

UKAT Equity & Inclusion SIG

Cross-institution research: Role of the personal tutor in reducing the degree awarding gap for racially minoritised students in the UK Higher Education

Title: Foster a positive discipline identity to build student learners, not consumers, and improve attainment for all.

Author: Dr. Louise Taylor, National Teaching Fellow and Principal Lecturer for Education and Student Experience

Affiliation: Department of Sport, Health Sciences and Social Work, Oxford Brookes University

Contact: louise.e.taylor@brookes.ac.uk Twitter: @L_Psychol

Introduction

This case study describes an activity that personal tutors can lead with their students during a one-hour personal tutoring session. The activity was developed from research that demonstrates that creating a sense of identity as a student within a particular discipline can support engagement with the educational process, and thus, academic outcomes. The workshop creates an essential space for students to learn about the impact of identities on their learning, reflect on their own identities, and engage in research-informed activities for strengthening their own discipline identities. By creating this space during personal tutoring, students, particularly those from the Global Ethnic Majority, are supported to enhance their sense of belonging, which will underpin improved academic outcomes.

Student identities

Identities describe who we think we are or how we see ourselves. They influence our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Therefore, students' identities, or how they see themselves in relation to their educational experiences, have a crucial role to play in their level of engagement, as well as various outcome measures of success (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017). Specifically, some research has shown, for example, that a student's identity as a member of their discipline is significantly associated with better academic outcomes (Jetten et al., 2017; Bliuc et al., 2011a, 2011b). This would suggest that if personal tutors can foster a sense of belonging within their discipline, not just among students from the Global Ethnic Majority, but among all students, then tutors can contribute to reducing ethnicity degree awarding gaps.

Personal tutors are positioned to play a unique role in fostering a student identity, specifically as a student member of an academic discipline. Achieving this will support all students to feel a sense of inclusion. The traditional identity of a student as scholar or learner, with an intrinsic interest in their discipline, has been somewhat overshadowed by the more modern identity of a student as an educational consumer (Bunce et al., 2017). This new identity is characterised by attitudes and behaviours that underpin instrumental engagement with education, focusing on gaining credentials rather than personal development (Tomlinson, 2017). As a result, students with a strong consumer identity, as opposed to a strong identity as a scholar of their discipline, may be more likely to engage superficially in their studies and achieve worse outcomes.

A tool for developing students' disciplinary identity

Identities are social, meaning that they are influenced and formed by the groups to which we belong (Oyserman et al, 2017). When people feel part of a group, they are motivated to establish a shared set of values and beliefs, and to coordinate their behaviour to promote the interests of the group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). With this in mind, I developed a workshop and supporting resources to enable students tutors to assess their educational identities as “learners” and “consumers”, and to strengthen their sense of disciplinary group membership. The workshop provides a structured space for students and tutors to co-create a shared group understanding of attitudes and behaviours that support learning within their own disciplinary context. This will support academic achievement, according to previous research (Bliuc et al., 2011a, 2011b; Bunce and Bennett, 2021).

The workshop structure is outlined in Table 1. It can be completed in approximately one-hour with a small group of students (up to 20), and is suitable for students at all levels of study, including those transitioning into university. Full details of the workshop can be found at www.brookes.ac.uk/SIIP, and the resources have been published by [Advance HE](#).

One-hour small group workshop
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Step 1: Student completes questionnaire to establish strength of consumer and learner identities and discover student ‘type’ (10 min)● Step 2: Tutor presents research on identities using PowerPoint slides provided (10 min)● Step 3: In small groups students consider discussion questions (25 min)

- Step 4: Tutor leads plenary to create a summary of attitudes and behaviours that support learning, in order to create a shared social identity as a learner (15 min)

Table 1: Key elements of the workshop

After students have completed a short questionnaire to establish the strength of their learner and consumer identities, they are categorised as one of four student ‘types’ (see Figure 1).

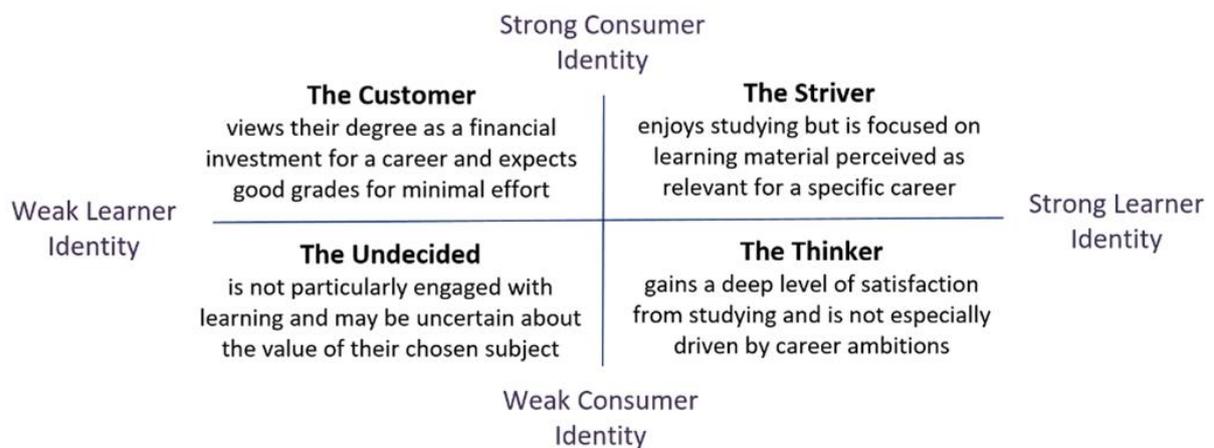


Figure 1: The four student types according to the strength of their learner and consumer identities

After learning about the research on identities through a tutor-led PowerPoint presentation, students discuss the relative impacts on learning of each identity type. Finally, in the plenary, the tutor leads students to co-create a summary of attitudes and behaviours that support learning in their discipline, in order to create a shared social identity as a student learner. Students are given the heading: *“Being a successful student in my discipline means ...”*, and are then asked to agree on a set of attitudes and behaviours that facilitate learning. For instance, ‘...being curious about new ideas by using resources available to me to find out more’ or ‘...asking questions of my peers or tutor if I don’t understand something’. The final list can be posted in their online learning platform and revisited during personal tutoring sessions to support deeper student learning.

Feedback from the workshop so far has been very positive, and it has been adopted by a number of different courses. One student said it “gives me more of an identity as a student and creates more confidence in my ability” and another said it “enables you to understand your learning and how to

adapt it to maximise your experience and learning on the course.” A lecturer also said: “This is a really well-designed workshop [...] the students were very engaged, and the questions sparked excellent group discussions. Several students said that, having taken part, they could now see the importance of self-motivated study if they wanted to do well at university.” So why not give it a try with your students, and help enhance students’ identities as scholars or learners within their discipline to support academic achievement for all?

References

Bliuc, A, Ellis, R A, Goodyear, P and Hendres, D M (2011a) ‘The role of social identification as university student in learning: Relationships between students’ social identity, approaches to learning, and academic achievement’, *Educational Psychology*, 31 (5): 559-574.

Bliuc, A, Ellis, R A, Goodyear, P and Hendres, D M (2011b) ‘Understanding student learning in context: Relationships between university students’ social identity, approaches to learning, and academic performance’, *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 26 (3): 417-433.

Bunce, L and Bennett, M (2021) ‘A degree of studying? Approaches to learning and academic performance among student ‘consumers’’, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 22 (3): 203-214.

Bunce, L, Baird, A and Jones, S E (2017) ‘The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance’, *Studies in Higher Education*, 42 (11): 1958-1978.

Haslam, S A (2017) ‘The social identity approach to education and learning: Identification, ideation, interaction, influence and ideology’, in Mavor, K I, Platow, M J and Bizumic, B (eds) *Self and Social Identity in Educational Contexts*. Abingdon: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, pp 19-51.

Oyserman, D, Lewis Jr, N A, Yan, V X, Fisher, O, O’Donnell, S C and Horowitz, E (2017) ‘An identity based motivation framework for self-regulation’, *Psychological Inquiry*, 28 (2-3): 139-147.

Platow, M J, Mavor, K I and Bizumic, B (2017) ‘Introducing self and social identity in educational contexts: Promoting learning, managing conflict, facilitating change’, in Mavor, K I, Platow, M J and Bizumic, B (eds) *Self and Social Identity in Educational Contexts*. Abingdon: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, pp 3-18.

Jetten, J, Iyer, A and Zhang, A (2017) 'The educational experience of students from low socioeconomic status background', in Mavor, K I, Platow, M J and Bizumic, B (eds) *Self and Social Identity in Educational Contexts*. Abingdon: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, pp 112-125.

Tajfel, H and Turner, J C (1979) 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict', in Austin, W G and Worchel, S (eds) *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, pp 33-47.

Tomlinson, M (2017) 'Student perceptions of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38 (4): 450-467.