

A Systemic Intervention for Engaging First-Year Students: The Context Matters

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Abstract

In this paper we present the theoretical framework of a training intervention designed for first-year students in their first semester. Our vision was to help them in their transition from a narrow and protected environment (family and school), to a wider, more complex and impersonal environment (university). First, we need to look at first-year students as bio-psychosocial systems, in order to understand the elements that shape their behavior. Then, we identify the skills to be developed. The proposed model is based on the general principles of systems theory and what is called “organized complexity.”

Keywords: Engaging first-year students, student transition, systemic training, organized complexity

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Introduction

A critical time in the life of an individual is the transition from high school to university — one of the most challenging and difficult periods of adjustment a person faces. During this transition, new opportunities for growth and change are created while at the same time restraining forces and pressures make students experience physical and psychological problems. In fact, youths entering university face multiple transitions not only in their academic environments. Some need to make new living arrangements away from home; they also need to create new friendships and personal networks. New, emerging adults are in a process of negotiating their responsibilities and roles in order to take them over fully, become self-reliant, emotionally autonomous and thus, gaining their individuality (a unique sense of self and autonomy) (Acquilino, 2006).

Wishing to alleviate the turbulence in the students' transition, we designed an experiential training intervention using a systemic, dialectic, multilevel and multifocal approach (Polemi-Todoulou, 2018). The design incorporates general principles of systems theory and is presented in this paper.

Shift from a Mechanistic to a Systemic Paradigm

At university, students are confronted with complex environments and processes that can no longer be understood with mechanistic assumptions of linearity, causality and stability (Dent, 1999; Tetenbaum, 1998). According to the dictionary, complexity is a Latin word composed by the prefix *co-* (together) and the verb *plectere* (weave, braid) meaning something entwined and intricate. It is also derived from the Latin word *complexus*, meaning embracing, surrounding. So, the word complexity is related to the

intricacy of the internal structure, while at the same time it denotes an embracing whole, “the system” (Pribram, 2002).

Complex systems are different from complicated ones in terms of predictability. In complicated systems the elements may have many possible interactions, but they usually operate in patterned ways which make possible to predict how the system will behave. In complex systems on the other hand, elements may follow a pattern but the interactions are continually changing. A system is a whole comprised of processes and “entities” that are interrelated, interdependent, and transacting (Vassiliou and Vassiliou, 1983). “The term ‘transaction’ means that the A is in process with B altering it at the same time that it is altered by it” (Vassiliou & Vassiliou, 1983, p.6). This totality of processes is characterized by what is called “organized complexity.” As the system functions, the transacting entities become differentiated and multiply through added channels of transaction, thereby increasing the organized complexity and creating a process of morphogenesis (structuring) which leads to an upward spiral of transformation. Multiplicity, interdependence, and diversity determine the degree of complexity of an environment (Sargut & McGarth, 2011).

First-year Students as a Bio-Psychosocial System

The model that we propose is based on the general principles of systems theory and what is called “organized complexity.” Our emphasis is on understanding the interrelated, interdependent, and transacting processes that comprise the what we see as the system “first-year students.” According to Vassiliou & Vassiliou (1983) these processes can be grouped in four dynamic entities, namely the economicosocial, the sociocultural, the psychosocial and the biological.

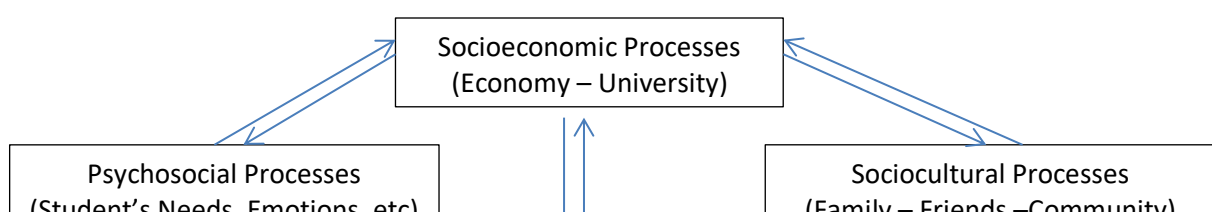




Figure 1: First-year student as a bio-psychosocial system, adapted from Vassiliou & Vassiliou (1983)

The economic situation, levels of unemployment, the structure of the educational system, as well as the functioning of the university/department are some of the many modalities that act upon the first-year student. In addition, the student belongs to a number of different social groups—family, friends, community—that influence his/her cognitive and emotional processes. So the question is: “How do these interpersonal (sociocultural) processes interact, influence and become part of the intra-personal (psychosocial and biological) processes that the first-year students are experiencing within the socioeconomic system?”

To understand the individual first-year student we need first to understand him/her as a person with biological and psychological needs as well as a member of a family, school, community, and culture and view these interactions in a wider context. Interconnectedness and interdependence of the various elements of the systems such as family, school, work, jobs, organizations, result in increased complexity, mainly due to the information technology revolution.

Biological and Psychosocial Processes

A young adult on the road to individuality has to renegotiate the relationship to him/herself and to his/her needs. Thus we need to examine the role of biological processes in the transition to adulthood. In this domain, young adults' relations with their bodies and their sexuality are important factors affecting their physical and psychological well-being. While independence, freedom, and autonomy are the most welcome features of this transition, they are also major sources of anxiety and fear of isolation (Peel, 2000). Coming from a "secure," highly structured, organized, and disciplined environment where everything, including the learning process, was dependent on and controlled by secondary school teachers, young first-year students are suddenly expected to assume responsibility for their own living and learning.

Parents, siblings, and friends already attending universities; secondary school teachers; and the students' community affect student expectations and aspirations about university life to a significant degree. Anticipation of greater adult freedom and a reduction in family help and support contribute to students' imprecise heightened emotions. Their established personality traits also may affect young people's adjustment to this life transition (Bardi & Ryff, 2007).

Sociocultural Processes

The role of family, friends and the community is important in shaping and interpreting life events. According to Vassiliou & Vassiliou (1987), "'Anthropos' (human being) and 'group member' are two aspects of the same process . . . Both aspects are intrinsically related" (p.8). As noted above, students participate in a number of groups (family, friends, academic work groups, interest groups, etc.) that form the community in which they live, constituting another level in the systems' hierarchy.

So, what is the role of family, friends, and community in shaping students' transition from secondary school to university study? The students' background affect cognitive and emotional processes and patterns of transactions that may make the transition to this new phase easier or more difficult. Opportunities to form positive social relationships with other students and university staff increase feelings of fitting in, make adjustment easier and quicker, and help to develop student identity (Briggs et al, 2012; Harvey & Drew, 2006; Scanlon et al, 2005).

Socioeconomic Processes

The socioeconomic system is the overarching system that shapes and conditions the complex processes within which individuals produce and influences all other systems.

It took almost 10,000 years for humankind to make the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society and 300 more years to move to the knowledge society of today. It will probably take only a few more decades to transition to a new form of society. This suggests the increasingly radical and rapid pace of changes that are currently taking place. In our knowledge society, the principal means of gaining wealth is information, which is accessible to everyone. New forms of work, which are both very technical and very anti-industrial, mark new ways of producing and relating (Toffler, 1980). Globalization and high uncertainty levels contribute to a highly complex environment with an overload of information.

The socioeconomic system forms the wider context in which all intra- and interpersonal processes develop. Part of this system is the economic environment and more specifically, the levels of unemployment, the structure of temporary employment opportunities, and the educational system itself. Greece is distinguished by a strong demand for higher education among western European countries , since a higher

education degree is considered “socially prestigious” and a vital asset for opening career opportunities. At the same time, tertiary level education is the responsibility of the state and “free of charge,” which poses a de facto restriction on the numbers of students that can be admitted to universities. This has resulted in one of the most restrictive higher education systems in Europe, and has increased the competition among high-school students seeking admission to the university, who must study hard during the last two years of high school in order to pass the demanding entrance examinations (Psacharopoulos & Papakonstantinou, 2005; Saiti & Prokopiadou, 2008).

Thus to gain university entrance in Greece, one must be self-disciplined, strongly motivated, and hard-working. The high unemployment rates of the recession period have placed additional pressures on students, especially those with low incomes and those with one or both parents among the unemployed. The economic crisis has made competition even more fierce, especially for universities in large cities, as low income poses restrictions on students’ relocation to other cities.

Developing the Necessary Skills

In this section, we attempt to present the main principles of the approach and explain how they contribute to the development of the set of skills previously mentioned. Having examined and understood the elements that shape first-year students’ behavior, we designed our training intervention with the aim of developing three set of skills recently proposed by Goleman & Senge (2014) as crucial for navigating and thriving in today’s environment of increasing distraction. These are “inner focus” (focusing on ourselves), “other focus” (tuning into others) and “outer focus” (understanding the larger world). These three skill sets mirror the processes that Vassiliou and Vassiliou (1983) described. Regarding the inner focus, we wanted the participants to start

listening to their feelings, to understand their various roles, and to accept responsibility and develop a sense of purpose in their new roles.

First of all, it is important to emphasize the experiential approach that we take to training. Our exercises are designed in a way that requires participants to share a personal experience, and in particular a positive one. For example, they are asked to think of a positive educational experience they have enjoyed during their school years. This is something all the participants have in common, something they can relate to and that does not require mental processing.

This is unusual for an educational environment, where students are typically divided in those who know/have studied and talk and the others who lack the knowledge and remain silent. Moreover, it trains the participants to focus on the positive side of events, which is another principle typically missing from the educational system, where mistakes to be corrected are emphasized. Finally, the approach works towards helping participants to develop self-knowledge. Before sharing their experiences, students are asked to focus on themselves and think about the incident, the elements they recall, and the way they would like to share them. At the end of the process there is time to reflect on their experience and evaluate it in the context of their current phase of development.

Regarding the *other* focus, knowing each other and creating a network of supporting relationships is key. This involves understanding and accepting diversity and relating to others from their perspective. In order to do so, we must create an environment where students are encouraged to participate by utilizing their whole self, both cognitive and emotional. Building relations requires the space to share experiences and express thoughts and feelings. This is not easy to achieve in a large group. It should be broken down in smaller sub-systems: groups of two and four. When forming these

groups, we need to make sure that less familiar people are connected each time, which eventually leads to increased cohesion.

When seated in pairs, participants are introduced to the concept of being members of a dyad and creating a horizontal/equal relationship in a context other than the class. Then they are asked to become members of a larger group, comprising four, thus moving to a new, more complex level of sharing and communication. The smaller groups foster a safe relational context that allows for the elaboration and synthesis of the emerging differences. Finally, the groups are asked to share whatever they would like with the larger group. This is a process through which the voice of the individual becomes the voice of the group and the areas of diversity become sources of growth.

Finally, regarding the *outer focus*, it is important for students to understand the new context and explore their interactions and role in it. This goal is best achieved through both the organization and the content of the intervention. In relation to the organization, as discussed before, assigning different, interrelated and specific tasks to the smaller sub-systems (groups of two and four), leads to the final group product: a synthesis of the work being produced by the sub-groups. Both individuals and sub-groups can identify their contribution in the output of the group, i.e. the collective knowledge that is being produced. The trainers have a holistic view of the processes evolving at different system levels and can shift focus from one level to the other. This gives the participants a multifocal view. In relation to the content, many tasks highlight the hierarchy of interrelated social systems at different levels of complexity. Any system (individual, family, small and large group, university, organization, community) is best approached as an integral part of the particular hierarchy in which it functions.

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Conclusion

As our environment becomes increasingly complex and unpredictable, the challenges and the problems of engaging an increasingly diverse first-year student population increase. We need to understand first-year students' transition to University as a multifactorial phenomenon. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature in this domain by presenting a framework and a training intervention design, using a multilevel and multifocal approach (Polemi-Todoulou, 2018) which is experiential in nature. Our methodology allows participants to work in groups, and to develop their interpersonal skills while focusing on their intrapersonal experience. As educators we need to take into account the broader socio-economic context as well as the intra- and interpersonal experiences that the students are bringing into the learning process. Our role here is to create a safe learning environment that facilitates interactions between participants.

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