

The power of metaphors to communicate about the first-semester experience

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1 Student agency during transition to HE

Transition refers to the process of change overtime when entering university. It is referred to the student capability to navigate this change characterized by the dissolution of existing routines, the negotiation of new roles, and the struggle for orientation and belonging in a new context. (Gale & Parker, 2014)

Agency can be defined “as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment.” Emirbayer & Mische (1998, S. 963)

Agency refers to the student capacity for action to be understood in the context of social contexts that influence, structure and limit actions. Thus, it is important to encourage student agency in transition and create structures that support student expanding their agency (Ecclestone, 2010)

Research Question

How do students in Swiss higher professional programmes

- express their transition experience to higher education in metaphors,
- and how is “student agency” reflected in these descriptions?

2 Research Design

Survey Sample in the Swiss University of Applied Science Context

Programme	N (total sample size)	n (response rate)	n/a	Total metaphors
BSc Physiotherapy	156	126 (81,3%)	28	98
MA Teacher Education Secondary 1	113	63 (55,8%)	25	38
BA Teacher Education Preprimary/ lower primary	83	53 (63,8%)	10	43
Total	352	242	63	179

Metaphor analysis

- Open question in a survey at the beginning of the spring semester 2023
- Systematic metaphor analysis based on Schmitt et al. (2017) (single analysis of 47 metaphors or 25% of the data material)
- Content analysis of the entire material using deductive categories (learning environment, perceived student role, temporal progression of the transition), with inductive development of subcategories from the data.

3 Results

3.1. How do students experience the transition to the new learning environment?

Major Themes	Elaboration
Orientation (n=34)	- Settling in, gaining an overview of the large amount of information - Difficulties in setting goals and prioritizing activities - In a few cases: Fit of the program and the search for one's own role
Up and down (n=32)	- Roller coaster as the dominant image - Active decision to get on board, little influence during the ride - Throughout the entire semester fluctuations regarding - Emotions - Pace and workload - Aktive Entscheidung einzusteigen, während der Fahrt geringe Einflussnahme
Tremendous effort (n=22)	- Major effort or existential struggle, with one's strength barely sufficient - Harsh conditions combined with missing or incorrect equipment - In a constant state of tension, lack of breaks
Challenge (n=21)	- Start as a clear challenge that requires a major effort - Noticeable progress and a feeling of “having arrived”
Surprise (n=19)	- Different from what was expected or difficult to imagine how it would be (venture) - Positively (astonished, not as bad as expected) as well as negatively surprised (shock, thrown in at the deep end)

3.2. How do students experience the transition over time?

Positive development (n=16):

The first semester was like not seeing the forest for the trees (...). Over time, I managed to organize my work and learning, and I felt that I had ‘arrived’ in my studies.

Positive outcome (n=6):

It was like a grab bag, because I liked most of the contents, although there were a few things I didn't like at all (...). Overall, however, I was pleased with it and would buy one again next time.

Volatile Trajectory (n=29):

The first semester was like a roller coaster for me, because my emotions and the performance pressure kept going up and down.

Good ending (n=7):

A very big surf wave, because I partly rode it and partly fell off the board, but I still made it back to the shore safely.. (92)

Constant high pressure (n=8):

The first semester was like a marathon, because getting everything done seemed almost impossible.

Negative Development (n=10):

A downhill run that was very easy at first and then, almost out of nowhere, became very steep and at times felt almost insurmountable, because in the beginning the schedule was very relaxed, and towards the end everything came at once with exams and a very overloaded timetable.

Bad ending (n=10):

It was like a wave that, as it grew larger, tossed me around more and more, and finally, after the exams, spat me out exhausted..

t / Course of the semester

3.3. Student agency in transition – two contrasting narratives

At the mercy of circumstances

vs

Gaining strength

It's like I'm drowning and every time I get a little closer to the surface, I'm pulled down by my legs (Student 21, Physiotherapy)

At the beginning, I felt like I was drowning. I couldn't hold on to anything and was swept away and washed under by every wave. Over time, I learned not to let the wave carry me away, but to face it with strength and determination.” (Student, 24, Physiotherapy)

The metaphor conveys

- how the students' effort and engagement fail to take a hold.
- negative feelings of powerlessness, lack of orientation, loneliness or fear.

The metaphor addresses

- challenges at the beginning,
- engagement and persistence,
- a learning process over time.

4 Discussion and outlook

- For the majority, the start is experienced as a major struggle beyond a reasonable challenge.
- The student experiences are highly diverse, but overarching themes emerge:
 - Difficulties in finding orientation
 - Managing the workload/ study material
 - The whole semester as a vulnerable phase (persistent stress, volatility)
- Positive development and the emergence of agency throughout the semester cannot be assumed to occur naturally.
- In line with Kahu & Nelson (2018), emotions, well-being, and self-efficacy are, alongside meeting academic requirement key to a successful transition.
- Social integration/ belonging and the underlying rationale of structures and practices are scarcely addressed.
- Metaphors offer a promising approach to bringing experiences to the surface and opening them up for discussion.

5 References

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