpectedly and emphatically by almost half the study participants who completed the course was the unintentional stifling of individual student effort and achievement through the development of co-dependent relationships between academic staff and students. This paper presents the data relevant to this particular issue, reflects on the findings, and outlines some of the strategies implemented since this study commenced that have contributed to a healthy completion rate of 98% over the past three years.

Background

The Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion (GDIHP) was established by The University of Sydney in 1998 to help close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and attainment at university level, provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers with the skills, knowledge and confidence to engage in primordial, primary and secondary prevention across a range of health issues, and help them progress to personally, professionally and financially rewarding positions. It is a full-time one-year block-release course specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults from across Australia who must meet strict entry criteria, including attainment of a relevant qualification and at least three years work experience in health or a related field. It is the only course of its kind in the country and as of March 2012, 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults from every state and territory had enrolled in the GDIHP. Through attainment of the qualification, many have realised their aspirations of social and economic uplift.

Over the years, the University and its public and private sector partners in this enterprise have striven to establish a learning environment that provides a high quality education which is also culturally affirming and values each student's particular set of knowledge, experiences, talents and skills. The tension between these principles is not insignificant and the level of support required is

substantial, given that the majority of GDIHP students did not complete Year 12 and do not have an undergraduate degree. A non-completion rate of almost 40% over the first 10 years of the course was therefore considered acceptable, particularly as it was in line with non-completion rates of other mainstream university courses.

This thinking was challenged in 2008 when, as a newly employed academic, I observed first-hand a number of situational and dispositional influences that resulted in a non-completion rate of 50% in the Sydney-based cohort of 14 students and 25% in the Mt Isa-based cohort of 12 students. I was also aware that in 2006, the non-completion rate for the Sydney-based cohort was 67%, and in 2007, it was 78%. I was of the view that these influences were on the whole unrelated to curriculum, cultural relevance or safety, academic preparedness or University policies and practices (with the exception of The Koori Centre-managed Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme, which was not able to provide adequate support for GDIHP students during those years – that support was instead provided by academic staff). The decision was made to investigate the enablers of and barriers to completion of the GDIHP by conducting qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in the 2008 cohorts and identify and implement solutions with the aim of improving student experiences and completion rates. Of the 26 students enrolled across the two cohorts, 15 agreed to participate in the interviews. Eleven had completed the course and four had not completed.

Risks versus benefits

At the time, I carefully considered the risk that some study participants may feel constrained when speaking about the GDIHP teaching staff, of which I was one. There was also the risk that I would not be able to maintain the social distance required to conduct a successful interview. I decided, however, that the benefits outweighed the risks. The participants trusted me, I had knowledge of and appreciation for the wider context of their personal and professional lives (which would enrich my understanding of the data), they had often demonstrated their willingness to constructively criticise the course and its staff during 2008, and we appeared to share the same objective; that is, to improve the GDIHP for future students.

Methodology and methods

Methodologically speaking, the best-fit approach to guide the research process was phenomenology research. In line with (but not in lock step with) the phenomenological paradigm, data collection was streamlined to include single interviews with participants who had all experienced the phenomenon in question so that the researcher could forge a common understanding (Creswell, 2007). Sampling was purposive and homogenous, and the combination of semi-structured and in-depth interview methods allowed me to introduce prompts to ensure all known topics were covered but also gave participants the freedom to introduce new topics or expand further on those being discussed. Immediately following each interview, I wrote down my impressions of my technique, the participant's responses and my reactions and understandings, which provided an opportunity to not only reflect critically on my interview technique but also to question any assumptions I might have brought to the research. All interviews were transcribed within 24 hours of recording and a preliminary analysis conducted. Statements and passages were summarised and key issues identified, highlighted, categorised and reviewed inter-connectedly to determine whether the issues raised were widely shared, somewhat shared or experienced by one individual only. Due to the relatively small sample size and amount of data generated, it was not considered necessary to use qualitative research software as a tool to analyse the data.

Issues raised

During the interviews, many complex and interrelated issues were frequently raised, such as workplace, peer and tutorial support, self-esteem, self-efficacy, determination and resilience, motivation for enrolling in, continuing and completing the course, and functioning of GDIHP academic staff. It is not my intention to discuss each of these issues in this paper; rather, I will focus on the functioning of GDIHP academic staff, or more specifically, their tendency to over-function (Cox, 2007; Fielder, 2008). This was an issue that was unexpectedly and emphatically raised by almost three-quarters of the Sydney-based cohort participants and discussed in terms of its importantly negative effects on both completing and non-completing students.

Over-functioning

According to the literature (Fielder, 2008; Langton, 2008; Pearson, 2009), many non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators have, in their approach to providing teaching and learning support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, tended towards over-functioning, or rescuing and co-dependency. In his instructive 2008 article, 'Pearson and Pedagogy: Countering Co-Dependency', Fielder bluntly assesses his role as an educator, stating that his thinking and pedagogy were generally based on a 'moral vanity that, at times, has sanctioned shallow and passive learning experiences that have failed to challenge student achievement.' (p. 61). Fielder states that he was heavily influenced by the progressive rights-based agendas of the past 40 years and admits that he was preoccupied with not being seen as racist or culturally insensitive. Fielder also acknowledges that he was influenced by feelings of guilt and his belief in the moral authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This uncomfortable alliance between white guilt and black moral authority is discussed in depth in African American academic Shelby Steele's 2006 book, *White guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era*, and in Aboriginal intellectual Noel Pearson's 2007 essay, 'White guilt: Victimhood and the quest for a radical centre'. In brief, both authors assert that the civil rights movement in the 1960s squandered its promise of racial equality and instead used its moral authority to trade on white guilt and use it as a leverage to demand rights that did not insist on reciprocal responsibilities from blacks. It infantilised the empowered, free-thinking, free-speaking black (Steele, 2006) and demonstrated to whites that black social and economic development could only be achieved through rescue and co-dependency (which ironically restored moral authority to whites).

As one of the GDIHP lecturers and the primary tutor in 2008, I engaged in this trend towards rescuing and co-dependency for the very same reasons outlined by Fielder, Steele and Pearson. I believed I had a responsibility to help atone for the destructive policies and practices of the past by providing an easier path into the future. I was also acutely aware of the often chaotic lives of our students, many of who face major life challenges during their year of study. My compassion, empathy and understanding were unquestionable; in hindsight, so was my romantic indigenism and victimology (Fielder, 2008). With the best of intentions, I overcompensated for historical and contemporary disadvantage (both real and imagined, as it turned out) by coddling under-performing students and granting them a raft of considerations. The most damaging of these was to allow students who had not submitted their assessment tasks in a timely manner to continue attending the course, and not treating regular class absences as a breach of contract.

Stereotype threat

The extent to which this behaviour activated stereotype threat and exacerbated the problem was also explored during the GDIHP study. Stereotype threat has been defined by Claude M Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995) as the risk of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype. Steele and Aronson's

research was based on the assumption that black Americans were judged by the dominant society as being less intellectually capable than white Americans and therefore less likely to succeed academically. They examined the effect of this predicament on the intellectual performance of black American students and confirmed that the self-threat caused by this assumption interfered with the intellectual functioning of these students, who under different circumstances performed as well as their white counterparts. Importantly for GDIHP students, who must identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander to be accepted into the course, stereotype threat can be evoked indirectly simply by priming racial identity; that is, the recording of race alone can create a self-threatening predicament (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Although I have suggested that the over-functioning of GDIHP academic staff was primarily driven by the desire to compensate for historical and contemporary injustices and disadvantages, the students may have perceived that the 'special treatment' they were experiencing was due to the belief that they were less intellectually and/or academically capable than mainstream students. It is difficult to avoid the implication of stereotype threat for those students who did not submit their assessment tasks for grading and the reinforcement experienced when their inability to submit was not actively addressed in line with university policy.

Everyone loses

Those most disadvantaged by an over-emphasis on rights and diminution of responsibility (Fielder, 2008) were the 10 GDIHP students who did not complete in 2008. All 10 regularly requested and had been granted extensions to assessment task submission dates and had failed to submit the majority of the required work, even though they had been provided with significant additional tutorial support in the final few weeks of the course. Seven were also regularly absent from or late to class. The GDIHP is designed to build on each previous block of learning and therefore requires the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge before the next block can be properly understood. Without the benefits of early rewards and the graduated process of learning experienced through detailed and timely feedback, these students were denied the same level of academic development, growth and independence experienced by those who received positive and affirming messages; they were, in fact, further enabled to fail.

Students who did submit their assessment tasks in a timely manner and who attended and actively participated in all classes were also disadvantaged: they felt cheated by what they perceived as the unfair advantages granted to others and in some cases, expressed concern that the qualification was being degraded in the eyes of their workplace, colleagues and peers. The negative effect of student coddling on those who strove to fulfil their student responsibilities, regardless of the significant situational and dispositional challenges they faced throughout the year, is illustrated by the following quotes:

Participant 1: There was some there that I think let us down. Obviously this is just my feeling, I don't know how the teachers felt about that but I said if I can get my assignments in on time I'm sure that those other ones could do it...I felt that they had let themselves down, let the Uni down, they let their colleagues down, you know, their workplace, they let the other students down...I felt hard done by, you know. I, um, them other fellas, they knew support was there, they could've asked for help...I felt, for me, who hadn't been to school and stuff [for decades], you know, if I ask for an extension then I make sure I get [the assignment] in and I turn around and thank [the lecturers]. But them other mob, for the life of me I can't see why [those students] were let go on so long. And I think other students felt the same.

Participant 12: Oh but there was something, and...it affected me. I thought that if people could just dag through this, I mean not hand in their assignments for ages and not turn up to class and turn up half intoxicated and they struggle through the day and don't do their work and then go back to the community and don't send their assignments in and there's no repercussions...and I thought that was pretty unfair, you know, we were all the same, we were all equal, no one should've been treated different, we all come from the same background, we should all be treated the same...Oh, look, there was only a couple that seemed to get away with more than everyone else and we was all asking, why are they here? Was it just to go out, you know, on the town? And they were late to class and full of excuses and you, sorry, but you guys bought it. Oh, maybe they had a good yarn to tell, I don't know, blackfellas can always tell a good poor bugger me yarn!

Participant 4: There was one thing [that made it more difficult], it was in the first block when we handed in our assignments. I had to hand my assignment in, I knew I had to do it but it wasn't completely ready but I handed it in anyway. I just thought, ok, there's the rules and I'm going to stick by them. Then I found out others hadn't handed theirs in til weeks later...they had all that extra time to get their work in...And I really lost momentum then, I lost my mojo, if you know what I mean. And I was really struggling. To get that first assignment in, that was the hardest, you know...And I thought, oh man, I was very disappointed. And I suppose I dragged my lip around for a while after that...

While the argument could be made that these students were better positioned educationally, intellectually, emotionally and/or socially to succeed at university, this is not supported by my knowledge of each student enrolled in 2008. While those who completed often displayed determination and resilience when challenged, they also indicated that their personal and professional lives were difficult and their self-esteem and self-efficacy were constantly under threat, particularly during the first two or three months at university.

Positive and affirming

None of the participants interviewed for this study had attended university before and almost all indicated that they were anxious and uncertain about the challenges ahead, particularly those who had lived most or all of their lives in remote communities. Participant 15, who had completed a number of Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses and travelled widely for work, said:

Oh, I was nervous, you know...it was challenging, that first block, because I'm from a small community...I like to work with people I know, you know, not complete strangers...

Participant 9 also expressed anxiety prior to commencing the first block:

I thought I was too old to do any more study and I was probably a bit dubious and worried about who the other students would be and how I would fit in with them...I hadn't been to a university before and watching my kids do their assignments and that, well, I was probably a bit scared.

As did Participant 5:

I was very apprehensive because I didn't have any, well, I didn't have any background in studying at all...I kept thinking I couldn't do it...

However, positive early experiences helped many participants overcome their trepidation and continue on after Block One and their self-esteem and self-efficacy improved significantly once they received their first assignment grade. Fear of failure receded and in its place was a sense of hope and pride:

Participant 5: When I took those marks back to work they were like, wow, you did really well. It was such an achievement and it made me believe in myself...

Similarly:

Participant 9: I thought I was the ant's pants when I got a high distinction! Christ! ...and that boosted my confidence. I think I actually grew a bit myself...So I think there was still anxiety there but not as much anymore...and [my daughter], she's a lecturer, she said to her students, my mum is 60 and she just got a high distinction so I don't see why you guys shouldn't be able to do it...

Participant 10 also indicated that, although she was nervous and uncertain during Block One, her confidence improved once she began to regularly achieve good grades:

Um...I actually felt good once I got used to it and when I got good marks for my assignments, that really helped because there are times I've taken on stuff and I never finish them, I stop halfway, so it was really good for me to keep going and not even feel like quitting.

Participant 1, who also experienced difficulties early in the year, grew more confident and began to take pride in his grades by the end of semester one:

After...I'd been doing it for about six months [my colleagues] started to come around [after they saw] the marks I was getting...and when I come back I started to tell them how we do these things, how health promotion should be run even though I hadn't finished it yet...and they started to ask [for my help]...

Participant 5, who admitted that she had initially delayed submission of her assessments tasks because she was afraid she would not pass, said:

I wish I had known earlier how well I was going to do, you know?...It was an amazing sense of achievement.

In contrast to the sentiments expressed above, the 10 students who did not complete the course in 2008 did not experience early, if any, affirmation of their knowledge and skills; for example:

Participant 8: ...other things just got in the way of me [completing my assignments]...I wasn't motivated, I guess...Maybe if I'd got one in, got a good mark and that, I would've seen that I could do it, yeah, like it might have motivated me and that.

Lessons learned, changes made

This study commenced in 2009 and was completed in late 2011. During this time, three more GDIHP cohorts have passed through the Sydney School of Public Health, with a fourth cohort more than halfway completed. Because the qualitative data collected in 2009/2010 were analysed iteratively, early implementation of strategies that reflected the preliminary findings were made in an effort to expedite improvements to student experiences. Those most relevant to this paper are listed below:

Student interviews:

Interviews are now conducted with each applicant prior to enrolment to establish relationships, explain the challenges ahead, discuss applicant expectations and concerns, and ensure they are cognisant of their rights and responsibilities.

Student Handbook:

Once an applicant has been approved, they receive a Student Handbook that also provides strategies for success and makes explicit the principle of reciprocity and the consequences of not meeting the course requirements. This is important not only for the detailed information it provides but to give academic staff a clear mandate to act if a student does not meet their responsibilities.

Appropriate early assessment tasks:

It is challenging to reconcile the academic requirements of a one-year full-time graduate diploma with the reality that most GDIHP students have not attended university before. To address this, we have broken the early assessment tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces, provided detailed and timely feedback on each submission (which enables students to complete the next task with new insights) and provided a model assignment as a guide.

Additional staff:

The research results made the case for additional staff compelling and a full-time Aboriginal academic was recruited. This academic has brought to the role the invaluable ability to separate intellectual and emotional functioning while maintaining connectedness to the students; or as one colleague put it, a 'non-anxious presence'. The School also provided additional administrative support which we have used to improve student experiences across the board, including management of enrolment, Abstudy, HECS and scholarship commitments, and travel and accommodation requirements.

Weekly tutorial assistance:

In partnership with The Koori Centre, a highly functional tutorial assistance scheme that has the capacity to provide students with a paid tutor who lives and/or works in their community as has been established.

Conditional scholarships:

Most GDIHP students are financially challenged and the provision of scholarships, which we have advocated for and which have been generously provided by private donors, relieves some of the burdens associated with studying full-time while working and raising a family. Importantly, receipt of scholarship is conditional on student progress.

Engagement of GDIHP alumni:

We applied for and were granted federal government funding to bring GDIHP alumni from across the country back to the University each block to teach, mentor and role model current students. Their influence is powerful and they unequivocally deliver the message that *completing* the GDIHP opens the door to many more choices and opportunities.

All of the above strategies play an important role in GDIHP retention and completion rates; however, the strategy observed by the course teaching and support team as having the greatest effect was the one proposed by Claude M Steele in his 1999 article, 'Thin Ice: Stereotype Threat and Black College Students'. Steele found that informing students that high standards are expected from them – an inherent part of teaching – signals that critical feedback reflects standards, not race. Black students who received this feedback saw it as unbiased and were motivated to improve their work where necessary. They trusted the source of the feedback. When accompanied by appropriate support systems, this 'combination of high standards and assurance was like water on a parched land'

(Steele, 1999: 5). Additionally, in the GDIHP classroom, we no longer stifle individual agency by permitting non-negotiated delayed submission of assessment tasks and unexplained absences. The enforcement of rules was and is robust, as is our support and encouragement.

Conclusion

Since 2009, the GDIHP recruitment and retention rates have significantly improved and completion rates were 100% for 2009 and 2010, and 95% for 2011. This may be partly due to changes in the socio-economic status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; with each year that passes our cohorts include two or three individuals who have benefited from education and employment opportunities that have enabled social and economic uplift for themselves and their families. Students are also on the whole highly satisfied with the curriculum, knowledge and skills of academic and support staff (whether they are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or not), the learning environment, Away-From-Base arrangements and tutorial assistance. However, the evidence strongly suggests that the sudden and sustained increase in completion rates is primarily due to changes in the functioning of academic and support staff, who have retained the vital elements of compassion, empathy and understanding but eschew rescue-based support. This is not to say that GDIHP students are no longer at risk of failing; some students are genuinely unable to meet the course requirements. The good news is that their situation is recognised and addressed early and they are neither carried over the line nor left without a qualification after a long and difficult year of attending university.

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