CASE STUDY

Sweet cupcakes for all: A teaching philosophy to enhance student engagement and success in an enabling linguistics course

Dr Jaime W Hunt[a] and Erika Spray[b]

a Open Foundation, English Language and Foundation Studies Centre, the University of Newcastle, Australia

b School of Education, Faculty of Education and Arts, the University of Newcastle, Australia

Higher education scholarship has established that enhanced student engagement leads to greater academic success, which then leads to an enriched student experience and higher student retention. These issues are arguably at the core of enabling education which prepares students to transition into degree programs. This paper outlines a teaching philosophy developed in a linguistics course in an enabling program at a regional Australian university in 2013. The philosophy, called *The Cupcake Philosophy*, is grounded in the theories of transformative learning and social constructivism. It makes complex linguistic theory and academic practices accessible for enabling students. It involves not only an overall style of teaching, but also a creative use of the metaphor of cupcakes, along with peer-learning activities, which scaffold students' disciplinary knowledge and academic literacies. This, in turn, helps students improve their self-efficacy in the tertiary environment, enabling them to reach their academic potential. After the philosophy was formalised in the course, student engagement, satisfaction and retention improved, as did the quality of students' assessed work. This paper demonstrates how an innovative and student-focused teaching practice can effectively promote student engagement and academic success.

Keywords: enabling education / widening participation; student engagement; teaching philosophy; linguistics, education theory

Introduction

In the current climate of the tertiary sector, the dominant definition of student success focuses on student retention and completion of courses. When applied to the enabling sector,

this definition includes student transition into undergraduate study. What is often overlooked in this framework is that success may also include, among other factors, a student's increased self-efficacy and self-confidence, and a clearer notion of future direction (e.g. whether to attempt undergraduate study or to find/change current employment circumstances).These goals may be achieved with or without transitioning into undergraduate study, or indeed completing an enabling program. However, in this paper, the notion of success includes the improvement of students' quality of work (as measured by higher assessment scores) and completion of the course described below.

Arguably, enabling educators wish for their students to succeed in tertiary study; after all, the primary aim of enabling education is to 'staircase students to degree programs' (Trewartha, 2008, p. 30). However, it can sometimes be disheartening to witness student attrition because many educators still feel it indicates a degree of failure, either on their part or the student's. This is a more complex issue than simply 'failure' (see discussion of 'positive' and 'negative' attrition in Hodges et al., 2013, p. 16), but despite acknowledging this complexity, most educators see the measure of success as completion of a course and transition into an undergraduate program.

One suggested way to reduce student attrition in enabling programs is to enhance student engagement. Increased student engagement in a program leads to a greater, more positive overall student experience which results in higher retention (Kift, 2009; Scott, 2008; Zepke, 2013). The result of this is a greater number of students potentially transitioning into an undergraduate program. Improving student engagement in an enabling program is a collaborative effort, which may involve support staff such as careers advisers, counsellors, student liaison officers, learning advisers, and student mentors. However, those with most influence upon student engagement are potentially also those with whom students have the most contact, i.e. the teaching staff (Kuh, Kinzie, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). The case study

describes a teaching philosophy (called *The Cupcake Philosophy of Teaching* because of a recurrent metaphor used throughout the course), implemented in a course as a response to a apparent high number of students leaving that course. The teaching philosophy was specifically designed with this unique enabling cohort in mind. The underlying educational theories which informed the philosophy are transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1995) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1997). It also involved embedding academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998) to enhance students' overall academic performance. The case study described here is intended to add to the broader discussion surrounding the scholarship of teaching and learning in widening participation at university.

Context

The Open Foundation Program

At the University of Newcastle, the Open Foundation Program (OFP) allows students aged 20 and over to study for a qualification which may be used to gain entry to various undergraduate programs across Australia. In the program, students complete two courses either part-time over one year, or full-time over one semester. Each course provides an introduction to a specific discipline, such as linguistics, sociology, geology, philosophy, and so on. There are no generic academic skills courses or any compulsory courses. The program is 'open', that is, there are no prerequisites for enrolment except that the students are aged 20 or over. In accordance with the open nature of the program, there are no tuition or enrolment fees. This may result in a higher level of attrition because there is no financial penalty for leaving the course early.

The student cohort is quite diverse and comes with a range of previous educational experiences. Some students have failed or dropped out of school as soon as possible, often due to family or financial pressures, or due to cognitive ability. Some students may have been

successful at school, but for various reasons may not have achieved the educational level that they had aspired to. According to Hodges, et al. (2013), the majority of OFP students are aged 20-30 (40.9%), with the next largest age group being 31-40 (12.4%), then 41-50 (5.2) followed by 51+ (1.6%). The diversity of student ages, abilities, and experiences requires a teaching method which is flexible enough to provide the best learning opportunities for students.

Learning theories

Because students in the OFP are aged 20 or over, it may be assumed that adult learning theories, otherwise known as *andragogy* (Knowles, 1990), are most applicable. This is in opposition to *pedagogy*, the teaching of children in the strictest sense. However, the line drawn between these two is artificial, and there is a great deal of overlap between them (see Taylor & Hamdy, 2013 for discussion). An example of the unclear distinction between andragogy and pedagogy is when pedagogical attributes are applied to adults learning in the tertiary environment. In the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (*Australian Qualifications Framework*, 2013), the graduates from Bachelor degrees (level 7 of 10 in the framework) should demonstrate abstract thinking, provide solutions to complex problems, apply knowledge and skills, and think critically. These attributes also align with Piaget's constructivist *formal operational level* (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Moore, 2012), which traditionally operates in a pedagogical frame. While these attributes are not required upon entry to undergraduate degrees, it is the role of enabling educators to prepare students to attain these attributes. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1997) *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), a concept of social constructivist psychology used in pedagogy, recognises the importance of experience in acquiring new knowledge. This extension of the 'known' into the 'unknown' is equally applicable to adults as it is to children.

However, the theory of *transformative learning*, as developed by Mezirow (1991, 1995), refers specifically to adult education and is particularly relevant to the enabling education context. This theory argues that childhood socialisation influences how adults live and learn. This particularly relates to students in OFP. Often because of negative childhood experiences, many students in the program have low self-efficacy and confidence in their academic abilities. Transformative learning aims to change this by helping 'individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and, if they find them wanting, to change them' (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015, pp. 10-11). The theory encompasses critical reflection and the principle of 'leading learners to the edge' (Knud, 2014), whereby students are challenged, and their limitations are made explicit, as they move beyond their habitual 'comfort zone' to encounter learning situations in which they may feel insecure. The relevance for OFP students here is clear: many enter the program because they wish to change their situation, whether to find (better) employment, or bring about some change in themselves. This is often difficult for students, resulting in liminality, described by Taylor and Hamdy (2013, p. 1564) as a 'sense of discomfort we feel when we do not quite understand the rules or the context of a new situation'. In some cases, this may be too confronting for some students, and they leave the program. Transformative learning aims to help students to overcome such barriers.

In preparing students for undergraduate study, it must be recognised that there is significant variation in OFP students' prior achievements because of the open nature of the program. This leads to challenges. In terms of age, students in the program are adults. However, in terms of developmental level, enabling students may be operating intellectually at the level of Year 10 (15 years of age), a level at which they may have exited formal schooling. Further complicating the issue is that enabling students are more likely to have a range of additional impediments compared to students who have entered tertiary education

via traditional pathways. These may include low self-efficacy and a weaker sense of belonging that is often associated with previous negative education experiences. In addition, they are more likely to possess fixed epistemic beliefs (Dweck, 2008) and have to deal with competing 'life' issues and adult responsibilities that school-leavers may not necessarily face.

Constructivists such as Piaget and Vygotsky consider each individual to be an active participant in their own learning. Nonetheless, this perspective still views learning as a response to input (or stimulus) from the social environment, a reflection of older behavioural models of learning where input is processed logically against existing data. In constructivism, this processing then produces a new trial output, which is then processed against new input. In other words, the 'unknown' is linked to the 'known'. However, this approach ignores the individual's affective, or emotional, characteristics. Boekaerts (1995), and Pintrich, Marx and Boyle (1993) suggest that students' affective constructs should not be ignored in teaching. Effective teaching models consider what students do to regulate themselves in their learning (metacognition), and why (epistemic beliefs), but also how they feel about it (the affective component of learning).

Educators play a significant role in influencing this affective component. While educators cannot measure or change students' cognition, they can influence their metacognition and affective attributes. Metacognition incorporates reflective practices, such as *planning*, *monitoring*, and *evaluation* (Schraw, 1998); in other words, metacognition is the conscious awareness of one's own cognition. Educators need to make students aware of their own cognition so that they may improve it, especially in relation to learning (Spray, Scevak, & Cantwell, 2013). One way of doing this involves scaffolding, a concept which encourages students into Vygotsky's ZPD. Vygotsky (1997, p. 33) refers to functions in this zone as being in the process of maturation, or the 'budding' stage, that is, the 'unknown'. The 'fruits', or the 'known', on the other hand, are functions which have matured. Scaffolding leads

students into the ZPD by helping with planning, monitoring and evaluation of their learning. Providing students with a challenging-enough task and assisting them to succeed enhances the affective attributes of student learning, improves the students' sense of belonging and safety in the learning environment, and leads to greater self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993, 2012). This, in turn, enhances motivation and engagement (Schraw, 1998) thereby creating the opportunity to improve metacognition and affect.

One way to influence metacognition is to adopt an academic literacies approach to teaching. This has a natural affinity with metacognition because it involves the explicit awareness of text structures, reading strategies, and thinking processes, etc. (Lea & Street, 1998). There has been scant examination of this approach in the enabling sector (Hunt & Baker, 2014). Traditionally, critical thinking, writing, library research, exam preparation, etc., have been decontextualized in a 'study skills' approach. However, an academic literacies approach acknowledges these skills are necessarily contextualised and embedded into the discipline itself (Lea & Street, 1998). An embedding approach allows students to draw epistemological connections between content knowledge and writing about that content (Hunt & Baker, 2014). In other words, disciplinary knowledge and knowing how to write in that discipline go hand in hand.

Case Study

The course

This case study describes a specific teaching philosophy which was implemented in both the part-time and full-time on-campus offerings of the course in 2013 in order to improve student engagement. The focus of this case study is an introductory course in linguistics (called The Study of Language) in the Open Foundation Program. It is designed to provide students with foundational knowledge of the major areas of linguistic enquiry such as

morphology, syntax, sociolinguistics, etc. Through this, it provides students the opportunity to broaden their critical thinking in regards to language and to start to view language objectively and scientifically. In addition to topics common to many introductory linguistics courses, the Study of Language includes a strong enabling component interwoven throughout, in the form of academic literacies. It is acknowledged that most of the students who undertake this course move onto undergraduate study in other disciplines. Therefore, the course aims to adequately prepare students for a range of undergraduate degrees from the humanities to the sciences. The course was offered in two modes: part-time over two semesters, and intensive over one semester only. Class sizes, on average, were relatively small, with approximately 17 students enrolled in each course in 2013. Verbal qualitative evidence for the success of implementing the Cupcake Philosophy was provided in the form of a focus groups run by an academic staff member from the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning[1]. Written qualitative and quantitative evidence was provided in the form of institutional online surveys conducted at the end of each semester for each course. These include the regular Student Feedback on Courses and Student Feedback on Teaching (two surveys conducted by a central planning and quality unit external to Open Foundation)[2].

Issues

At the end of 2012, three particular issues relating to student engagement were identified:

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[1] Permission from the Human Ethics department to conduct the focus groups was organised by the staff member of the Centre for Teaching and Learning on behalf of the lecturer.

[2] Because of the voluntary, anonymous, and routine nature of the surveys, ethics permission is not required. All comments were de-identified by the central planning and quality unit before being passed on to the coordinator of the course.

(1) Analysing attendance records showed that the average classroom attendance fell by 42% across the year from the beginning to the end of each course. Additionally, 28% of students did not sit the final exam at the end of Semester 2. (Those students who do not complete the final exam do not complete the course.);

(2) Students had poor library skills. Classroom discussions revealed that many students were not able to find enough relevant information for assignments. This was supported by the fact that they had either cited no or very few academic sources in their essays, or relied too heavily on open internet sources. Some students had admitted to not using any library resources at all by the end of their first semester and others had not been able to find the course's prescribed or recommended texts in the library;

(3) Revision lectures were dull, unimaginative, teacher-centred, and inadequate. During these lectures, many students appeared disengaged. When discussing revision techniques with the students, the lecturer observed that students lacked the required skills in revising for exams.

The Cupcake Philosophy

The solution to these issues was the Cupcake Philosophy of Teaching. This specific teaching methodology is designed to enhance student engagement by influencing, motivating, and inspiring students to learn, thus improving students' metacognitive awareness and allowing them to reflect upon their epistemic beliefs. In addition to an overall approach to teaching, it aims to improve students' affective attributes through various interactive, fun, pedagogically relevant group-work and peer-learning activities to engage students and provide a positive educational experience.

One way of optimising students' learning in the course is to make complex linguistic theory accessible through metaphor in a fun and interactive way. When they are confronted with complex theoretical content, students may feel overwhelmed and suffer what Dawson

and Conti-Bekkers (2002) refer to as *academic culture shock*. This is especially the case with a linguistics course because students have rarely been exposed to this discipline before university. The solution to this problem and to assist students through their 'disorienting dilemmas' (see Christie, et al., 2015), the philosophy acknowledges that adults learn by building upon previous learning and real-world experience (Barkley, 2010; Vygotsky, 1997). The Cupcake Philosophy relates the 'known,' i.e. the everyday foodstuff of cupcakes, to the 'unknown', i.e. complex linguistic theory, thereby linking the outside world with classroom content, and enhancing student engagement in the process (Doyle, 2008; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Cupcakes make a suitable metaphor because students are familiar with them, often have fond associations with them and usually like eating them. Cupcakes symbolise fun and enjoyment which extends to learning in the classroom environment. The humour and light-hearted way of connecting cupcakes to linguistic content engages students and provides a recurring theme to the course. This then provides consistency in a course where new or different content is presented nearly each week. For example, as typical for an introductory linguistics course, one week the topic may be morphology, and the next, semantics. The metaphor of cupcakes assists in reducing student anxiety in the classroom, which is often a hindrance to enabling students, making classes more relaxed, fun, and interactive - all valuable attributes in teaching (Ramsden, 2003). This leads to more enthusiasm and engagement.

Classroom activities[3]

In 2012, it was identified that students used the university library poorly and needed to develop their critical thinking in regards to literature choice, evidenced by the poor quality

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[3] The relatively small number of students in each course (approximately 20 in 2012, and 17 in 2013) may have contributed to the success of the activities detailed below. These activities may or may not be suitable for replication in much larger classes without modification.

of sources used in their essays. Previous experience and anecdotal evidence indicated that this was most likely due to two factors. Firstly, most students in the course at the time had not used the library either at all or at least to its full capacity. Secondly, the then method of introducing students to searching for quality sources in the library involved the librarian visiting the lecture room and merely demonstrating the library catalogue skills to students. This was deemed to be only mildly successful because students were passively observing the demonstration rather than actively participating in a task. Active learning promotes classroom engagement (Tinto, 2012), so the solution was the creation of the *Library Extravaganza* in consultation with the librarian.

The Library Extravaganza takes place in a computer lab in the library, no longer in the regular classroom because 'the best place for students to develop independent learning and college success skills is in the environment where they will put these skills to use' (Doyle, 2008, p. 66). It follows, then, that if the students are to learn how to use the library, they should learn to do so in the library. This allows students the opportunity to follow along as the librarian demonstrates various features of the library catalogue, and, more importantly, students can immediately search for materials for their upcoming essays. This adds immediate relevance to the task. In alignment with the Cupcake Philosophy, the librarian adds a fun element - a treasure hunt where students form pairs to complete a short quiz by searching the library website and finding selected books with humorous titles. This fun activity consolidates the information that the librarian explains. The first pair to answer all questions correctly and return with a picture of their specified book on their smartphones (or the book itself) chooses a nominal prize from a 'lucky dip', which contains promotional items leftover from university orientation sessions, and small chocolates or sweets. The competitive and exciting nature of the activity adds an emotional element, making the task memorable and assisting in learning (Doyle, 2008). The impact of the activity is immediate because

students are able to find information relevant for their essay, and many stay behind after the session to search for more.

A follow-up session occurs in Semester 2 of the part-time course. (Note: this does not occur in the full-time course due to time constraints). Similar to the first session, a librarian is present, but the students are more focused as they explore the library's databases for current journal articles (a more advanced task than using the library catalogue). There is a brief demonstration of the databases by the librarian, as the focus is on the self-directed learning of students. Once again, the task occurs in the context of searching for sources for an upcoming essay. The librarian provides expert assistance, and the lecturer assists with content knowledge where necessary. Both sessions nurture the students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy, as they make students feel comfortable in the new environment of a university library. The sessions also provide meaningful interaction among students, and between students and library staff. Furthermore, the sessions provide students with the opportunity to enhance their academic literacy of not only the 'fixed skill' of finding content, but to extend that to using critical thinking in context when engaging more meaningfully with texts.

The success of these activities was shown not only in the form of immediate verbal feedback, but in the form of higher quality essays. In 2012, the students used few sources, mostly the textbook and non-academic internet sources. After the Library Extravaganza, more students used a greater number of recent, scholarly journal articles as their sources, and relied less on internet sources. This also suggests enhanced critical thinking, as students showed that they had been more selective in choosing their sources. While undertaking these activities, students are gaining essential 'learning-how-to-learn skills' (Doyle, 2008, p. 10), enhancing their academic literacies of sourcing quality texts as they acquired this new knowledge in context.

In 2012, the end-of-semester revision lectures were dull, mere teacher-centred summaries of the main points covered in the semester, where students sat passively, disengaged. The associated exercise was a practice exam, with 15 multiple choice grammar questions, similar to what would appear in the exam. The lesson did little to assist students in preparing for the exam, and neither did it assist students in enhancing their study techniques. Two learner-centred activities, the *Grammar Game Show* and the *'You Are the Expert' Mill Drill* proved to be good solutions to this problem. The Grammar Game Show allows students to revise their knowledge of syntax in a fun and exciting way that is familiar to students. As mentioned above, the Cupcake Philosophy follows the Vygotskian approach of linking previous experience (in this case, of television game shows) to the 'new' (i.e. exam questions). In the game show, the students form teams to answer exam-style questions to win nominal prizes such as inexpensive German chocolates and wafer-biscuits (providing a teaching opportunity in comparative linguistics when inspecting the German text on the wrappers). Students receive extra points for justifying an answer and providing additional information. This encourages students to be analytical about their answers instead of simply guessing. Computer sound effects, using squeaky dog toys as 'buzzers', and the lecturer's acting as a cliché quizmaster enhance the fun and exciting atmosphere for students. As a result of this, and other group-based activities, students formed independent study groups outside of class to further revise their knowledge of the course content.

The benefit of the Grammar Game Show is that students learn a different revision technique. Although quick-fire responses to multiple-choice questions encourages surface learning (a fact made explicit to students), students also enhance their strategies for exam preparation, in particular, the syntax section of the exam. Rather than simply reading information repeatedly, they learn the technique of answering practice questions similar to those that may appear in the exam. They thus learn a strategy that they can employ in their

own time, either alone or in groups. They also enhance their academic oral communication skills, social and psychological engagement in the course and group problem-solving skills.

The 'You Are the Expert' Mill Drill is an activity to enhance student learning. In pairs, students have 20 minutes to revise a given topic and become 'experts' on it. They don a nametag displaying their topic, e.g. 'Ask me about Semantics', or 'Ask me about Morphology'. The 'expert' students 'mill around' and teach their topic to other pairs of students who ask questions and take notes.

This activity aids in boosting students' confidence, and hence their motivation and self-belief (Zepke, 2013). The peer-to-peer aspect of the activity reinforces belonging in a safe environment. The low-stakes task occurs in pairs or small groups (i.e. they do not need to 'present' to the whole class at once. It also stimulates independence in learning by allowing students to be in control. Peer-teaching, as discussed in Doyle (2008), promotes deep learning because the students require a thorough understanding of the topic in order to teach it. It engages students actively, allowing them to take charge in their own learning and the learning of others and improve their own self-efficacy.

Both of these revision activities provide students with the chance to critically reflect on their revision techniques, which leads to what Mezirow (1991, 1995) calls *perspective transformation*, further motivating and inspiring students to improve their skills. Also, the students appeared to become excited about the prospect of winning prizes and competing against rival teams, building a 'sense of personal connectedness' (Krause, Harley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p. 37) with their teammates in striving towards a common goal. Following the framework of Schraw (1998), these activities, in addition to the explicit modelling of cognitive and metacognitive skills, assist students in improving metacognition in various ways. Firstly, students become more aware of their own knowledge of cognition. Their declarative knowledge is raised by learning what factors influence their performance. For

example, this may include a raised awareness of which revision techniques may or may not work best for them. Students may enhance their procedural knowledge, such as learning how to categorise sentences into parts of speech. Conditional knowledge, that is, knowing when and why declarative and procedural knowledge is to be used, is explored in all three activities because they require students to adjust to each task as required. After knowledge of cognition, the second branch of metacognition, according to Schraw (1998), is regulation of cognition. This involves activities which assist students in better using sources, enhancing strategies, and enhancing awareness of breakdowns in comprehension, or knowledge 'gaps'.

An additional important aspect of all the in-class activities is the interaction of students in their teams. This promotes discussion, which is a central element of transformative learning (Knud, 2014). Knud claims that during discussion, critical reflection and experience take place, and without it, transformative learning does not occur.

A recurring aspect of each activity is that feedback is given in a non-threatening environment. Answers to the library task quiz are given in class and are pertinent to the associated assessment task, answers to the game show are revealed before moving on to the next question, and the Mill Drill allows peers to provide feedback instantly. In addition, after each activity, student learning is scaffolded by the evaluation and discussion of any 'gaps' in knowledge and process regarding the activities. This encourages students towards mastery and learning from feedback (Dweck, 2008). Dweck claims that focusing on person or product in feedback encourages entity theories of intelligence. This then reinforces in students the idea that the reason they were successful was because what they produced was 'right'. However, Dweck continues, if students are provided with feedback and reflect upon the process (that is, the 'how' rather than the 'who' or 'what'), i.e. a key part of transformative learning, this then helps to promote an incremental point of view. For example, students reflect upon whether they had adequately prepared for a task, whether they continued with it

(even if it seemed to be difficult), and whether they managed to interact with people if they normally do not, and so on.

Results and discussion

After the implementation of the philosophy in 2013, student engagement and metacognitive awareness appeared to have increased. The overall student satisfaction reported in the end-of-semester surveys increased from a mean of 4.86 to 5.00 out of 5.00. Class attendance in 2013 had increased by 11% compared to 2012, and student retention increased by 12%. In addition to this, there was an increase in quality of students' assessed work with students using more scholarly sources and displaying a higher level of critical thinking in their writing.

Students' metacognitive awareness and self-efficacy was not formally assessed for this case study. However, comments in the Student Feedback on Courses and Student Feedback on Teaching, suggest a positive effect. These include[4]:

'The way he delivers the content of the course causes me to want to be engaged in my learning which in turn creates the opportunity for me to do well in my grades.'

'I think it's a fine line between spoon feeding and guidance and [the lecturer] has managed to balance this very well. He gives me the confidence to know that I can manage my own learning but at the same time, he is ready to help when asked.'

'… constant feedback provides the stimulation needed to study my way through difficulties rather than burying my head in the sand and ignoring them'

'The interaction of students in each lecture built up confidence and helped us learn the

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[4] All comments were de-identified by the central planning and quality unit before being passed on to the coordinator of the course.

contents each week.'

'[The lecturer] created an environment which encouraged me to open my mind and examine my preconceived notions about language. The way I understand language, and the role of the linguist, is different from my understanding at the beginning of semester 1 and I have found this experience invaluable. I am positive this will have a major impact on, and influence, my study choices over the course of my degree.'

Furthermore, the in-class activities were well received by students:

'... the way [the lecturer] delivered this program made it a fun and enjoyable learning experience for me.'

'The lecturer made it interesting, exciting and fun to come to lecturers and tutorials, which gave myself the motivation and determination to come back each week.'

'The way [the lecturer] taught this class made it extremely enjoyable for me. I never once dreaded going to class, cause [*sic.*] I knew every lecture and tutorial would be filled with interesting facts, unusual tasks… I never believed I would be able to join in on group tasks or even class discussions. [The lecturer] made this possible for me.'

'The tutorial in the library was excellent'

'[The lecturer] makes learning fun.'

Positive feedback on these activities has also been noted from other lecturers whom students have told about these activities. As a further result of this enhanced engagement for the course, on a number of occasions, students have made or purchased cupcakes to share with the entire class.

Although the teaching philosophy has shown to be successful in this particular course and context, there are limitations to this case study. The Study of Language course has a relatively small number of students (an average of 17 enrolments per semester), and it is questionable whether the activities explained above would suit much larger classes. One way of addressing this would be to include the activities in tutorials, or to redesign grouping and to include stronger scaffolding. However modest the improvements to student satisfaction, attendance and retention, they demonstrate that introducing a teaching philosophy specifically designed to enhance the engagement of a particular cohort does have other positive effects. A direction for future research would be to include entry and exit measures for attributes such as self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness, to gauge metacognitive and affective elements (attributes) on a larger scale.

Conclusion

The Cupcake Philosophy and the included activities as described in this paper, influenced by transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1995) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1997), appears to encourage student engagement, leading to higher retention and student satisfaction. The philosophy, and its associated activities, allows students to enhance their metacognitive skills and affect constructs. If they work on these across the duration of the course of one or two semesters, students should be able to take those attitudes and strategies with them to their undergraduate studies, and thus be much better equipped to engage effectively with the challenge of further study.

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