

Nineteenth International Conference on The First-Year Experience

Keynote Presentation

Kerri-Lee Krause (PhD)

Centre for the Study of Higher Education
University of Melbourne, Australia

Making Connections in the First Year: The Key to Success in An Age of Unreason

Abstract

As I reflect on lessons learned over a decade of national studies of the first year experience in Australian universities, the take-home message may be summarised in a single principle: *make connections*. This is not only sage advice to students entering the first year of undergraduate education, but also an imperative for faculty, staff and administrators seeking to optimise the success of all students in the first year. This presentation, based on empirical evidence, will explore the notion of connectedness in an array of forms, from connectedness among peers and faculty, to connectedness to ideas and communities of practice, and connectedness beyond the institution. Connectedness, I will argue, is the key to success for all who live and learn in colleges and universities in an 'age of unreason', when familiar ways of knowing and doing are challenged by the need to take hold of and shape the future, think the unlikely, and perhaps, even, do the 'unreasonable'.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this conference gathering. I thank Mary Stuart Hunter and her team for their kind invitation. It is certainly an honour to be here with you.

'Making connections in the first year: the key to success in an age of unreason'. As I noted in the abstract for this presentation, after a decade of national studies of the first year experience in Australian universities, the conclusion I have reached is a simple one, but one that has enduring consequences for student success and it is this: the fundamental importance of making connections, building community.

I'd like to challenge your thinking on this very familiar theme today by advocating the need for a little upside-down thinking on the matter. Now, being from the land down-under, we're quite used to looking at things upside down, so to speak. In fact we contend that the rest of the world has it all wrong with the existing world map – it should really look like this.

My argument today is that the time has come to be 'unreasonable', to undertake some upside down thinking about how to foster student success in the first year. Let me explain.

In George Bernard Shaw's play 'Mrs Warren's Profession', the playwright has one of his characters commenting ... "The reasonable person adapts themselves to the conditions that surround them... The unreasonable person adapts surrounding conditions to themselves... All progress depends on the unreasonable person.

Charles Handy, the modern philosopher argues that, as a society, in all dimensions of our lives, we are entering an Age of Unreason . . . :

when the future, in so many areas, is there to be shaped, by us and for us . . .

a time when the only prediction that will hold true is that no predictions will hold true . . .
a time for upside-down thinking... to evoke new images of familiar things.
(Charles Handy, the age of unreason, 2002)

To evoke new images of familiar things...

It seems to me that as first year practitioners, there is a danger that we might become so familiar with the old familiar first year themes, that we seldom take time out to view these themes and issues through new eyes.

As we gather for this 19th international conference of the first-year experience, the Australian based international first year in higher education conference has just concluded its 9th meeting. Next year, it seems, there will be two major anniversaries to celebrate on either side of the world. And, if it doesn't clash with this conference, I'd like to invite you all to come down under for the 10th anniversary first year in higher education conference in Melbourne, Australia.

I have watched a significant progression in the types of papers presented at these conferences. There is now a great deal more emphasis given to rigorous, evidence-based approaches to the first year and the growth in the body of empirical evidence to guide our policy and practice has been a welcome development.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that as you scan the topics represented in these two conferences, they remind us of a range of critically important, yet familiar themes:

- The importance of peer support and peer mentoring programs
 - Student retention in the first year
 - Strategies for fostering student-faculty contact
 - Supporting students from diverse backgrounds in the first year
- And the familiar list goes on.

My challenge to you at the start of this conference is “use the next few days to really dig below the surface, look for new ways, unique approaches to some of the old familiar themes – perhaps even engage in a little ‘upside down thinking’”.

This presentation is framed around three questions:

1. Why the need for upside down thinking about familiar first year issues?
2. How can we think upside-down to bring about connectedness?
3. What is the urgency – why worry about challenging those familiar ways of knowing and doing in the first year?

To address the first question, I'd like you to reflect on who our first year students used to be.

It was once the case that, as our forefathers (and I use the masculine form of the term advisedly), looked out over the student body, this is pretty much what they saw – sure, the students may have had a few more clothes on some days, but higher education was essentially for white, upper class males who inhabited their campuses and had little to distract them from thinking great thoughts each day.

Things have changed just a little. Our students have much more to juggle while studying than was once the case. They are wired and wireless, connected to the world like never before, juggling multiple commitments, particularly paid employment,

faced with difficult decisions about career plans for an uncertain future. And, what's more, they are much more likely to be female.

So the need for upside down thinking about how to promote success in the first year is prompted by factors such as the heterogeneity of the student population in an age of universal access to higher education; fragmented student lives characterized by multiple commitments and a very impressive juggling act to keep all the balls in the air.

The skills demanded of this juggling act make me think of using the bathrooms on planes – having just spent many hours on one, this example is rather vivid in my mind. You know, when you to the basin and try to get the soap out of the dispenser, and wash both hands, and keep the water running, and press the button to keep the plug open and the sink draining. How do you do all those things at once in a tiny cubicle barely large enough to move? Well, somehow our students manage to juggle similar challenges.

I would argue that we really don't know our students well enough. As the student body becomes increasingly diverse in terms of background experiences and aspirations, the imperative to monitor their experience, walk a mile in their shoes, is there like never before.

Let me illustrate with just one example from our most recent national study of the first year experience in Australian universities. We made a special study of the differences between demographic subgroups in the first year and how they experienced their first 6 months of study. For instance, we examined the differences between experiences of students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds, we looked at gender and age differences, to name a few.

This example demonstrates some of the significant differences between the plans and aspirations of international students as compared with their domestically based peers. As you may know, Australia is one of the most significant exporters of higher education in the OECD world. Our international student body has grown threefold over the last decade. And we were particularly keen to know some of the sources of difference between international and Australian domicile students when it comes to reasons for enrolling at university.

You have these data on the handout, so I won't dwell on them, but they serve as a simple example of some of the key areas in which the international and domestic student experience diverge, even before students set foot on the campus.

One of the trends of the last decade internationally, and certainly in the Australian context, has been the increasing fragmentation of student lives. One key reason for this has been the growing commitment among fulltime undergraduate students to part-time employment. In the last 5 years, the proportion of the first year population in paid work has increased on average from 51 to 55%. This is certainly a conservative estimate – we have reason to believe that many of our non-responders were, in fact, too busy working to respond to our survey!

As you examine the trends in the proportion of students working, you can see a significant movement from 1994 to 1999 towards the right of the table – in other words, more students working longer hours. In the past 5 years, it appears that this creep to the right has been curbed somewhat. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that when the 1999 study was published, many universities were so shocked by the rising paid work phenomenon that they put in place proactive steps to

try to shape student expectations and educate them about how to balance study and paid work with a manageable and 'so-called' reasonable number of hours of employment per week. This approach has now been embedded into policy in many universities and academic faculties or schools, along with explicit statements about how much time students should devote to study per week in order to succeed in their chosen course.

Another reason for the apparent plateau in the number of paid work hours among the undergraduate student population may be explained by the significant rise in the proportion of international students in our sample. Among this group of students, the number of hours of paid employment per week is restricted as part of their visa conditions. But despite the plateauing effect, you will notice to the far right of the table that there has been no decline in the proportion of students working the equivalent of close to full time jobs while studying full-time.

Fragmented lives, multiple commitments, impressive juggling acts – but at what cost?

Looking further at reasons why upside down thinking about familiar issues is so key at this time, I would argue that the familiar issue of the rising use of technology among the net generation of first year students is worthy of closer scrutiny. While technologies offer much promise in terms of connecting students and their campus learning communities, they also have the power to distance students from each other, from faculty and from active involvement in the first year. Think for a moment about the hours students spend downloading course materials from the web, searching for assignment materials online, or listening to podcast lectures.

While the perception is that the net generation are wired and wireless, online all the time, chatting away, the reality emerging from our data is quite different.

Yes, on the whole they are digitally literate and connected, but they are quite discerning and highly strategic about distinguishing between use of information and communication technologies (or ICTs) for study as opposed to leisure. The message we are receiving from students is that they like to keep their ICT use for study and leisure purposes quite separate.

These data from the national Australian study surprised us – we expected considerably more students to be emailing their teachers and peers on a regular basis, but this was not the case. We were very surprised to find that there had been so little growth in the numbers of students using online discussion as part of their study.

I had a conversation with a young freshman student on a plane traveling across the US last week – I collar them when I can! And she confirmed this trend in her own experience. She told me about an online course that she had taken recently and commented on how hard it was to commit to use of the online discussion board that formed part of the course. "It wasn't that the content was difficult, and I know the online discussion board was probably a good idea, but it was just really difficult trying to balance that with my other online chat – you know, on MSN. I would much prefer to just keep my online chat for my friends, and then meet face to face to discuss study things. I don't think I'll do another online course like that."

Clearly, this is not the experience of all students. In fact, one of the major lessons learned from 10 years of studying the first year experience in Australia is that there is no such thing as **the** first year experience anymore – it is not a one-size-fits-all

approach – each student experiences their first year through increasingly diverse lenses. Nevertheless, this illustration of online discussion board preferences is worth bearing in mind before jumping to conclusions and making non-evidence-based judgements about the net generation.

As you will see from this table, the least interactive use of ICTs is that used by the vast majority of students on a regular basis. Perhaps some upside down thinking about ICTs and their role in engaging students in the first year is in order.

Upside down thinking is called for in an era of institutional resource constraints, not to mention the inertia characterizing large institutions in an age when creative and responsive initiatives are so crucial.

I'm sure this couldn't possibly be the case in your institution, but certainly what I observe in many universities across Australia is that while there are pockets of excellence and highly committed individuals achieving impressive results through their first year initiatives, there is often little synergy between these initiatives and campus-wide policies and practices.

In an age of unreason, I would argue that it is time for a more coherent, institution-wide approach to supporting the success of first year students.

And finally, in considering the argument in favour of upside-down thinking, we come to that age-old issue of curriculum, assessment and program design in the first year. It's ground that has been covered so many times, yet there is still much ground to cover. A significant proportion of my working life is committed to working with faculty (academic staff) on developing curricula and assessment tasks that are informed by research evidence on the changing student experience and that are aligned with objectives for student success as global citizens. Faculty face significant challenges in accommodating and supporting diverse student needs and backgrounds, while at the same time maintaining the highest standards and quality in student learning experiences. And they need support to do so. Support, not just in the form of one-off professional development workshops, but in the form of an institutional culture, policies and practices that not only value success in student learning and development, but also value faculty and staff learning and development.

These are just some of the many reasons for arguing for the need for upside-down thinking – for looking at the familiar challenges through new eyes, and for having the courage and initiative to not simply adapt ourselves to changes around us, but in fact to be proactive in adapting our institutions, our policies and our practices to the needs of our students and ourselves to maximize our chances of achieving success together.

It is pleasing to know that the majority of our students in the first year of Australian universities really like being a university student. Most like being on their campuses, but we are not doing so well when it comes to the specifics of belonging to a community of learners and teachers committed to learning. And, I would argue, this calls for unreasonable thinking – not just expecting our students to change and adapt themselves but perhaps taking the unreasonable step of challenging our own practices, policies and values.

We have talked about the 'why' of upside down, unreasonable thinking. But what about the 'how'?

It is said that a frog, if placed in cold water will not make any attempt jump out of a

container if that water is heated up slowly and gradually. In the end, it will let itself be boiled alive rather than take the initiative to make a break from that watery environment that once seemed so inviting. I haven't tested this theory myself – I will rely on those biologists and zoologists among us to confirm or refute the story. Nevertheless, it makes a good illustration for the take-home message I'd like to leave with you today: we can remain in our comfort zones and settle for slow and continuous change to which we may or may not react, or we can accommodate the inevitability of discontinuous change that may stir up our world, and challenge us and our students to adapt and manage our lives in new ways.

How can we make best use of upside down thinking to achieve connectedness and community? The key once again, is not a new concept, but it is one that receives far too little air time in our institutional conversations. That is why I am particularly pleased to see the synergy between this presentation and the afternoon plenary address on Wednesday, entitled 'Learning without borders', where you will see a fine example of a whole-of-institution approach taking place right here at the University of Toronto. I assure you we did not collude on this, but the synergies are really quite amazing.

The model I'm about to share with you comes with a health warning – it should not be operationalised in your office, on your own, unsupervised. And you should definitely consult with professionals, colleagues, peers before trying any of this. It is not a lone ranger solution, neither will it mean that you can stay swimming in your comfort zone like the frog. It's going to mean jumping out of the water, out of your office, perhaps even out of your area to work with colleagues across the institution, and beyond its boundaries.

And I have to add that what I'm about to share is a vision, a dream rather than a reality. It is my hope of how our institutions might operate to support the success of every first year student who sets foot on the threshold of our campuses. But I take comfort from an old Brazilian proverb that reminds us that...

If you dream alone, it's just a dream.

If you dream together, it's reality.

I would like to propose this as a three-phase model of the first year student connection making process.

The first phase represents the early transition experiences of first year students. This is a simplified representation of just a few key dimensions of the student's life, including their background experiences and home and community factors that shape who they are and how they will experience the early days, weeks and months of university or college. Related to this are the student's hopes and plans for the future, along with their multiple commitments outside of study – probably best represented through the commitment to part-time paid work as we have discussed.

As the student makes the transition to higher education, they slowly begin to make connections with the many facets of university or college life. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to expand on these in detail. Suffice to say that the significant role of each factor is supported by extensive. And you will find all of these factors expanded and discussed in research of such luminaries as Tinto, Pascarella and Terenzini and in the recent publication of Kuh and colleagues entitled 'Student success in college: creating conditions that matter'.

Research confirms the formative role of peers and peer collaboration within cohort groups, across year levels, disciplines and classroom boundaries as a means of

maximizing opportunities for student success in the first year. We know, too, the importance of first year students connecting with faculty members as individuals but also as academic departments and communities of scholars.

As well as connecting with peers and faculty with whom they will have closest contact in the learning community, first year students face the challenge of connecting with the institution itself – its culture, tradition and those taken-for-granted practices that may be so very alien to students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds. There is a need, too, for connecting with those who will provide such crucial support in the form of students affairs staff and services.

Finally, we come to two sets of connections that provide the foundation for success in the first year. Students in transition need to learn how to learn in higher education and, beyond this, they need to learn how to make links to the disciplinary community of practice (or multidisciplinary community, as the case may be). My observation is that we have devoted much time to the social integration dimension of first year student connections, but insufficient time on these central elements of what it is to learn with and belong to a community of scholars.

As the student body diversifies, and as students enter our institutions from increasingly diverse backgrounds and educational experiences, so the imperative to equip them with the necessary skills for engaging with tertiary learning requires our fullest attention. Not only do first years need to come to terms with what it is to learn and succeed in higher education, but they also need to learn the new language and conventions of their disciplinary study – a challenge that we so often overlook if we restrict our efforts to academic literacy development in decontextualised settings.

And in terms of conceptual connectedness, there is some very interesting and ongoing work both in North America and the UK, as well as in Australia, on the critical importance of teaching-research nexus and the need for connecting students to the research and researchers of their chosen discipline. Research-infused learning and teaching provides an important pathway for helping students to make conceptual links with their learning in its disciplinary context, as well as with the broader community of scholars, who contribute to the thinking and the scholarship of discovery and ideas in the discipline. Upside down thinking would suggest that research-led learning and teaching is not restricted to graduate students in research-led universities. Rather, it may be put into practice in creative ways across year levels including first year, and across institutional types to maximize the quality of student learning and to help them to connect to a community of ideas, discovery and scholars in their discipline.

You will notice that, at first, these connections are rather tenuous, as the first year student resides initially on the edge of the institution, not yet launched as a fully fledged first year, and undergoing many internal conflicts and personal reassessments and adjustments in this new environment. Over time we hope that the students' connections to the dimensions of the institutional environment and experiences will strengthen. But still you will notice that the student tends to experience these different dimensions as distinct and separate elements. Unfortunately, these boxes tend to be self-imposed by institutions, many of which operate on a silo mentality, with limited cross-institutional communication and collaboration.

With the passage of time, our hope is that the institution will begin to take on greater relevance in the life of students, that as the student becomes more fully integrated into the institution, so the institution takes on a more significant role in the student's

life and experience – both on campus and beyond. This may manifest itself, for example, in opportunities for civic engagement that gives students opportunity to become involved in community-based projects and that take universities and colleges back into the community. It is also important for institutions to consider how they might work with students to try to forge more meaningful connections between student employment off campus – the many skills they develop on the job – and the university curriculum. Yorke and colleagues in the UK argue that we have a long way to go in maximizing these connections and their potential role in student learning and success.

During the course of Phase 2, it is my dream that students will come to experience the many dimensions of the institution and learning in seamless ways. A critical part of the connection-making process for first years involves making links across the institution and thereby making meaning of their experience. The unreasonable part of this model, however, is that rather than simply expecting students to adapt themselves to this new environment, I contend that institutions and the people in them have a significant responsibility to constantly assess and re-assess the environmental conditions to determine what and how we might need to adapt the context and perhaps even change some of our practices to optimize the chances of first year student success.

Phase 3 completes the transition process, and demonstrates the ideal – where students are effectively integrated into the institution, their connections with the facets of the university or college community are strong and seamless, and the institution has reciprocated by ensuring that every effort has been made to be relevant to students' lives beyond the university experience.

The well-adjusted student continued to assess and reassess their thinking as transitions of different kinds continue through and beyond the first year.

A whole-of-institution response to support the holistic development of the first year student.

As I scan the conference program that we are about to embark on, I see all the dimensions of this model represented. My challenge to each of you is to consider how your particular initiative or program or research study contributes to the grand tapestry that is the first year experience in your institution.

We have asked why and we have asked how, but what about the 'what' of upside down thinking? What is the urgency in advocating unreasonable thinking about familiar first year issues?

I think the students themselves are the reason for the urgency. In most institutions, the majority of freshman belong to what has been labeled the Y Generation, characterized by high levels of connectedness and a global perspective on community that we have not witnessed before. In recent months, I have had the privilege of traveling to Japan to interview first year students there, I have had conversations with students in Ireland, the UK and the US, and everywhere I go, the desire for connectedness is a common, binding force.

This desire for community applies equally to non-traditional age students in our institutions, though our research evidence points to some unique elements in their experiences and expectations of community in higher education. Nevertheless, the point remains that whoever the student may be – whether the more 'typical' digital native, or the non-traditional age student, the student with a disability, the

disadvantaged students – whether by resources or geographical distance, the minority students, the first generation student – all have the right to succeed in a supportive community environment that provides seamless connectedness.

If we fail to act, then I believe we, and not the students, bear much of the responsibility for not creating supportive learning and living communities in our institutions – whether physical or virtual. Yes, freshman students certainly do have a key role to play in adapting to and shaping their university experience, but the responsibility is certainly not a one-sided affair.

I was taking my usual morning walk recently. It takes me past a primary or elementary school and from time to time, I walk late enough in the morning to see the children making their way to school. Some walk with parents, some ride bicycles, some jump and run along the path, eager to get there, and some are a little less eager to start the school day!

On this particular day, I was walking along the path which runs parallel to a creek and is surrounded by a bushes and shrubs. It is a well-worn path to the school. Ahead of me a very flustered looking mother was racing up the grassy stairs to the school, with two young children in tow. The warning bell had already rung and they had to hurry. The mother looked back over her shoulder, calling out 'Quick Alexander, we're going to be late – come on, hurry up'. After a few more harried calls from a mother desperately trying to get her three young ones to school on time, Alexander emerged from a nearby clump of trees, triumphant. She was about 10 years old and her face glowed with excitement. She was oblivious to the time and the fact that she was holding the family up. Her hair was all over the place, and her shoes covered with mud.

Her mother took one look at her and let out an exasperated moan, still trying frantically to make her way up the hill with the two small children. But Alex didn't seem to notice and with great excitement at a most inappropriate time, she called out 'Mum, mum, I've found a great hunting place – it's going to be a really good place to explore - there are all sorts of things to hunt in there'.

Mum only cared about getting to school on time and one can only wonder what it was that the fearless hunter Alexander had discovered on her detour from a familiar path that they probably walked every day.

"It's a great hunting place – a great place to explore!"

I challenge you to treat this 19th international conference on the first year experience not as a well-worn path that you travel each year, perhaps dipping in and out of sessions, picking up a few good ideas each day, but see it through new eyes – it's a great hunting place – an opportunity to explore the familiar, perhaps from an upside down perspective.

Imagine boldly how you might better assemble the many facets of the first year in your institution to achieve a whole and seamless experience. Think unlikely thoughts and perhaps, even, leave this conference to do the unreasonable.