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Exploring the experience of ten Australian Honours students

Honours study is viewed as a transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study, and/or to enhanced career prospects. In Australia Honours is usually an adjunct to the standard undergraduate degree. This paper provides an ethnographic study of ten Australian Honours students. Seeing their experience through their reflections, in their own voices, reveals that Honours may be more than transitional; these students were transformed personally. Such emotionally charged transformations require academics to reflect on the best forms of support for Honours students.

Keywords: Honours, undergraduate research, transformational learning

Introduction

Many universities offer students the opportunity to graduate with Honours, traditionally perceived as a bridge for the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study, and/or to good careers. How universities administer Honours (aka Honors) degrees varies between and within countries, institutions and discipline areas. In the UK, for example, Honours is part of a degree classification system (Elton, 2004), while in many Australian universities Honours is an adjunct to a standard undergraduate degree, although there is great variation in approach (Kiley, Boud, Cantwell, & Manathunga, 2009). While there is some theoretical literature related to administrative and pedagogical aspects of Honours, there is less literature representing student perspectives. In this paper I explore the experience of some recent Australian Honours students in my school, the School of Environmental Sciences, in the Science Faculty at Charles Sturt University, to better understand what undertaking Honours means to individuals. Charles Sturt University is a multi-campus facility for research and undergraduate teaching. In this School, Honours is undertaken over nine months, during which academics supervise a student from the development of a research question to the submission of a written research thesis.

Student experience of research

Various forms of undergraduate research have been explored in the USA (e.g Kinkead, 2003), the UK (e.g Ryder, 2004) and Australia (e.g Brew, 2003a). There has been less research on the specific case of Honours in Australia than on other degrees, an oversight corrected in part by a recent report on the role of Honours in Australian Universities (Kiley, et al., 2009). That report suggests that the traditional bridging nature of Honours poses some structural dilemmas for institutions, and notes the “uncertain pedagogical status of Honours as lying between more directive undergraduate teaching and less directive HDR [Higher Degree Research] supervision” (p. 21) The bridging nature of Honours suggests it is logical to draw on research

related to both the postgraduate and undergraduate experience to bolster the relatively scant literature on Honours. Petersen (2007) suggests that much recent postgraduate student centred research has the applied goal of improving support to students, a goal ultimately measured through completion rates. Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary & Ryan (1999) refer to work from the 1980s and 1990s which posited student dissatisfaction with supervision and other support as a cause of high attrition rates in Australian postgraduate courses. Much applied research concludes with recommendations for better supervision practices (for example Connell, 1985; Cullen, Pearson, Saha, & Spear, 1994). Alongside the applied research scholarship is a growing body of work theorising the postgraduate experience. Here again the focus is on the student-supervisor relationship; for instance Bartlett & Mercer (2000) question the conceptualisation of supervision as a series of unique relationships, and Manathunga (2005) explores the "private space" between candidate and supervisor. Lee & Green (2009) propose authorship, discipleship and apprenticeship as arche-metaphors for understanding supervisor-student relationships. Morrison-Saunders, Moore, Newsome & Newsome (2005) provide some insight into the emotionally turbulent world of PhD students, an area that they note has had only cursory treatment.

Scholarship on the experience of undergraduate research is also a mix of applied and theoretical, in this case centred on understanding when learning through research begins. Brew (2003b) distinguishes between teaching students about the process of research, and the outcomes of student research. Similarly, both Berger (2007) and Willison & O'Regan (2007) discuss a continuum in the development of research skills in undergraduate course work, which starts with being taught about research and moves towards the creation of new knowledge by students. Honours in Australian universities is often considered to fit within this continuum; as Schweinsberg & McManus (2006, p. 1) put it "Honours study is analogous to an in-between space", a transition between the coursework orientation of undergraduate study and the traditional research focus of postgraduate study".

Scholarship about Australian Honours mostly considers institutional measures for enhancing Honours courses, rather than the student experience. For example, Beck & Balme (2005) suggest that standardisation is needed across universities, Burgin, Tayebjee and Hunter (2005) describe institutional measures to embed Honours projects within larger partnerships and Kiley et al. (2009) provide recommendations on articulation of the various Honours models, curriculum features and student pathways. The rare papers that focus on the experiences of the students are instructive. Fitzsimmons, Anderson, McKenzie, Chen and Turbill (2003) note that undertaking Honours is not only transitional but also "transformational", a theme also addressed by Channock (2001). Transformative learning is about enhancement or change, rather than simply the next stage of a linear learning "journey" (Mezirow, 1997). Related to transformation of self, Sayed, Kruss and Badat (1998) present the student experience as shaped by contextual issues, including emotions.

Honours in the School of Environmental Sciences

The research for this paper commenced in 2004, in the School of Environmental and Information Sciences. At that time Honours research projects could include ecological, social, cultural and information technology related topics. The discipline

of Information Technology separated from the School of Environmental Sciences in 2006; references to “the School” cover both incarnations.

Throughout the data creation period (2004-2007 inclusive) the pattern for on-campus, full time Honours students in the School was to commence study in February and submit a written research thesis in the first week of November of that year. The activities undertaken by each student followed the pattern presented in Figure 1. Activities that contributed marks to the final grade were a stand-alone literature review, a methods subject, and the written thesis, while two public seminars were mandatory but not graded. The process from recruitment to examination was guided by at least two supervisors, and overseen by the School Honours co-ordinator, working within the Faculty Honours guidelines.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

Research Methods

To address the comparatively sparse academic consideration of the student experience of Honours in Australia this research is ethnographic; it involves the study of culture within a specific place (Hodkinson & Macleod, 2010), from the perspectives of those being studied (Lui & Carspeken, 2009). This insider perspective facilitates the ethnographic goal of learning from the research participants as well as learning about them (Spradley, 1979). Ethnography involves some “immersion” in the culture being studied, in my case achieved through being part of the community of the group in question. I have been a member of the School’s academic community since 2001, from 2004 as a tenured teacher and researcher. I supervise Honours students, including two of those included in this study. Key methods of ethnography include making observations and recording conversations (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009). This study is based on conversations I undertook with ten on-campus students. Each had submitted their Honours thesis, and in all but two cases had yet to receive their examiners reports. Each participant was involved in one in-depth conversation with me on campus, for between 45 and 90 minutes.

Research about students by academics is replete with ethical considerations, particularly around issues of anonymity and power (Chang, Radloff, Polus, & Gray, 2005), so this research was reviewed and approved by the University’s Human Ethics Committee. The School has fewer than 30 academic staff, and only a few students undertake Honours each year, so there is potential for individuals to be identifiable in research outputs. This risk was reduced by undertaking the research over three years. The ten students represent all of the on-campus Honours students in that period, except for three or four who departed from the university immediately upon completion of their research. I was familiar with each of the students by sight, and had taught or supervised some of them. To reduce the potential for actual and perceived coercion I provided potential participants with written and verbal information stressing that this was research rather than a School evaluation, and guaranteeing their involvement was not related to their grades. I also assured them that the conversations, including published quotes, would remain anonymous. In all publications arising from this research, including this paper, the students are assigned a number (S1, S2) that does not reflect the conversation order. Other identifying information has been removed.

The research “interviews” were relaxed and conversational. The sessions were loosely structured by asking students to reflect on their past year decision to undertake Honours- to submission of their thesis. The data were thus created as shared reflections on the Honours year in our School, digitally recorded and later professionally transcribed into orthographic text. Inductive categorical content analysis was used to organise the content of the transcripts. Categorical content analysis involves the extraction, classification and labelling of similar utterances to build themes (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). I present the findings below as verbatim quotes to encourage the reader to experience the Honours year through the words of the students. The quotes are selected to provide examples of particular thematic categories.

A glimpse of the lived reality

The students invited to be part of this research had completed Honours on campus, full time, had submitted their thesis, and were available for interview. Most of the research participants had recently completed undergraduate study at this or another university, others were returning to study; some were in their early twenties, others were a little older; two were male, eight were female. All appeared to welcome the opportunity to share their recent experience with me and ultimately a wider audience.

The students said they undertook Honours either to learn more and develop skills; to do “something”; or to avoid unemployment. Training for PhD study did not appear to be a driving motivation for most of these students, although some were testing the system and themselves with this in mind. Few seemed to know what Honours would be like when they commenced. For example:

I just thought it was – I didn’t really think about it too much but I thought it was research, you just sat in your room and researched and – then again I didn’t know what research was because I’d never really done it. ... all you are told is that it is a hard year and you’re going to have to work hard. (S10)

A consistent theme among the ten students was that, although they didn’t really know what to expect, they expected it to be “hard”; and so it was:

Looking back I [laugh] handed it in, but at the time... it was a very hard year, like in so many respects... so many things just come up. (S7)

The students raised many issues that contributed to making this a “hard” time for them. I present these below as themes of workloads and personal challenges, then show some emotional consequences of these challenges.

Workloads

All the students noted that Honours required many hours of work:

What I did is I went from like Monday to Saturday and on Sunday I had a day off because I was so buggered. (S4)

Students also remembered the intensity of the activities:

All year was heavy, like intense. (S3)

You're thinking so much you just never shut your brain off. But everything gets thought about and everything gets thrown up and...it's a tough year... Yeah you're just thinking constantly about either your project or something and it's just like you never wind down and relax. (S7)

...it is a hard year and you do have to work hard, but there is so much more to it, it is not just that, like there is the constant thinking about it that we didn't know about and the guilt that I didn't know about. There are all sorts of things that just add to it, so it does make it a hard year. (S10)

Workloads and intensity were not necessarily discussed in negative ways:

Yeah [fieldwork] was great, hard hard work and long long days, it was brilliant. (S2)

Although workloads were raised by all ten students there were other, at least equally important issues that appeared to be making the year “hard”.

Challenges

At the beginning of the Honours year there was the challenge of the transition into new roles in the university:

It's just because it's so different. Like you're not an undergraduate student anymore, you get onto the staff email and it's so many things that make you... I mean considering these are these people that you've looked up to for three years and you've pretty much listened to them in lectures and oh, it's just been amazing. Then to have them walk by you and say 'hi' and things like that, it's amazing. I couldn't get over that! (S4)

I remember [X] who was really difficult to talk to as an undergrad, all of a sudden because I was now [his/her] Honours student it was like we're a peer, I was pretty much like a peer and you can talk about stuff... we were encouraged to come to morning teas and mix with other academic staff, yeah and everyone would go “how is your project?”, every time you walk down the hall like “how you going?” ... (S2)

..in a way we were the outcasts of the school, we got blamed for things, you know like sort of, if the milk was being used up too fast... only one comment was directed at us but it was just... basically it was just funny and just... the PhD gang sort of started... because some of them were like ‘oh they're not real research students or anything’ but most of them are really cool. (S7)

... especially just being referred to as constantly as the ‘undergrads’ and compared to the pos grads, ... this was actually through – sorry, some of the PhD students. At the start of the year, I shouldn't mentioned this, some of

them were very us and them about us coming in – it was a very strange situation, ... it was this feeling that they were the real researchers and we weren't just yet and we were undergrads and we had a long way to go... (S10)

There was also a lot of learning required. Various aspects of the requirements of the Honours program challenged people. For example, some found giving their seminars, quite daunting:

...the first seminar, I was really scared. It was a lot worse for me than a lot of the other things. (S1)

It was really quite nerve wracking even though we knew it wasn't worth any marks. I think the whole getting up in front of the Faculty and having to present your work which you really still weren't 100% sure on... (S5)

Then there were skills to develop in writing, reading and research practice:

Definitely harder than any assignments I've ever done. It's just kind of a totally different, I felt like it was a totally different style of writing. (S4)

...you've got the feeling that you can write but then when you start to do your literature reviews; very, very different, hugely different. That I think was where the pressure, having to change your writing skills and pick up on new skills. ...it's such a big steep learning curve. I mean in everything, the standard that's required of your writing of your analysis, of how you present your results and there's just so many things you have to learn. (S5)

Students also found they had to learn to expect and deal with criticism of their work:

I found it strange when I first handed in my first draft of anything...and I got it back and there was all these comments over it and I was like 'Oh no, I've just done a terrible job – no, I don't want to do it any more'. Then by the end of it, if they didn't give me back something with a comment, I would be devastated because then I'd think, 'you've got to tell me what's wrong with it, I've got to fix it.' So I really wanted comments by the end of it because I know to make it better, you need criticism. (S4)

I always thought I was really good at writing and all of a sudden [Supervisor]'s like "crap what are you doing, do this again..." But then you go "right I've got a job" and get on with doing it. I don't know if you were younger how that would be..., That was quite yeah, that was the first time that I questioned whether I could get through the year. (S2)

... not one of us of the students really did a good talk and we all actually felt really deflated by the end of it and it was sort of just like a – 'well if people are going to pick on us now, this isn't a really good start to the year' and our projects really need a lot of work and I think we all felt a bit disillusioned after that, so we went to the wine tasting. (S10)

The comments above reflect the overwhelming theme in all of the conversations, of Honours being a challenging, intense time. This theme is also suggested by the many emotional terms that permeated each conversation.

Emotional responses

Among the terms used by the students when discussing their Honours year were guilt, fear, enjoyment, panic, frustration, pride, doubt, anxiety, nervousness, excitement and passion. Most of the students mentioned that they had felt "stressed" at some stage, and some discussed their "crises" in a way that suggested emotional issues were an accepted part of Honours. For example:

... your emotions just overwhelm you and sometimes you are on the verge of tears and other times you're fine. Other times I can't sleep and I dream about my thesis and other times I think, 'oh, I've just done my fieldwork chapter, it's great, I love it. This is great. I'm going to go great'. ... I was pretty much really working hard in the last few weeks. I wasn't really stressed in the last few weeks, it was probably about four weeks before it was due in, I was having my crisis and I would say 'oh no, am I going to get this in? I've got four weeks. I've got so much to do. How am I going to get this in?' That's when I had my crisis. (S4)

...it was a bit late to be changing it and that was a very stressful time writing up my findings and discussion at that stage. (S8)

...the last two weeks was really hard, like there was one day in the last two weeks I just sat at my computer and burst into tears because I was just stuck on something and I had to re-write it for about the third time and I was just going 'I don't know how to do this, I can't do this' I just had a big crying moment and then the next morning I was fine. (S1)

I was a bit of a mess around literature review time...I sort of went 'stuff this I'm going to drop out now!' (S7)

Commonly the emotions raised centred on nervousness and even feeling scared, as shown in previous comments about presenting seminars. Sometimes this was presented as self-doubt:

It was funny because the night before I was practicing that and I just thought 'what a pile of crap' and I hated it, I had another tantrum and then I just, the next morning it was like 'right I know how to make this better'. (S1)

[Supervisors] said I could input but at that point I was probably very nervous. I mean these are all lecturers I know and I was like 'I can't say my opinions or anything like that' which did change during the year...But yeah, at that point I was scared to say anything. (S4)

I remember feeling very daunted right through until towards the end. I thought, 'I am not going to be able to do this. I am not going to be able to do this.' I sort of doubted myself most of the time, 'I'm not going to make it.' I

don't know why... I think I just had, I could see all those stepping-stones that I had to get through initially and I thought, 'how am I going to do this?' You know? But it was alright in the end, but initially I was pretty stressed, yes. Doubted myself, which is bad. (S9)

Balancing these negative emotions were frequent references to passion, excitement and enjoyment:

[Field work] was just yeah quite exciting and amazing... I actually really enjoyed the year. (S2)

...just had a bit of fun this year as well with the other guys. (S3)

... Once you've got, you starting getting results, it's a good feeling, yes. ... you kind of get a good feeling when things start to come out. (S6)

The emotional intensity of undertaking Honours was apparent when students reflected on submitting their thesis:

Kind of empty, kind of – I just handed in this thing – it was my life for a year, or nine months anyway and I had nothing to do... I got up the next morning, 6.00am and I cleaned my entire house... Trying to get over everything. (S4)

...it was a really strange feeling, handing it in. It was good though and it was a huge relief, it was a huge sort of weight off your shoulders and I just felt tired, very tired... (S10)

I'm really glad that I've done it and it's... when you realise 'oh that's the hardest year you'll ever do and you think 'thank God that's out of the way'. I mean even after I submitted I couldn't stop thinking about it for a week... And everyone seems so happy, like lots of my friends, not only here, but outside of the university they just congratulate me and say 'that's great!' so that's something pretty good, yep. I feel pretty happy about it. But I'm glad it's over, I'm so glad it's over. (S1)

Relationships- a key to surviving?

How do students manage their emotional ups and downs? A clue to this is the large amount of time in each conversation devoted to discussing the student's relationships with other people, in particular. supervisors, other staff, postgraduate students and other Honours students.

Supervisors

One of the recurring themes was of supervisors guiding the student through the Honours processes. The word guide was not used by any of the students, but is implied in comments about supervisors knowing the direction, timetable, or plot. For example:

...they're there to keep me in line, make sure I'm getting things in on time and...Like I was thinking the other day, how do you get from A to B without someone on your back, making sure you're getting things, getting some

milestones throughout the year?... I'd go to them and tell them what I've been doing. They'd say, "Are you going all right? Do a bit more." (S6)

[Supervisor] was pretty good on keeping me on track, keeping me on schedule. (S1)

...they were there if you needed them just to even walk in and go I've lost the plot, I don't know where I am, one line or two lines from them and you're back on track, you know where you're meant to be. They were always helpful. (S5)

Supervisors were also described as encouraging and supporting students in subtle ways, for example:

And [supervisor] kept saying don't be silly of course you can do this. But you said my work was crap... [and supervisor said] What are you here for, are you here because you already know everything...or are you here because you're learning? And I kept going yeah it's not like you should know everything straight off, otherwise you wouldn't have to do Honours. (S2)

...just as long as you have that support and for someone to support you, yeah. Someone you can get along with and who is really keen to actually be involved in and help you. (S7)

Because I think that was one of the hardest questions [supervisors] kept saying to me 'why?' I was like I've got to think about that more, so that is really hard but... I think it's really important to leave the student alone in their own room to do their own things and not be sort of "why aren't you at this stage or why?" (S10)

Other staff

Discussion of the roles of other staff in the school was less straightforward, as suggested by these very different statements:

... there were times you'd go up to the tea room and all you want is a break, you don't want to talk about anything and another lecturer would come in and start talking to you about stuff but as much as you didn't want to talk it would always help to talk it out and just the encouragement and everything that you got was good, it was very handy. (S5)

... some of them did take an interest but I think some of the staff, particularly other student's supervisors were asking more out of trying to figure where you were at, at the moment, compared to their students...So I thought that was really interesting coming from the supervisors as well, I thought – because I didn't expect that, and they'd sort of say where their students were at and you'd go "right", you'd go quiet. (S10)

...like a divide between like it's not, it doesn't really work in unison especially the individual staff members. They have, like everywhere, it's just social interactions I guess, but you have little pockets of people, the biggest one is social versus practical research. There's still a big divide there... (S9)

...getting a nasty letter [staff evaluation] after your presentation. If it's constructive... but that was just nasty. I was really excited about doing a PhD at that stage and then just threw everything in the air, I thought I don't want to do it here if people are going to be mean to me and those sorts of things but you've just got to learn to toughen up a little bit. It's a bit unnecessary. ...[someone else] said the young lecturers sometimes feel that they've got to, I don't know, so I tried not to take it too personally, but it was hard. (S8)

Postgraduate students

References were also made to the support provided by postgraduate students in the School:

When things got really hard it was really good having the postgrads around ... because you could talk to them about what stage you were at and their experiences and things. And they'd say 'oh you'll be right, you'll be right' that sort of thing, telling me what to expect and you'd say 'how long did this take you to write (x)?' or whatever so that was kind of pretty good. (S1)

... we felt really, really left out. But it actually came about when one of the new PhD students came and she had just been an Honours student and the same thing had happened to her, so she started including us in the postgrad group... (S10)

Honours students

Some of the most animated relationship stories told by these ten students were about other Honours students. Some were stories of support, for example:

Oh it was awesome having [Honours student] there, I would have gone crazy without having him in the room. Yeah because he sort of kept me grounded and threw things at me if I was being too annoying or being highly strung as usual. Yeah it was good because he's a bit of a girl and I can talk to him about stuff. I'm not sure if he really appreciates that but he was sitting there, you know... yeah it was definitely great having him there. (S6)

I don't know how to describe it, it was a bit what comes around goes around but in a really nice way, like help people and get help, particularly me and [name] because we had similar methodologies so either I'd be a week before him or a week after him or something like that but we'd be talking to each other and going I've got to do this and I'd go I had to present it like that and he'd go yeah and I can do this so we'd help each other that way, even just little hitches like computer problems they'd help me, even just having a bit of fun because I know a couple of the others had lots of things going on so we'd go let's play football or be naughty, walk down to the bakery and they'd keep an eye out for your project as well, if [another name] found an article she'd chuck it my way... (S3)

Some interactions with other Honours students could also be competitive:

... at one point I was feeling really inadequate, I was just thinking, if they're so far ahead, I feel like I'm working so hard, why am I so behind? (S10)

I know I didn't go into it looking to beat anyone or be better than anyone or anything like that. I went into it and came out of it just trying to do what I needed to do and what I wanted to do and things like that and...The competition side of it was just, you know, you're writing this sort of stuff and it's just sort of spicing it up saying, "I've got 150 pages. How many pages have you got?" (S6)

... I was sitting next to [name] who was writing pages and pages of stuff and I was just sitting there watching him type, type, type and I go "how do you know what you're typing?" (S7)

Student learning

All of the interviewed students felt they had benefited from Honours. For example:

I definitely think this is more about the actual learning... like you definitely come out with some really good research from Honours but a lot of it is about preparing you to do more in the future. (S7)

... you get to the end of it and... it's such a big steep learning curve. I mean in everything, the standard that's required of your writing of your analysis, of how you present your results and there's just so many things you have to learn... You learn and your standards just go right up. (S10)

Looking back you realise just how much you've learnt and all the skills you've gained. (S8)

I knew how much I'd gotten out of the year, that I'd learnt so much about project managing and all sorts of stuff and devising my own methodology and seeing it through and applying myself and knowing timeframes. Just so much... (S2)

It was good. The whole way through undergrad you're doing projects, you're doing report writing but you're only doing little snippets here and there, you haven't actually started anything from scratch and do all the way through and to be able to do that it's important, it was what I wanted to look at, it was what I wanted to do so in that sense yeah definitely. I don't think I'd change anything, the topic, supervisors, the school, nothing. (S5)

Discussion

In reflecting on the student experience of Honours in my School I draw on my understanding of the School, and on the literature discussed in the introduction of this paper. Most of that literature considered institutional arrangements and notions of Honours as transitional to postgraduate study, or increased skills. The somewhat novel approach of listening to students yielded findings that support the small set of Honours literature that highlights personal transformation. The students present

themselves as part of a hierarchical world, with academics apparently near the “top”, undergraduates near the bottom, and Honours and postgraduate students actively constructing positions in between. This active negotiation of new positions and personas suggests that transformation of identity is occurring through Honours, alongside the transition of academic abilities. The foregrounding of fluctuating emotions and identification of identity challenges by the students is in keeping with claims by Channock (2001) and Fitzsimmons et al. (2003) that Honours is more than a simple transition from one state of knowledge and skills to the next. It also supports the suggestion from Brew (2003a) that one category of description for learning through research is a personal journey of discovery. The transformational aspect of Honours study receives comparatively little academic consideration in Australia. This may be because it is less tangible (and less rewardable?) than academic transitions, and because it is most easily recognised by focusing on student emotions- an area of research noted by Morrison-Saunders et al. (2005) to receive only cursory treatment. Even the most recent and thorough review of Australian Honours, which sources data from students, has no mention of emotion, and refers to transformations only in regard to institutions.

By under-regarding the transformative nature of Honours, the potential benefits of Honours to individual students (and hence their institutions and ultimately their nation) may be inadvertently constrained by academic norms and institutional processes. For instance, the literature on postgraduate supervision cited in the introduction suggests the supervisor-student relationship, central to the postgraduate student experience, might also be expected to be central in the narrative of Honours student transformation. The story that emerges in these conversations is less emphatic. Supervisors, working with the School support mechanisms indicated in Figure 1, are central in the sense that they guide the students through the academic transitions of Honours. There was less evidence that supervision was supporting identity transformations; indeed, there is a hint that the nature of academia, personified in supervisors, was sometimes constraining the emotional confidence of students. The School has a strong culture of academic rigour, which manifests partly as thorough criticism of work presented in public, including at student seminars. This culture also encourages overt competition among the academic staff, with hierarchies of “worth” based on rates and quality of publication and research student progress. This entrenched rigour and competitiveness among the academic staff, including their own and others’ supervisors, appeared to reduce the expectation by the students of emotional support from supervisors- the primary model in Lee and Green’s (2009) terms is that of apprenticeship rather than discipleship. Instead, emotional support was sought from others within the School community. Although also competitive and hierarchical at times, postgraduate and other Honours students appear to be able to provide the varieties of support needed to facilitate the transformations of identity associated with undertaking undergraduate research.

Experience shows that students do “make it through” this School’s Honours system. This research suggests that at least some transition academically and transform personally, so the School must be providing adequate support for students. Support for their academic transition is overt, and comes from providing supervisory teams, tailored course work and the specific targets presented in Figure 1. Support for identity transformation is less tangible, and has emerged through the efforts of individual academics, and a little luck. In particular, the School is small enough for

all members of the academic community to meet in shared spaces such as the staff tearoom and seminar venues. Some individual staff members encourage students to use the tearoom, and students are officially and publicly welcomed. The School has a dedicated Honours space that is physically close to the postgraduate research space, facilitating communication among the students. The administrative requirement for all students to commence at a set time may also support communication.

Conclusion

Identity transformation appears to be overlooked and under-valued in the literature on student research programs, and if my school is typical, within academic discussion. This lack of attention has implications for both the administration and educational efficacy of Honours programs. Because it is more dependent on the understanding and characteristics of individual staff, and on luck, support for identity transformation is vulnerable to accidental erosion; for instance, unfavourable office accommodation decisions may be made by administrative units. It is only by making the implicit supports explicit that they can be incorporated into planning and evaluation. Also, although this research suggests that the supervisor relationship is not the only important one to these Honours students, it does remain influential. It would be useful for all academics who undertake supervision of Honours students to reflect actively on issues of identity transformation and emotion; and this includes listening to student voices. Reflection on how their understanding of, and practice within, academia, might influence their students' transformations would be particularly valuable for them, their school and, especially, the actual experience of their future Honours students.

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