The Postgraduate Experience as Liminal Space

Pedagogical Reflections on the application of Assessment for Learning in Education PG courses at USP

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Abstract

- This presentation situates the postgraduate experience as a liminal space in which the student is constantly negotiating between the ‘known’ rules of academic engagement at the undergraduate level and the ‘unknown’ expectations of the postgraduate course. It draws on the notion of liminality (Van Gennep, 1908; Turner, 1969) as a space between other spaces, a ‘threshold’ or ‘transitionary’ space of being, and explores the role of purposeful curriculum design through reflective teaching practice. Recommendations include a strong PG academic-orientation, short-course bridging programmes, and guided learning experiences through assessment for learning. A comparative analysis of the delivery of an Education postgraduate course offered in three teaching modes over 2011 – 2012 is presented to demonstrate critical pedagogical reflection based on a small scale post-graduate survey conducted in 2007.

Liminality as theory

- Liminality first emerged in the discipline of anthropology introduced by Charles Arnold Kurr Van Gennep in the early 1900s in his study of ‘Rites of Passage’ or those ritualistic processes that mark significant life transitions (such as birth, puberty, marriage and death).
- He argued that socially constructed ‘cultural’ ceremonies or rituals enable the liminal experience where a person loses his/her identity temporarily before re-emerging with a new sense of self (e.g. what is the difference between a girl and a woman?)
- In the 1960s Victor Turner revisited this concept in his study of symbols in ritual. He explains the state of being ‘in-between’:
  The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are between and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner 1969, p55).

Why liminality?

- Liminality is today used in a wide range of disciplines to describe any state of ‘in-betweenness’
- Either – a transitional period between two more stable states (e.g. adolescence as a liminal space between childhood and adulthood)
- Or - a permanent state of ‘otherness’ as ‘in-betweenness’ (e.g the child of bi-cultural parents – Indian/Fijian – feeling she is never fully one or the other).
- In both states – (transitionary or permanent) liminality – there is an assumption that ‘time’ is needed in order to reach some level of comfort i.e. in order to
  (a) move into the next phase; or
  (b) remain in the liminal state by developing a sense of ‘hybridity’ as identity (e.g. feeling strengthened by drawing on the cultural heritage of both parents).
- “[w]hile “a liminal state is a “threshold” passed through on one’s way from a prior to a later stage...liminality has become a state of existence and experience in itself” (King 2006, p4).

Liminal Educational Spaces

- Consider the learning continuum of ‘studenthood’ from early childhood to the higher degree at University.
- Liminal spaces become evident and it is interesting to note that this “...is rarely investigated by researchers (for an exception see Allan and Lewis 2009)” (Field & Morgan-Klein 2010, p3).
- “Threshold” transitional phases in the learning continuum are represented as T1 – T5
- May be further expanded to T5 (Masters Degree, and T6 , the Doctorate Degree).
- These curriculum gaps (knowledge + skills) are liminal spaces between each level of education
- Highlights the need for more focused research and support strategies to enable smooth transition from one level to another

Defining the PG experience as Liminal Space

- The typical PG student will encounter a combination of varied positive and negative learning experiences in the duration of their respective programs.
- Various discussions with PG students enrolled at USP indicates that the most negative PG learning experience is the overwhelming feeling of being out of their depth and not knowing what exactly is expected of them.
- Many lament the unspoken expectations of educators and the sense of ‘knowing’ that PG must entail something more than UG but not quite knowing what that is
- This ‘in-betweeness’, may be viewed as a significant liminal space.
Initial Reflections...

Q: What are some markers of the PG liminal space?
A: Gap between UG and PG, Work experience (or lack of), Language gap, ICT (ill)iteracy, lack of knowledge, skills, not widely read, etc...

Q: What are the indicators of a comfortable PG space?
A: Positive sense of worth (i.e. academic self-esteem) and positive relevant learning experiences in which the student feels in control of his/her own learning.

Q: How can we assist students in bridging this gap?
A: Positive sense of worth (i.e. academic self-esteem) and positive relevant learning experiences in which the student feels in control of his/her own learning.

The average USP PG Class includes students who

1. represent diverse socio-cultural and educational learning experiences;
2. have diverse learning needs and preferred learning styles;
3. are at different levels of their PG programme; enrolled in the PGDip, or MED;
4. have had a variety of +ve and –ve PG learning experiences;
5. may not have thought about the ‘value’ of the PG qualification in terms of:
   (a) their own learning process; and/or
   (b) the application of their learning to their ‘professional’ practice.

What PG Students were saying in 2007

- A small scale study was conducted with 25 PG students at SOE enrolled in the PGDip (18), MED (4) and MA (3).
- At the time of the study, seven were enrolled in MA/MED with 2 working on statements of intent.
- One student did not have any teaching experience, 10 were primary teachers and the remaining 14 secondary teachers.

Students’ perceptions of the level of difficulty of PG courses and support provided:

- **Level of satisfaction of academic performance**: 72% (18) satisfied to some extent; 28% (7) pleased with their performance so far.
- **Level of difficulty of PG courses**: 88% (22) average, 4% (1) difficult and 8% (2) easy.
- **Assistance**: 8%, (2) always (in every course and every assignment) sought further assistance from lecturers to complete assessment tasks; 76% (19) did so when needed; 8% (2) never sought additional assistance.

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4/29/2013
HOW STUDENTS RANKED THEIR OWN SKILLS/ COMPETENCY LEVELS AGAINST A LIST OF EXPECTED ACTIVITIES AT PG LEVEL

Common problem areas appear to be:

About 1/3 i.e. 1 in three students ranked poor/negligible in the following areas:

- Critical Review of an article
- Writing a Research proposal
- Interpreting data and reporting

About 1/5 i.e. 1 in five students ranked the same in:

- Literature Review
- Statement of Intent
- Conducting a small scale research
- Use of ICT Tools for research

Perceived PG Support Needed

What PG students are suggesting: Total (% needing help)

1. Short course bridging Programme - 22 (88%)
2. PG support prior to beginning PG - 23 (92%)
3. Formal Essay Writing - 17 (68%)
4. Referencing Methods - 19 (75%)
5. Statement of Intent - 23 (92%)
6. Proposal Writing - 23 (92%)
7. Conceptualizing Research Questions - 22 (88%)
8. Basic Computer Skills - 18 (72%)
9. Data presentation and interpretation - 22 (88%)
10. Literature Review - 20 (80%)
11. Annotated Bibliography - 21 (84%)
12. Critical Review of articles - 25 (100%)
13. Seminar Presentations - 18 (72%)
14. Internet and Email - 16 (64%)

GENERAL STUDENT COMMENTS ON THE PG LEARNING EXPERIENCE

1. Some lecturers had been demeaning/laughing at students’ mistakes; some ambivalence
2. Timing of courses late evening classes when teachers are tired after long days and travel a long distance
3. Thesis writing needs to be taught in more depth
4. Lack of general support
5. Racism experienced with preferential treatment of lecturer’s own ethnic group
6. Travel problems (long distance)
7. Inadequate ICT support in the use of particular research programmes e.g. for data analysis
8. Assessment criteria not always clear very few rubrics/marking criteria shared
9. Handouts not clear
10. More contact hours (2 hours not enough)
11. More group work
12. Lecturers not always available for f2f consultation after hours (for workers/teachers)
13. Email not preferred mode of communication
14. Faculty expectations of PG students are high
15. More discussion time needed in class
16. More texts and research books in library needed
17. Difficulty with understanding research
18. Very little guided learning (not hand holding but general explaining/clarity)
19. Unsure of expectations
20. Many simply ‘get through’ their courses
FIVE YEARS ON WHAT ARE OUR STUDENTS SAYING?

An Ongoing Talanoa

20 students, 2011 (15 Laucala based, 5 RMI) + 30 students, 2012 (16 Tonga + 11 Labasa + 3 Laucala based)

Has anything changed?

Much of the same...

1. ICT know-how an ongoing concern
2. Students seem more comfortable with internet use and email but
3. Moodle and internet access/connectivity
4. Writing skill level varies from very poor to excellent
5. Little or no theoretical understanding
6. Limited (if any) methodological understanding (teach myself attitude)
7. Assessment issues ongoing
8. Lack of theoretical/methodological know-how
9. More discussion/group activities sought
10. Little applied learning opportunity through guided learning (AFL)
11. Irrelevant materials -- lack of correlation/connectedness to Pacific realities
12. Difficult to get on with some coordinators (dismissive and abrasive)

The ED457 Experience

A Teacher Notes

AFL AS REFLECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

Coursework changes

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<th>Laucala Semester 1 2011</th>
<th>Labasa Flexi 2011</th>
<th>Tonga Flexi 2012</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Short formative paper (0-3 pages each based on 2 readings per module)</td>
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<td>2. Research essay (Library/fieldwork research)</td>
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<td>3. Chapter/book review</td>
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<td>4. Attendance &amp; participation (Participation discussion questions, Q&amp;A, presence &amp; comments re-readings &amp; lectures + Moodle 10%)</td>
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<td>1. Reflective online Journal Entries (Blog) -- 1 per module</td>
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<td>2. Seminar Presentation -- 10%</td>
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<td>3. Research concept paper -- 5%</td>
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<td>4. Research paper -- 15%</td>
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<td>5. Annotated Bibliography -- 10%</td>
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<td>6. Participation -- 10%</td>
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Teacher’s Notes

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<td>1. 3 Critical reflections -- 15%</td>
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<td>2. Research concept paper + pilot study -- 15%</td>
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<td>3. Annotated Bibliography -- 10%</td>
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<td>4. Seminar Presentation -- 15%</td>
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<td>5. Participation -- 5%</td>
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<td>6. Oral presentation/open forum/debates -- 15%</td>
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Problems writing ‘critical reflections’ – re-submit options had to be provided
with guided writing activities in class
Poor referencing skills
Even those who had done other PG courses did not stand out as critical thinkers
Difficulty in articulating their ideas & most reluctant to ‘being wrong’
Some seeing ‘re-mark’ option or reconsideration for extra is work
rather than understanding their weaknesses
Handful of outstanding students who worked hard at their studies
General complacency / laxity
Assessment for Learning can and should be applied at PG level in
Introducing Key Teaching how to conceptualize and
When guided appropriately, the results can be astounding.
It is good practice to know what our students’ prior knowledge is in
One Online assessment
We must think about adult learning pedagogies in the broader
We need to re
Prior knowledge is at the core of constructivism.
Increased number of readings /offering
Deliberate incorporation of
Lack
Teaching students how to conduct

Laucala

1. Problems writing ‘critical reflections’ – re-submit options had to be provided with guided writing activities in class
2. Poor referencing skills
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4. Difficulty in articulating their ideas & most reluctant to ‘being wrong’
5. Some seeing ‘re-mark’ option or reconsideration for extra is work rather than understanding their weaknesses
6. Handful of outstanding students who worked hard at their studies
7. General complacency / laxity
8. Sense of ‘rote-learning’ wishing to be total
9. Lack of applied educational theory
10. Difficulty in understanding/applying the topic of the discipline/ foundations of education
11. Lack of awareness or use of basic academic language expected at PG level
12. Communication skills (oral and written English was very poor) – some better at oral than written and vice versa.

Labasa

Initial diagnostic - some problems re-marking - BUT further re-thinking and fine-tuning
1. Increased number of readings (offering student options + CD of readings provided
2. Further changing course assessment, oral assessment, group work
3. Teaching how to conceptualize and modeling
4. Perceptually selecting a number of theories & engaging students in actively applying those to localPacific discourse
5. Introducing key-terms per module
6. Teaching students how to conduct a policy analysis
7. Written reflections per module (2 of 4 assessed)
8. One-on-one discussion on draft written papers
9. Deliberate/open forum (Tongan) as culturally appropriate oral assessment
Positive Outcomes: One group – may possibly incorporate into larger ICS research project

Two students identified with potential for further thesis work with title guidance
Students beginning to see changes in thinking processes and in their spoken and

Lessons Learnt

• Assessment for Learning can and should be applied at PG level in conjunction with Assessment of Learning – it makes pedagogical sense.
• Most PG students are full-time workers and therefore need some additional support
• Moodle support is sporadic at best – inaccessible and costly for regional students
• We need to teach (a) critical thinking skills; (b) theorisation techniques; (c) conceptual mapping; and
• We need to re-examine some of our pre-existing assumptions about what PG students already know

Lessons learnt..cont...

• We must think about adult learning pedagogies in the broader context of preferred Pacific learning styles against our preferred teaching styles
• Important questions: How do our students’ learn best? How do we effectively teach them to think critically and creatively for themselves on par with our expectations of the PG student?
• Prior knowledge is at the core of constructivism.
• It is good practice to know what our students’ prior knowledge is in order to bridge the gaps within the PG experience.
• When guided appropriately, the results can be astounding.

Potential Outcome?

• Some of these students write and express their ideas (i) more coherently; (ii) more critically, (iii) more theoretically grounded - than some academic papers that I have reviewed.
Plausible Assumptions about why liminal spaces exist/persist in the USP PG context?

1. Students may not be adequately equipped (attitude, knowledge and skills) for PG expectations (foundation not taught/learnt at school and UG level);
2. Our entry criteria (recruitment level) may need to be reviewed;
3. We may not be offering (or cutting) courses that could provide the theoretical application/interrogation needed;
4. We may not be teaching/including enough Pacific academic writing for students to correlate Western-Pacific educational discourse;
5. Our teaching models may need to be revisited;
6. PG Academic Orientation/Induction programme may need work;
7. Either current PG support is not meeting students’ needs or students are not maximizing on support provided.

Recommendations

1. There needs to be wider research into the PG experience at School and Faculty level;
2. Listen to what our students are saying;
3. Rethink our prior assumptions about our PG students;
4. PG lounge where students can meet and talanoa;
5. PG students need to be engaged in critical intellectual debate and scholarly dialogue;
6. The next step? Researching the thesis student learning experience as a liminal space (post-phd perhaps 😊)

C. F Vaka'uta  SOED FALE Sept 26 2012