

The eM-Power Game: A game playing approach to international student support

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Abstract:

The challenges of engaging with a university environment are encountered on at least three levels – academic, personal and cultural. Not all of these challenges are stated, visible, easily recognised or even acknowledged. As a consequence, difficulties often arise for individuals to successfully navigate their way through the uncharted waters of academia. Studies and professional experience, have shown that students repeatedly encounter common traps, difficulties and problems when making the transition into the tertiary learning environment. Whilst these are commonplace observations, orientation strategies for dealing with them could be more effective and innovative. Traditionally, institutions take a conservative approach to student induction, and these methods are notoriously poor mechanisms for the effective transfer of information. Rather than talking ‘at’ the assembled students in a passive learning environment the eM-Power Game seeks to raise students’ awareness of important information through an activity based learning format.

Key words: game playing, transition, international student transition, problem solving, teaching and learning, international student support

From a broad perspective the eM-power game is designed as an innovative shift from traditional approaches to student orientation. Traditionally universities are conservative in their approach eg talking heads, reliance osmotic learning.

The game is designed to raise student awareness about university practices and connections as in this environment challenges are encountered on at least three levels – academic, personal and cultural. Not all of these challenges are stated, visible, easily recognised or even acknowledged. It raises awareness by engaging students in considering institutional, personal and intercultural negotiation to successfully navigate their way through the uncharted waters of academia, to become aware of those hidden icebergs.

So the game is ultimately designed for students to explore their own capacity for agency and maximise the opportunities the university provides and to develop tools, insights, awareness so they can negotiate, operate, even manipulate if need be.

So teamwork, problem solving, academic approaches, recognition of staff roles and strategy discussions are all an important part of the game.

This game was sparked by a particularly bad incident that highlighted a gap in our service provision for our students. We had a continuing student whose personal and cultural vulnerabilities were exploited by a member of staff. We found the action we could take was limited and this led to our realisation that this, and a whole range of other issues, needed to be better addressed in a proactive manner.

For example: every year we have International students who run up enormous phone bills that they really have no hope of paying back. So this plus sexual exploitation, is the kind of thing that we want students to be more aware of and to make more informed choices about. Their apparent lack of knowledge and appreciation of the potential for exploitation was an underlying problem in some students being able to settle into a successful academic and life experience.

Our appreciation of the common difficulties that even continuing students faced when making the transition into their new environments, led us to consider a more a proactive approach – to nip the problems in the bud, so to speak from the beginning. So the emphasis here is on the **transitional** period in placing this kind awareness into orientation itself. To address it specifically – explicitly - not indirectly as in traditional approaches.

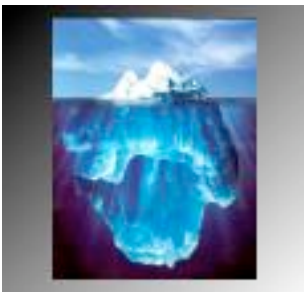
Our aim is to empower the students to 'know the ropes' of their new environment quickly, actively and in a non-threatening and fun situation.

So one way of conceptualising the challenges that students face is to think of the university experience, or any new experience of an organisation, as comprising both stated and visible challenges and those which are submerged, unspoken and unacknowledged.

It is the unawareness and lack of understanding of these hidden, unknown aspects that can unintentionally reinforce existing power relationships, as occurred for our student, and perpetuate the opportunity for exploitation – not to mention assimilation. This can have the effect of marginalising students, excluding them from experiencing all the university and wider cultures have to offer.



This is one representation of the big social and cultural entity that a new environment is and arguably this is what students may first see...just like the passengers in the Titanic.



And this is another...what new students don't see when they don't 'know ropes' and what the Titanic passengers really experienced...

The focus

An emphasis on **Knowing** the ropes – not just learning about or being told about – means awareness of issues such as:

- developing intercultural learning practices – what may or may not be acceptable
- learning and teaching styles that are in operation
- the importance of engaging with the university as a learning community
- the need to strike a balance between learning, work and social commitments
- gaining a broader familiarization with all that the university has to offer
- specific areas such as sexual harassment, plagiarism and relationships

And it is awareness of these issues that we hope will add to student ownership of their success – whatever that is.

The focus is on developing student awareness – by making known the aspects of university life.

In so doing, we interrupt the perpetuation of dominance and subordination, enable access & equity and interrogate the acceptance that students need to be assimilated.

Awareness promotes in the individual:

- personal agency
- confidence and competence
- exploration of opportunities

- independent learning
- lifelong learning strategies
- graduate attributes

Process

The game is delivered in a context that introduces the range of challenges that confront new students. After the game, a debriefing seeks to bring together the various issues and strategies raised through the course of the game so that students feel confident and empowered in commencing their studies. The activity itself takes approximately 90 minutes.

Students are assigned randomly to teams in the game to give them an opportunity to begin forming friendships. Teams are then presented with a series of hypothetical situations commonly confronted by new students, accompanied by consequences of their decisions. Each team has to reach a consensus in their answers with the assistance of facilitators (senior students, general staff, counsellors and academics) acting as roaming advisers. The use of staff volunteers as advisers seeks to familiarise students with staff in a relaxed and cooperative environment. Students physically move across a playing space symbolising their transition through first year. Some of the consequences allow the teams to move forward across the playing space, some consequences require that they remain stationary, and other consequences may send them backwards.

An important element at the conclusion of the hypothetical part of the game is a debriefing session with the students. This seeks to bring together various issues and strategies raised through the course of the game so that students feel confident and empowered in commencing their studies.

Intended Outcomes

In posing hypothetical questions or scenarios and consequences, the aim is for students to appreciate the range of issues they may confront over the course of the year, to become aware of the challenges, both stated and unstated, that students may face and to raise their awareness of how their choices will shape the nature of their experience. At a practical level, the engagement stimulates the opportunity for social networking and enables students to interact informally with relevant staff.

Whilst the intention is for students to be introduced to a range of strategies for learning and coping with institutional transition issues, the purpose of the game is not to produce a 'winning' team. Rather, we hope that students will be able to evaluate their current approach and what they can do to improve, inform, and empower their own choices. This will help them to develop strategic thinking about possibilities and that some outcomes of their decision making can be random, outside their control, unforeseen as well as more obvious.

The challenges presented to students deal with issues such as:

- developing intercultural learning practices – what may or may not be acceptable in areas such as appropriate staff and student conduct
- learning and teaching styles are addressed – lectures, tutorials, timetable issues, essay writing, exam preparation, and so on
- the importance of engaging with the university as a learning community – forming peer support networks, approaching staff for assistance, seeking study skills support
- the need to strike a balance between learning, work and social commitments
- gaining a broader familiarization with all the university has to offer
- specific areas such as sexual harassment, plagiarism and relationships are introduced in a non-threatening environment

How do we know it works?

Formal evaluation is an important part of assessing the game's ability to raise students' awareness of the issues they may confront in their first year. Our findings indicate the game can make a difference.

Pre- and post-game questionnaires target specific areas of interest covered by the game and provide a measure of the students' awareness of particular issues emerging from the transition to university study. A follow-up questionnaire is conducted in Week 4 to assess, to some degree, the effectiveness and benefits of participation in the game.

Results from the pre/post game questionnaires were significant for the majority of indicators (7 out of 10, 8 out of 10 and 10 out of 10 for three separate groups). Data from the Week 4 follow-up questionnaires provide evidence of the long lasting effect the game has achieved. For example, our Likert-type scale indicated 'high' to 'very high' level of confidence or understanding in terms of confronting issues (75.5%), in seeking assistance (80.4%), in understanding independent learning (98.04%), and in acting assertively (88%). This was also the case with responses about the immediate future where 68.6% of students felt confident ('high' to 'very high') about the month ahead. However, the students expressed a degree of anxiety about impending assignments with only 47% feeling highly confident about this aspect, perhaps demonstrates an element of strategic thinking.

Anecdotally, it appeared that there have been with fewer problems for the students with one outcome being that more international students made use of support services at an earlier stage.

Staff involved in development and delivery of the game modified their behaviour and there is informal feedback from students that they felt empowered when dealing with similar situations they have encountered during the transition period.

The eM-power game engages the participants at both an emotional and intellectual level in an activity that introduces them to many of the central aspects of transition that students commonly find problematic. The indications are that the students have taken the opportunity to begin forming friendships among their peers and to meet senior students and staff in an educational but informal activity.

Conclusion

For those interested in improving support services for students, providing an engaging introduction to their institution, and empowering students to make informed decisions then this interactive approach may be useful. In addition to providing social networking opportunities with other students and an opportunity to interact with relevant staff, this game-playing initiative raises awareness of important student issues. Students are encouraged to develop strategic thinking about possibilities and to develop a broader awareness of personal, academic and cultural issues they may encounter.

Note: The eM-Power Game is a suitable mechanism to engage with the following areas.

International students: visa issues - work rights, obligations, financial issues, risk minimisation, adaptation to a new environment.

Organisational culture: 'knowing the system' (right people for the right issues), service, learning strategies, assessment processes.

Student issues: plagiarism, finances, consumer issues (caveat emptor), time management, failure, services, negotiating power inequities, gender issues, staff and students relationships, system, learning modes, approaches to independence.

Intercultural communication: organisational practices, diversity awareness, cultural negotiation, identifying similarities and accommodating differences, building local and international student/staff connections.

Interpersonal skills & communication: assertion, social networks, social relationships, liaison, negotiation, group work.

Content development: student issues, ESOS and National Code legislation, equity and diversity, language, subject disciplines, professional development strategies - academic and general.

Transition: technology, organisational culture, study skills, planning your study, academic, social, time management, returning to study.