



Small Grants 2018 – Recipient Project Report

Water metaphors to help us rethink how we support student transitions into medicine

By Dr Valerie Farnsworth, University of Leeds, Leeds Institute of Medical Education

With funding from ASME's Small Grant fund, I conducted a study on 'the first transition: becoming a medical student'. My aim was to understand the ways students adjust to the demands of the MBChB, particularly in terms of their approach to learning. I approached this topic knowing that schools today are, by and large, performance-oriented. The school context fosters particular learner identities which have been characterised in terms of a 'performance orientation' or a 'concern for proving one's competence' (Watkins, 2001). For those who go on to Higher Education and more specifically, to study medicine, a different 'learning orientation' is demanded of students. A 'learning orientation' is defined as a 'concern for improving one's competence' (Watkins, 2001).

The study utilised several theoretical tools, conceptualising transition as change. By focusing on learning transitions, I was looking specifically at changes in learning orientations, approaches to studying and also looked at 'ability mindset' (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). A 'growth mindset' or 'incremental' ability mindset is the belief that effort leads to success (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). On the other hand, a 'fixed' or 'entity' ability mindset is an implicit theory that 'ability leads to success' (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). The study was further guided by an interest in the role of the 'experienced curriculum' which is culturally constructed (Lawy, 2006).

The study involved interviews with 9 of our University of Leeds undergraduate MBChB students. Interviews lasting 40 - 60 minutes explored students' ideas about learning, ability mindset and the medical curriculum.

This brief summary highlights some findings that may be of interest to ASME newsletter readers. These are presented as water metaphors that emerged from the data as themes.

Same boat. The phrase 'we are all in the same boat' was used by several of the students interviewed for this study. In using this phrase, they described a strategy for reducing the stress that comes with thinking that it's only them who struggle and everyone else has it figured out. This sort of mindset is linked to a fixed mindset which is about comparing yourself with others.

Deep end. While we may think that supporting students along the way is the best way to 'support' transitions, the students interviewed referred to the challenges of the curriculum as the things that helped to spur them on to become more self-directed in their learning and make changes in their approach. This metaphor of the 'deep end' is about having a complex curriculum and challenges like placements in busy wards and interactions with patients that help push students along in the transition to becoming self-regulated learners. It is this that helps them realise a new goal, which is not to perform well on exams to access medicine but to know what they need to know to be excellent doctors.

Fish out of water. There is the expression that 'a fish in water does not know it's in water'. This applies to the transition in that students need to be reflective of the curriculum in order to develop their growth mindsets and become self-regulated learners. Meta-level reflection was linked to being critical of themselves, monitoring their learning and assessing and re-assessing their learning strategies. A key point made by all was that the learner needs to find what works for them and this may involve some trial and error. Deciding to try new strategies came about from reflection on the expectations of the course, which they quickly realised could not mean memorising everything. Rather than repetition of knowledge (e.g. multiple copies of notes to write), they needed to glean the main ideas or as one student put it 'first principles' and then learn the 'extra details' (most similar to A Level Chemistry according to some participants).

References

Lawy, R. 2006. Connective Learning: Young People's Identity and Knowledge-Making in Work and Non-Work Contexts. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Jul., 2006), pp. 325-340.

Watkins C. (2001). Learning about Learning enhances performance. *NSIN Research Matters*. 13, 1-9. Available from: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10002803/1/Watkins2001Learning.pdf> [Accessed 15th January 2019].

Yeager D. and Dweck C. (2012). Mindsets That Promote Resilience: When Students Believe That Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed. *Educational Psychologist*. 47(4), 302-314.