

Stories as perspectives and interests: Approaches and issues in conceptualising student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University

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Abstract

This paper draws on the principles of textual and thematic analysis (Rowan, 2001) to examine a selection of statements about student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University, gleaned from an intensive, semi-structured conversation conducted by the authors in January 2005, focused on thematically clustered reflections arising from their research into the topic to date. Stories, understood as perspectives and interests, are found to be highly informative about learning from change in terms of these significant university issues.

Studies in LEID is an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education. ISSN 1832-2050
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Introduction

This paper presents selected elements of an ongoing project to conceptualise student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University. We argue that one useful interpretation of ‘stories’ is in terms of how those stories reflect underlying perspectives (ways of seeing phenomena) and interests (economically, politically and socioculturally framed intended goals and aspirations). Viewed through this lens, ‘student attrition and retention’ becomes a contested terrain, the site of divergent and competing assumptions about such ideas as the purposes of a university education, the role of universities in the early 21st century, quality assurance and control, the university’s distinctive communities and constituencies and its future sustainability.

The paper draws on the principles of textual and thematic analysis (Rowan, 2001) to examine a selection of statements gleaned from an intensive, semi-structured conversation conducted by the authors in January 2005, focused on thematically clustered reflections arising from their research into the topic to date. The examination reveals a range of explicit and implicit constructions of students, staff members, the university and its presumed stakeholders in relation to attrition and retention. Stories, understood as perspectives and interests, are therefore highly informative about learning from change.

Background

From the outset, this investigation of student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University has sought to conceptualise attrition and retention in terms of the complexity and diversity that characterise the university (reflected, for example, in the distinct types of student study location and modes). Thus, rather than promoting an essentialised or homogenised framework for understanding attrition and retention, we have emphasised instead the dynamic, heterogeneous and situated features of those phenomena. Within that broader framework, our focus here is on eliciting a range of perspectives and associated interests in relation to attrition and retention, gleaned from a focused reflection on the topic, prompted by outcomes from our research to date.

Method

On 19 January 2005, the three authors conducted an intensive, semi-structured, tape-recorded conversation about student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University. We considered that it was important that we communicate and clarify with one another our developing thinking about a complex and contentious topic, as a prelude to engaging in data gathering with other stakeholders. The conversation was guided by questions that we had formulated individually before the session; at the same time, we wished to make the conversation as freely flowing and inclusive as possible, so the questions were posed when they seemed most directly relevant to the dialogue, rather than in a fixed and predetermined sequence. (We had in mind here the approach taken by Rowan and Bigum [1997], who used the textual device of a dialogue between themselves to deploy an actor-network theory analysis of an undergraduate course at the same university.) The questions included which perspectives that different stakeholder groups in and outside the university might hold in relation to:

- what attrition is
- whether there is an acceptable and/or a necessary level of attrition
- what the individual and institutional causes of, and responsibilities for, attrition might be
- which strategies might be effective at promoting retention and why they might be effective.

Our analysis was facilitated by the application to the tape-recorded conversation of Rowan's (2001) transformative approach to textual and thematic analysis. (See also Walker-Gibbs [2004] for a recent application of Rowan's approach to a different set of issues.) Rowan's approach emphasises the gaps and silences of what is absent and excluded from, as much as the explicit and implicit elements of what is present and included in, texts (including focused conversations) (see also Pamphilon's [1999] 'zoom model' of examining multiple perspectives in the context of recording and analysing life histories.) We have used this approach to generate a number of thematically clustered reflections on the analysis that appear in the next section.

Results

We have space here only for three such thematically clustered reflections:

1. Analogies
2. Perspectives
3. Interests.

Nevertheless, we contend that these reflections encapsulate many of the approaches and issues in conceptualising student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University, and in the process they suggest some significant implications for understanding the stories about, and learning from change in relation to, those phenomena.

Analogies

Analogies were a recurrent and powerful feature of the conversation. This fact is not surprising, given our focus on stories as encapsulating perspectives and interests; analogies can represent discursive flows and tensions by means of graphic and memorable metaphors.

The first analogy identified in the conversation was *medical*. This occurred in the context of an assertion that students need—and deserve—as much information as possible on which to base such decisions as whether to apply for university, which program to study and whether to leave university study.

If we take that argument to medicine, the argument would be [that,] if a patient is sick [dying], let's not treat the patient because we are delaying the inevitable, so from that perspective it may actually be that we really do need to ... up front assess whether success is possible. And we really do that—at least from an academic point of view we assess students in terms of their minimum criteria for joining the university. Currently they're all academic [criteria] rather than for example "Do you have enough money [to pay the fees and charges]?" or "Do you have other commitments [that might diminish your prospect of success]?"

Looking at the medical analogy again ... instead of just looking at students' academic performance and say[ing], "Right, you're in", we need a far more thorough consultation process for those students who we might feel are potential attrition stat[istic]s and make sure that we [are] at least monitoring and assisting them along the way ... to make a decision at the right time so that they do continue to process their enrolment ... That's where the medical analogy comes in: the development of a fairly heavy consultation and hav[ing] some steps along the way ... before they actually do go to surgery.

And the medical analogy is linked to our current philosophical and ethical basis that we need to provide full information and it's actually up to the student or the [patient] to make the decisions, but if we turn it around should we be up front telling our students, "Hey, there's a 50% chance ... you're not going to graduate. Do you really want to join?"

This series of statements about 'the medical analogy' reflects a number of perspectives on attrition: that academic and non-academic factors are perhaps equally influential; that the university has a duty of care towards students that extends to providing full information and conducting thorough consultations; and that ethics underpin the university's approach to attrition. These perspectives in turn indicate a number of interests being evoked as endorsement of particular perspectives, notably here the interests of students and of the university.

A similar intersection between perspectives and interests was manifested in the second analogy to emerge in the conversation: that of *the parent-child relationship*:

Another analogy ... is the analogy of the parent—the same thing in relation to information. The child goes through different stages and at the stage of an undergraduate they're on the cusp of adulthood, and in a sense there's a relationship of the parent-child between the institution and the individual that comes to mind as well ... providing ... as much information as possible, ... but also providing the support ... In the end, it's the decision of the individual as an adult, but who has more information: institutions or individuals?

Some students and staff members might contest this analogy, and highlight instead the independence attributed to adult learners. What the parent-child relationship analogy emphasises is once again the ethical dimension of the institution-individual relationship: the need to provide information and support, and by implication the university's obligation to take a proactive and continuing interest in the welfare of its students.

A third analogy was *between attrition and unemployment*:

... another analogy comes to mind. With unemployment [economists] used to talk about full employment, and they used to talk about ... maybe [a] zero to two per cent tolerable range, but these days we're very excited if we can get it to five per cent ... and it makes me wonder whether there's an analogy between attrition and unemployment—whether there is a tolerable level of attrition that reflects this incredibly complex mix that we're trying to [map].

... I think there's got to be because you can't expect that you'll have 100% retention. There will be students who drop out for various reasons, so there's got to be a point where you say, "X per cent is the acceptable level of attrition". Now ... I think that [level] can vary across universities.

... while in theory a five per cent unemployment rate may be good for the economy, it is bad socially and, just as [a] five per cent attrition rate may be acceptable to maintain academic standards, it has negative consequences for the students [involved] ...

The attrition-unemployment analogy is another powerful story that reflects tensions among diverging perspectives (attrition as inevitable and tolerable versus attrition as a potential social tragedy to be avoided by whatever means possible) and hence among competing interests (the student, the university, the community).

Perspectives

Understood as ways of seeing phenomena, perspectives vary widely around student attrition and retention. That variability was demonstrated as our conversation elicited divergent views of particular issues.

Two examples must suffice here. The first was the multiple opinions expressed about when in the student's study career attrition should start to be measured and about underlying questions of the university's social obligation.

... when is attrition attrition? It depends where we start [the definition], doesn't it? If we don't start our measure until we actually get [students] in, it doesn't matter how many people we turn away at the gate before they get in, and in fact if we were really concerned about attrition we would be more careful to say to those people, "Sorry—you've got to know we're just not prepared to take you—we're not prepared to risk you", whereas if we accept attrition as starting earlier than that we might have a different view of that and it might be a more complex and subtle relationship.

The philosophy is do we stop [students] at the gate? And then it comes back to [the point that] we have a social obligation to help our communities, and many members of the community have low OPs [the tertiary entrance score assigned to Queensland school leavers].

... we [also] have a social obligation to ensure that, when those people come to the gate and we let them through, they are as well-informed as possible, because if we don't and they go back [not having graduated] with low self-esteem ... we are then letting the community down ...

The consensus here seemed to be that, regardless of definitional difficulties of considering attrition as being measurable from different positions on the pathway from initial enquiry to enrolment confirmation, the university's interest in students' retention and welfare began at the point of initial enquiry.

The second example was that perspectives varied about whether and when attrition should be considered a problem rather than an indicator of the quality of a university's programs of study and useful feedback to particular students that such programs are not currently what they should be doing or want to do.

... Do we go for [the] lowest attrition possible, or do we go for [the] highest grade point average and ... highest graduate employment? If we go for the highest grade point average [and] highest graduate employment, that would probably suggest we accept a high attrition or a higher attrition...

... broadly I would argue every attrition statistic represents some type of problem. The seriousness of the loss varies quite a lot.

And CQU and other universities have to make hard choices, and it may be as a whole that we would be better off targeting categories of students...

... has the return for the student been optimised? That's the real question. And ... really the attrition statistics are saying it has not been optimised ... That's an assumption that universities are built on and based on—that the optimum solution [for students] is graduation.

And it's not necessarily so. One term here could be just enough to ... help [the individual] identify what they want to do, where they want to go ...

Consensus was less easy to reach in relation to this set of perspectives. The views that attrition is always some kind of problem to be addressed, and that by contrast attrition might, in some cases, represent students experiencing university courses and programs and making informed choices to leave them, reflect different perspectives and hence different perceptions of whose interests are served or not served by the phenomenon of attrition.

Interests

Understood as the economically, politically and socioculturally framed intended goals and aspirations of individuals and groups, interests are fundamental and significant repositories of assumed benefits and sources of ethical judgments and sometimes tensions. The conversation elucidated several different interests assumed to be associated with student attrition and retention.

Some comments related to students' perceived interests. For example:

Sometimes by addressing attrition we can actually be delaying the student's decision to withdraw so we the university could actually be costing the student money—as well as the student's own self-esteem being damaged by the delay in the decision to withdraw, we could actually be hitting the pocket as well.

Some comments related to the university's perceived interests, which were not necessarily the same as those of students:

So it's this interplay between the individual and the institution ... and the institution might engage in those attrition strategies that actually prolong the pain and cause more debt from a mixture of reasons. One might be an altruistic kind of thing—"We want to help this person, we have a commitment to the region and so on"—and another might be less altruistic: "... Our economic interests are centred on ... [keeping this student here]".

More generally, some comments related to the perceived interests of the community, broadly defined:

That links to another concept that so far we've been talking about individuals and I think it's a part of the Western philosophy [to] focus on the good of the individual rather than the good of society ... That also brings us to a slightly different issue ... that particularly institutions like CQU—we are not a traditional, elitist university. The main focus of ours is to help and support students who would otherwise not gain a higher education, which is really to some extent what you could call 'positive discrimination', that supporting communities with students who are not educated—getting the students educated in those communities helps those communities up. In which case attrition has quite a different aspect. You could argue that we need to think about what is the best interests of the community rather than the student.

Yet another set of interests was assigned to governments:

... from a purely economic sense for domestic HECS [Higher Education Contribution Scheme, paid by domestic students for university undergraduate courses and programs] students, our principal customer is the government because it pays the bulk of the fees [in many programs].

These constructions of multiple interests were encapsulated in a discussion of different forms of ‘good’ and different kinds of argument about student attrition and retention:

So that’s an interesting thing ... this notion of good: public, private, individual, social.

So the moral argument ... comes in as well and it’s the interplay between the moral, the economic and the political ...

Implications and conclusion

We turn now to consider three significant implications of these findings for engaging with attrition and retention and for building on and harnessing the outcomes of stories told about those phenomena.

Firstly, we argue that it is necessary to incorporate the explication of perspectives and interests associated with stories about attrition and retention into policies directed at engaging with that attrition and retention. To design effective solutions, we need to have a sound understanding of the problem and the environment surrounding it. At this time, we do not have that level of understanding about ‘the attrition problem’ and its environment. The analysis that we undertook is one technique for developing our understanding, both within our specific institutional context and in the broader policy and praxis context.

Secondly, we assert the value of using that explication of perspectives and interests to inform our efforts to develop an explicit model of attrition and retention (Somasundaram, Bowser, & Danaher, 2005). Again our focus in developing the model has been on mapping and celebrating the complexity and diversity of the university: its students; its courses and programs; and its policies and procedures. Such a model must reflect the equivalent complexity and diversity of the stories told about attrition and retention.

Thirdly, we contend the methodological significance of linking perspectives and interests when conducting research into university teaching and learning. Stories about such teaching and learning abound, and constitute potentially powerful and fruitful narratives that researchers—as one element of a broader community of practice—would do well to record and interpret. Perspectives and interests can provide a useful analytical framework for understanding such narratives: which ones are told for which intended effects, as well as which ones are told less frequently or not at all.

This paper has demonstrated that stories, understood as perspectives and interests, are highly informative about learning from change in terms of student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University. On this basis, attrition and retention is a far more complex and significant phenomenon than a simple measuring activity

and trying to establish the reasons for students not completing their study. Such reasons must be situated in the broader interplay of socioculturally and ethically grounded understandings and aspirations about the purposes and impact of universities in the early 21st century.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the editorial leadership and support of Phillipa Sturgess, Jillian Litster and Leone Hinton in this theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*. They acknowledge the helpful comments and constructive feedback of two anonymous referees. They endorse the interest of many stakeholders in engaging productively with student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University.

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