Thriving in transition

Dr Martin Harris
Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania

Abstract

This ongoing study contributes to a framework for the design and application of transitional programs in higher education, by identifying the characteristics and processes that allow individuals to thrive in challenging circumstances.

There is a generally accepted view that there is a linear process of transition to higher education involving a disruption of old patterns, a period of uncertainty, and then a new beginning. This research will explore the evidence of dislocating challenges, and describe a new cyclic model that identifies the stages of the transition and the key characteristics within each stage. The informing research describes a suite of 16 prevailing themes and attributes to the four process stages of the 'thriving transition cycle' (i.e. preparation, encounter, adjustment and stability).

This research provides a unique, dynamic and detailed framework for the examination of the transition process; and potential indicators for timely, effective interventions.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in regard to transitions 'well resolved' and, potentially, to the strategies and planning for the retention of students in challenging circumstances. In many cases, the disruption associated with a transition to a new environment involves challenging circumstances that are sufficiently destabilising to require the individual to re-examine the self (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) At the same time this provides an opportunity through which an individual is motivated to function at a higher level. It is in that context that an individual "…acquires new skills and/or knowledge that may promote mastery of similar situations in the future"(Bergland & Kirkevold, 2001, p. 427).

A detailed analysis of the particular stages, characteristics and processes of a successful transition is presented in this paper. The informing research (Harris, 2009) describes the characteristics and processes that enables an individual to thrive in challenging transitions and offers insight into the design of meaningful programs of support. This research identifies the processes of the transition 'well resolved' and the personal characteristics of individuals who manage change well, with a focus on learning and growth. From the results, a comprehensive analysis of the experience of the dislocating transition identified a principle group of 16 characteristics (concepts) and associated processes. Based on variations in these identified concepts, the study's participants clustered in one of three groups (categories):

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(a) *Thriving,* where participants recognised the adaptive processes of recovery and growth, including the mastery of strategies to account for the disparity between expectations and experience.

(b) *Surviving,* where participants were placed between the two polarised positions and where movement was possible in both directions, dependent upon the resolution of the tasks of the transition.

(c) *Languishing* where participants indicated a lack of mastery, a lack of understanding of process, and a failure to learn from the experience.

The emerging form is the Thriving Transition Cycle (Harris, 2009) that draws on Nicholson's (1987) management transition cycle, to provide a developmental/sequential model for thriving in periods of transition. This model ascribes the 16 themes to the stages of the cycle (and provides evidence for the identification of participant categories within the cycle themes).
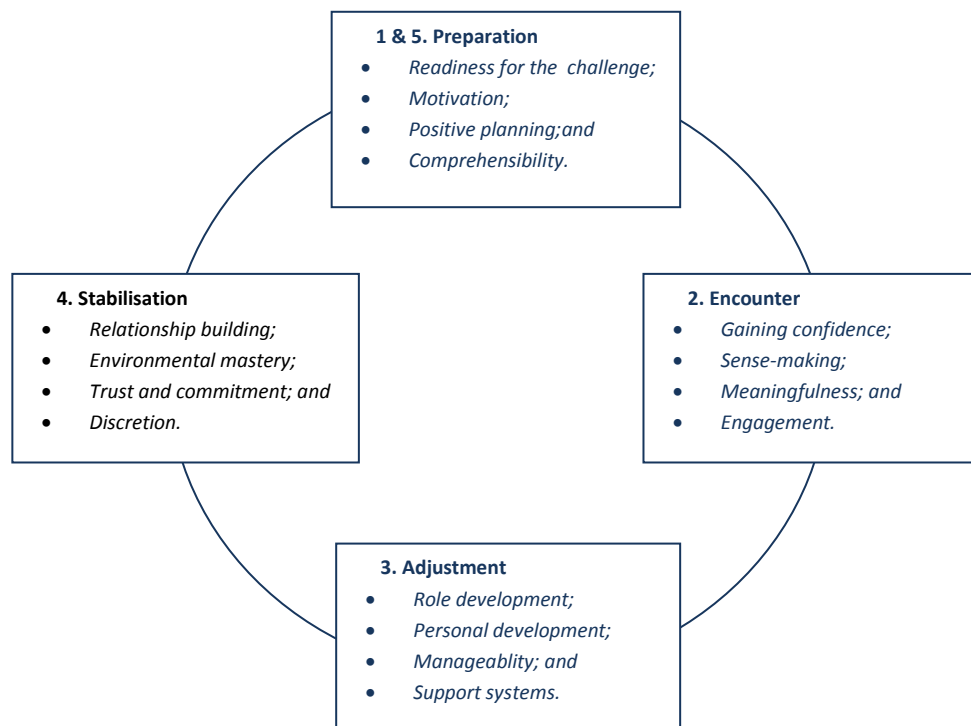

Figure 1: The Thriving Transition Cycle

Stage one:

(a) Readiness (the ability to engage the challenging transition in a purposeful way). Those who thrive are aware and selective, and their readiness is formed by astute reasoning and purposeful investigation.

(b) Motivation (the willingness to engage in the dislocating transition). Those that thrive are confident, optimistic and have proactive coping strategies.

(c) Positive planning (the ability to negotiate and plan personal pathways). Those that thrive are self-assured, have positive detachment and confidence in planning.

(d) Comprehensibility (the ability to grasp concerns in the transition process). Those that thrive have a clear, ordered and structured understanding of the imminent challenge.

Stage two:

(a) Gaining Confidence (the ability to negotiate the transition experience). Those that thrive understand the disparity between the anticipated pathways and their experience.

(b) Sense Making (the ability to make sense of their transition experience). Those that thrive have clarity of purpose, and a willingness to leave the old and embrace the new.

(c) Meaningfulness (the ability to identify the components of the challenge as worthy of engagement). Those that thrive recognised the significance of parts of the challenge as opposed to a bewildering whole.

(d) Engagement (the commitment to the transition, particularly the adjustment tasks). Those that thrive are open and receptive.

Stage three:

(a) Role Development (the altruism and competitiveness in the context of the evolving role-fit relationship). Those that thrive are able to select 'stage appropriate' strategies.

(b) Manageability (the ability to meet the demands of the challenge, particularly the balance of competing interests). Those that thrive have an acute awareness of the component parts of the challenge and are able to allocate resources accordingly.

(c) Support Systems (the nature and availability of information, social companionship, tangible resources and emotional support). Those that thrive can identify and access support systems (including their immediate friends, family and supporters); and new systems in the form of structures and routines.

(d) Personal Development (the ability to process the experience of the transition in a meaningful way and to learn from the experience). Those that thrive are able to identify development pathways and can seek feedback to allay concerns.

Stage four:

(a) Relationship Building (the ability to form meaningful and sustained relationships during the transition). Those that thrive show genuine warmth towards others and are active in their search to engage with others.

(b) Environmental Mastery (the ability to apply strategies to account for the disparity between expectations and experience). Those that thrive have a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the new environment and are able to access the necessary resources to establish a satisfactory level of mastery.

(c) Trust and commitment (the ability to navigate the time-bounded aspects of the transition in a meaningful way). Those that thrive have a vivid impression of their journey since the dislocating moment, and a clear agenda for the next stage.

(d) Discretion (the scope to determine the content and scheduling of the transition, i.e. to plan personal pathways). Those that thrive are aware of the dominant structure of the environment, but are able to act autonomously.

The applied model

In partnership with two other university departments of rural health (UDRH), the University of Tasmania (UTAS) has been awarded an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Strategic Priority Project Grant to investigate and better support the transition of rural students as they move from home to study. The grant will look at practical ways to adapt and apply the "thriving in transition" model to different settings and with a range of students. By working with transition coordinators and student counsellors at university campuses in Tasmania, W.A. and N.S.W., this project will contribute to those activities and initiatives currently taken by universities to assist student transition. This research targets rural students in health professional courses, including those from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, to enable them to better manage and cope with their transition to tertiary study; especially where this may involve a physical re-location.

The Nuts and Bolts session will provide an opportunity to focus on the applicability of the model to the first year higher education challenge. In particular the session will seek to clarify the particular challenges at the stages of the transition described in the model. This data will contribute to an understanding of the positive aspects of dislocating transitions and inform the implementation of more effective interventions. The session will contribute to a set of two program goals:

- A more robust understanding of the transition to tertiary study;
- A contribution to a new, emerging model of transition that will assist institutions to implement strategies that provides the best opportunity to enable students to succeed.

The session discussion will help to inform the program and interventions that accommodate individual accounts of transition, to provide the best opportunity to thrive in challenging circumstances.

Session Outline

1. *Presentation of the Thriving in Transition model*
   - PowerPoint assisted overview of model (10 minutes).

2. *Group interaction; contextual issues and challenges for adaptation (10 minutes)*
   - Transition support in the workplace? (Participant observations within their own institutions / common themes / challenges / program directions);
   - Capacity of the 'cyclic' model in the workplace? (Participant appraisal within their own institution / readiness for change / complement to existing programs / templates for support).

3. *Presenter led, whole group discussion (10 minutes)*
   - Drawing together the ideas from participants / common and unique examples / consideration of model adaptation pathways / directions to complement local experience;
   - Conclusions

Conclusion

In all transitions we apply a frame of reference to explore, understand and negotiate the accompanying challenges. Some challenges are more confronting than others and threaten well-being; and yet some individuals thrive. They have a confident awareness; they make meaning from the challenge; they learn from the process, and apply the learning to increase understanding. Thriving is transformative, and the meta-cognitive change that occurs allowed the individual to examine their sense of self, i.e. the challenge is sufficiently confronting to be a cause for change. This informing study and the current research platform will provide data that extends the concept that where the challenge is the catalyst for change, three outcomes are possible, (a) thriving (improved awareness, learning and growth); (b) survival (recovery to a semblance of original levels); and (c) languishing (unable to action the possibilities).

The themes throughout the Thriving Transition Cycle, when well resolved, provide a platform for success as the transition continues, i.e. thriving is a process that is forward focussed, clear, ordered, and purposeful; and where students are confident, pro-active and self-assured.

Educational organisations have the capacity and opportunity to develop these actionable themes in the delivery of their programs of student support more effectively and confidently. The themes and stages of transition provide points of reference for timely and directed intervention, and for the provision of more universal programs of support.

References

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