Discourses we live by: ESREA Life History and Biography Network Conference 2-5 March, Aarhus University, Copenhagen.

Abstract:

Failure in first year: turning it around

Universities promote the success stories of their graduates in their course brochures to attract students; equally, undergraduate students hope to succeed by graduating with a ‘good’ degree to obtain a ‘good’ job. However, for some first year undergraduate students, the discourse of success does not always translate into their experience as they encounter failure in their results~~.~~ This failure during first year becomes a turning point either for eventual achievement or non-completion of a university course.

In Ireland only 19%o f first year students reported that they discussed grades or assignments with their lecturers in the 2015 *Irish Survey of Student Engagement* (p 76) [[1]](#footnote-1). Furthermore, student-staff interaction continues to receive relatively low index scores in the survey from the first pilot in 2013 to results published in 2015 and the score for first year students is also 19% (p 74). With such low levels of interaction it appears difficult to know what contributes to failures and successes during first year.However, student reflection during first year can provide insight into failure with assignments and contribute to understanding of the first year experience.

This paper draws on a qualitative study resulting from students who failed a module which had been designed specifically to aid their transition to higher level education in the first semester of first year. The assessment had been based on a weekly reflective journal. As their second attempt to pass the module students were asked to reflect on why they had failed. The students were then interviewed in their third and final year to discuss that pivotal moment of having failed a module and how they had fared since that time in first year.

Analysis of the assignment and the interviews indicate that these first year students found it challenging to maintain a sense of self and sense of purpose in being at university. Themes which are integral to this challenge include (1) the challenge of becoming autonomous in contrast to the regulated pattern of work in secondary school (2) uncertainty over assignments (3) creating a routine (4) friendships/loneliness/uncertainties and finally, (5) specific personal matters such as being dyslexic, working or facing the challenge of moving to Dublin from a smaller town. Overall, most students recovered and did go on to succeed with gender also playing a role in this achievement. However, student uncertainty over assignments indicates a potential shift to actively increase student-staff interaction in first year.

1. Higher Education Authority. 2015. *The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), results from 2015*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)