"Creating a Relationship" : The characteristics of a Companioning Relationship in the Context of Academic Probation

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the characteristics of a fruitful helping relationship in the context of academic probation. Data was collected through multiple in-depth interviews and analyzed using a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which provided a fitting framework for a thematic narrative analysis. A document analysis was also completed to determine the conceptual foundation of the academic companioning program. Supporting Dewey's interaction principle, findings suggest that a rapport characterized by presence and trust and an approach promoting responsibility, awareness, and holism were key in this shared experience.

Keywords: Academic probation; Helping relationship; Deweyan theory of experience; Qualitative research; Thematic narrative analysis

Introduction

In the fall 2007, the University of Ottawa put in place an innovative program aimed at assisting students on academic probation. More specifically, these students had been required to withdraw from their program of study due to unsatisfactory grade performance. Winning an appeal to their mandatory withdrawal however, they were allowed to continue their studies while receiving academic support through a program tailored to their needs.

Previous research evaluated the influence of this support program for students on the verge of dismissal. It indicated that the companioning program helped 15 out of 20 students to pursue their studies and 4 students to obtain their diploma. Another key finding of this study revealed that a central determinant motivating students' success in the program was a positive and stable relationship with a professional resource person. The relational dimension is deemed crucial as it stimulates students' engagement in the program and in their studies (Philion, Bourassa, LeBlanc Plouffe, & Arcand, 2010). However, the investigation does not elucidate how and why this relationship was a decisive constituent of the process. To further our understanding of success factors of a program aimed at enhancing students' academic achievement, I sought to explore what characterizes a fruitful helping relationship between a student and resource person, and what form it takes in the context of academic probation. In this endeavor, I begin with a discussion of the notion of academic probation and academic assistance programs developed to assist probationary students.

1 - Academic Probation

Much research has been done on the topic of academic attrition, which has been defined as the termination of student membership in post secondary institutions (Bean, 1980). A closer look at the circumstances of termination suggests an evocative distinction between students who voluntarily withdraw from their program of study and those who are dismissed (Tinto, 1975, 1987; Vaughan, 1968). This warrants a focus on a specific population of students who are on the verge of dismissal, but who do not wish to withdraw from their program of studies, that is, probationary students.

In view of an insufficiently defined notion of academic probation, I have elsewhere proposed a definition based on key texts (Scarf, 1957; Smith & Winterbottom, 1970), which suggest that (a) students were put on academic probation when their grade performance is below a satisfactory threshold; (b) those on academic probation could remain in their program of study but must increase their grades; and (c) they would be dismissed if they do not (Arcand & Leblanc, in press a).

These elements of definition have yet to be examined and confirmed in order to provide a solid foundation for the burgeoning body of research on academic probation.

Much of the literature on academic probation centers on obstacles leading to underperformance (Arcand & Leblanc, in press b). Such impediments include a lack of essential study skills, strategies, tools, and motivation. Hindrances in the student's personal life are also mentioned such as employment obligations, home-related responsibilities, conflicting relationships, and health issues (Humphrey, 2005-2006; Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2006-2007; Trombley, 2000-2001). Authors, however, have called for an in-depth consideration of student experience contrasting with the current focus on impairments (Ryan & Glenn, 2002-2003; Thomas, 2003; Vander Schee, 2007). This is particularly relevant seeing as professionals and practitioners are preoccupied with the experience of academic probation as lived by students (Glasser, 2009; Nance, 2007; Zuzelo, 2000).

2 - Academic Support

To cater the identified impairments leading to underperformance, most institutions of higher education offer assistance programs to provide probationary students with effective strategies to recover good academic standing. Seeing as there are no guidelines mandating the development of probationary programs, they vary greatly in terms of structure, format, and theoretical foundation. For instance, support is offered through group workshop-based interventions (Coleman & Freedman, 1996; Humphrey, 2005-2006), individualized academic advising (Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2003-2004; Newton, 1990) or combined forms of interventions (Kamphoff et al., 2006-2007; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Concurrently, some assistance programs emphasize learning skills while others focus on personal support. Finally, length and time commitment vary from one session to semester long interventions.

A major component of probationary programs is referred to as academic advising in U.S. literature. Three approaches of academic advising are prevalent, that is (a) prescriptive advising, an outcome-oriented course of action whereby the expert advisor pinpoints the needs of the student and proposes a plan of action (Molina & Abelman, 2000; Vander Schee, 2007); (b) developmental academic advising, a collaborative, process-oriented approach that aims to help the student develop holistically as an educated adult (Harrison, 2009; Vander Schee); and (c) intrusive advising, referred to as high involvement advising which, emphasizes the advisor – advisee relationship, proposes assistance activities on a regular basis, and seeks to foster student motivation and responsibility (Molina & Abelman; Vander Schee).

The francophone and European literature employ the expression of "accompagnement scolaire" to designate a similar process (Glasman, 2001; Romainville, 2000; Romainville & Noël, 1998). Literature on death and bereavement use the term and definition of *companioning* as a helping relationship that promotes being present to another person, respecting the person's disorder or confusion, and listening with the heart (Wolfelt, 2004). In keeping with this, he proposes the term *companion* to describe the person who has the role of walking alongside, seeking to stir the other's inner force and find new connections in their world (Wolfelt, 2009). Believing this term translates justly the notion of "accompagnement scolaire", I use the expressions *academic companioning* and *academic companion* in this text.

3 - Epistemological Stance

In order to acquire knowledge about what characterizes a fruitful helping relationship, more specifically, a companioning relationship and what form it takes in the context of academic probation, I focused on the experience of students and professional resource personnel involved in the program. In so doing I wished to connect with the pedagogic issue shared by the students who struggle and the professionals who support them. I also sought to connect with the meaning of this issue for those involved (van Manen, 1997). Although little research has yet addressed this matter, I concur with Vander Schee (2007) in proposing that more attention and sound research must be devoted to understand students' experiences of probation and support. In line with the movement of positive psychology, I believe that the area of research on academic probation will benefit from a focus on what allows students to grow, flourish, and engage in their academic project (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Dewey's theory of experience has helped us make sense of what a fruitful companioning relationship means from the perspective of probationary students and professional resource personnel.

Dewey, the philosopher and pedagogue, believed that everything a person acts upon and undergoes is an experience. It includes all that has meaning for the person, all that evokes emotions and attitudes (Dewey, 1958). He suggested that this influence is a function of the quality of the experience, which is based on two principles, interaction and continuity (1938/1997). First, the principle of interaction involves a belief that the person is in undivided unity with his environment and, therefore, is in continual transaction with his social and physical environment. Second, the principle of continuity suggests that experience is cumulative, each experience having an influence on future ones and conversely, every new experience being shaped by past ones (Dewey, 1934/2005, 1938/1997). The individual derives meaning from this constant interaction with his surroundings. This construction of intellectual and emotional attitudes alters his perception of and rapport with the environment (Dewey, 1958). Experiences and their derived meaning, by fostering positive internal conditions, are believed to promote receptivity to further experiences and growth (Dewey, 1938/1997).

4 - Methodological Procedures

Drawing on Dewey's work, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) proposed a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (interaction, continuity and situation), which have informed my analysis of the students' and professional resource personnel's storied experience (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007). The story is an essential medium through which the meaningfulness of an experience can be conveyed (Polkinghorne, 1983). Whether told to oneself or to others, the story is a fundamental type of data accounting for experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Appropriately, in this study, I have collected stories of experience and examined them through an analysis of narratives. A document analysis was also helpful to further an understanding of the research purpose. The data collection and analysis procedures are described below but first, I introduce the seven participants involved in this study.

4.1 - Participants

Five students responded to an email invitation and completed the investigation in the fall 2008. They studied in diverse undergraduate programs in a large urban Canadian university. All students had entered university the year following their high school graduation; four were between 20 and 22 years old and one did not disclose her age. Four participants were women and one was a man. Three were Anglophone and two were Francophone. Incidentally, the five students were Caucasians born in Canada. The pseudonyms Manelle, Eva, Mark, Leena and Anny were used in this manuscript to protect their anonymity.

The academic companion who worked with the students and the program developer received an email invitation and accepted to participate in this inquiry. Connie, the academic companion held a degree in counseling and psychopedagogy and had over 10 years experience as a learning specialist. She was chosen as the academic companion in this specific program for her extensive knowledge of the university setting, her understanding of the variety and uniqueness of struggles students face, and her expertise in study skills and strategies. Denise, the program developer had a strong background in special education. As a learning specialist she had worked in the field of academic support and learning in higher education for over 15 years. She also conducted research on academic attrition and retention. Her extensive field and research experience led her to envision and develop an academic companioning program aimed at supporting students facing mandatory withdrawal.

4.2 - Qualitative Interviewing

Core data of this study emerged through Seidman's (2006) phenomenological approach to interviewing, an in-depth methodology that seeks to appreciate the respondents' lived experiences and their meaning (van Manen, 1997). This three-interview structure, conducted with each student, sought to uncover details of early experiences, understand current experiences, and consider the meaning attributed to them in the form of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. This data allowed us to explore the students' experience with academic probation, the companioning program, and the rapport with their companion. These interviews took the form of semi-structured, individual, face-to-face conversations that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. One more vocal respondent required a fourth interview to complete his life story.

The two single interviews with key personnel involved in the support program allowed us to explore a practitioner and an administrative perspective on academic probation. These discussions were semi-structured, individual, face-to-face and lasted roughly 60 minutes. They occurred in French and quotes used here were translated and authenticated by the respondents.

Data emerging from a total of 18 interviews with 7 respondents were examined in view of Riessman's (2007) thematic narrative analysis, which focuses on the content of storied accounts to uncover and thematically categorize experience. The transcribed student stories and the two single interviews were imported in the Nvivo 8 software (QSR International, 2007) to map the shared experience. Interview segments that were particularly eloquent or recurring were classified into key themes. All three perspective were integrated in the same coding scheme but were distinguished in the interpretation phase as called for by the research purpose.

4.3 - Document Analysis

To further enhance my understanding of the probationary experience and locate the experience in context, I conducted a document analysis to delimit the companioning program's objectives and conceptual foundation in accordance to the research purpose (Salminen, Lyytikäinen, & Tiitinen, 2000). Documents including (a) the university support services' web page, (b) a research proposal describing the rationale behind the development and implementation of the companioning program, (c) the program's logic model, and (d) a published article reporting on the effectiveness of the program were carefully reviewed to uncover the posture, philosophy, and values guiding the program. This data provided context as well as an additional layer of meaning concerning the creation of a fruitful rapport as intended in the realization of the companioning program in which the participants were involved.

5 - Findings

This qualitative study explored what characterizes a fruitful companioning relationship in the context of academic probation. First, making use of the interview with the program developer and the document analysis, I examine the companioning program as it was envisioned and intended. Following this, I analyze the shared experience of companioning based on the interviews with the students and with the companion.

5.1 - Academic Companioning – A Vision

This first section of findings is based on the interview with the program developer and the document analysis. It reports my interpretation of key elements in the lived experience of the companioning program complemented by excerpts from the program developer's perspective. The academic companioning program originated from a humanistic vision of support for students who risk compulsory withdrawal but wish to pursue and complete their studies. Denise, the program developer expressed in those terms the intent that led to the implementation of the companioning program:

> There is a lot of discussion about the social costs of academic attrition. That's one thing, but there is also an emotional cost. There is an individual cost in not obtaining a diploma. (…) I'm a learning specialist and I work with students with learning disabilities, and I always wondered about the students who are at risk, those we forget, who slip through the cracks, I wanted to dedicate my attention to them too.

This interest led Denise to gather a team and the resources to develop an academic companioning program that offered support for one term. When asked what was central to the companioning process, she unquestionably put the relational aspect at the forefront:

> Creating a relationship. Creating a relationship. Students come back, not because you have done much with them, but because you have listened to them, you took the time, you created a relationship. They became important. (…) Students want contact, they want to be recognized. This is what being valued as a person is.

The program's objective was to facilitate the student's short- and long-term academic success by focusing on five broad dimensions of academic success. These included (a) defining or refining academic and/or professional goals, (b) developing essential learning strategies, (c) enhancing course content knowledge, (d) improving writing skills, and (e) examining personal challenges. Through a collaborative companioning process, the student and the academic companion worked together to uncover the student's needs and develop a personalized and structured learning plan. This plan was aligned to the broad dimensions, however, the individualized aspect of the program was crucial in the companioning process as highlighted by Denise when she said:

> I take on a journey with each student I meet. (…) I listen to the student and follow his lead but I also aim to help him focus on his learning situation, the challenges he faces, and what he is willing to do to meet his goals.

The students' university experience was the focus of the intervention. In line with reviewed literature on academic companioning, the program was structured to support the students, but also prompt them to take ownership of their academic progress. The form of assistance and activities used aimed to make them reflect and enhance their awareness about their situation, practices, and needs. It was hoped that this would help the students take matters into their own hands and expand their development of strategies to foster their own success. The program developer became animated as she explained: "It is a shared responsibility. Of course, I will be there but I will not be leading, I will not be following, I'll be right there beside him."

It was believed that helping students develop their sense of responsibility would help them better navigate the academic world and foster their success. The program sought to help students become more independent, and soar on their own wings. For example, it was hoped that they would recognize their needs and take advantage of the multitude of support services offered to them on campus.

Various tools were used within the program to optimally support the students. A first individual semi-structured interview voiced the student's university experience and contrasted it to his previous school experience. A second individual meeting used a reflective tool called the Socratic Wheel and helped the student clarify their learning needs and goals with regards to the five above-mentioned dimensions of academic success. These two complementary interviews informed the development of an individualized and flexible learning plan that launched the intervention. In addition, throughout the intervention, the student was encouraged to keep a weekly reflective journal on his progression and experience. Lastly, a final interview re-examined the student's initial learning plan and assess whether it remained relevant for him and to what extent specific objectives were met.

The document analysis and interview with the program developer reveal the parameters of the program and the philosophy guiding its implementation. Although the intervention was guided by five broad dimensions, the structure of the program was clearly centered on the student. Furthermore, it is evident that the student – companion relationship is vital to companioning. Such elements help contextualize the experience lived by the students and the resource person in the companioning process.

5.2 - Academic Companioning – A Shared Experience

The relational dimension of the shared companioning experience was discussed at length by the respondents. A thematic analysis of the sixteen interviews with the students and one with the companion distinguished two themes and five categories characterizing the student – companion relationship. I named them according to the terminology used by the respondents. my proposed interpretation is offered below, together with relevant quotes to showcase the participants' perspective.

5.2.1 - Rapport

In the next pages, I elucidate the nature and development of rapport as perceived by the respondents engaged in it. Specifically, the thematic narrative analysis suggests that presence and trust were key qualities of their companioning relationship.

5.2.1.1 - Presence

A first element defining the rapport between the students and the academic companion was the resource person's ability to be fully 'there' for the student. The companion's presence and student-centered style were frequently raised in interviews with the students. Mark noted his companion's noticeable warmth and focus and was impressed by these qualities:

> She's a really [emphasis] caring person. Really caring person. (…) Like, she's a very, very warm person (…) When she's with you, she's really with you, you know. You're the focus of her attention (…) The second I met Connie, she's great, I wanted to do it, I had no problem with being in that program.

For Eva, this presence was particularly important at a time she lacked personal support from family and friends. She noted her gratitude for being listened to through the struggles she was experiencing in academic and personal contexts:

> When I was telling her stories about my family or something, she'd always remember. She remembered the details (…) Just in general, I appreciated being able to go and talk to her. I liked how she set aside time at the end of each session to just talk with me.

Being present in this process also meant being able to adapt to the student's specific situation. The students mentioned the companion's flexibility and capacity to adjust the intervention to their needs. For instance, Anny indicated that Connie was able to adapt to her particular situation as a student in her final year of study: "My situation was different (…) and she recognized that. She did see that it wasn't what I needed so she adjusted, like we didn't meet for an hour every week cause it wasn't realistic."

In addition to listening skills and focused attention, Connie's commitment to the program was emphasized by the students. The extra steps she took in her daily work were valued. Eva was most vocal in this regard:

> I really appreciated how much dedication Connie had to each student. You could just tell by the way she talked about the program. I appreciated how much effort she put into it. (…) She'd email me in her spare time (…) It showed me that she put a lot of extra thought into her work. And I appreciated that.

The companion's viewpoint corresponds to the impressions expressed by the students. Her idea of academic companioning is "a presence, someone who can hear things in a neutral zone." Her concept of presence was elicited in the interview. For one thing, she communicated on many occasions that her work was centered on the student's needs and goals: "Of course, you take them where they are. Before I meet them, I never have in mind, 'You have to do A, B, C' (…) We take them as they are, where they are."

Her discourse clearly translated the importance she attributed to being flexible and focused on the student in her work: "Some [students] were very talkative and had a lot to say but others were more reserved. So I work with this openness, the openness on the other end, to figure out our course of action."

5.2.1.2 - Trust

Trust arose as an important component in the companioning experience and the development of rapport. Students discussed the tone of their meetings with their companion, calling attention to agreeableness and comfort, which enticed them to speak openly about their experience. Eva's discourse is revealing: "We had wonderful conversations. I felt comfortable talking to her. (…) She always had an open mind about everything (…) Yeah, and she made it easy for me to open up. I was just comfortable." Students also indicated the significance of this ease with the companion. As Leena plainly stated, she valued the closeness with a trusting professional. This interaction occurred at a time she struggled to improve her academic performance and remain in her program of study: "On the emotional level Connie really was someone I could trust, and I was able to talk to her a lot, with everything that was going on."

Connie's respectful and non-judgmental attitude was key in arousing the student's trust in her. They often mentioned her open mindedness, receptivity, and understanding, which enhanced their comfort to discuss and disclose with her. Manelle believed his contributed to the success of her companioning experience: "I found [Connie] very warm, and friendly. It was easy to talk to her. (…) If I hadn't been able to tell her how I felt, I don't think it [the companioning process] would have worked as well." In addition, students highlighted Connie's competence as an important element of trust. Acknowledging that their companion was knowledgeable about their specific university setting, academic probation, and tools and strategies to support them inspired trust. When asked if he trusted that Connie was knowledgeable in her field, Mark answered: "She is. There's no question. There's no question. And she doesn't use that intelligence in an overpowering way, demeaning way. It's always very subtle and helpful."

The companion's perspective harmonized with that of the students. She proposed that a rapport of trust is the foundation of a successful helping relationship. She explained: "If you don't have a trusting rapport with the person, no matter the quality of the strategies and psychopedagogic tools you have to offer, you won't accomplish much. First there must be that trusting rapport." In this relationship, trust was bi-directional. On the one hand, Connie sought to gain the students' trust by respecting their experience and being prepared and knowledgeable as a companion. On the other hand, she genuinely believed in the students' ability to be successful in the university setting and she did not hesitate to share this impression with them: "They all are intelligent people, clearly; otherwise they would not have been admitted in university. I tell them repeatedly, 'If you're here, it is because you have the abilities, you can achieve this.' "

Both parties highlighted the importance of presence and trust in the companioning process and relationship, suggesting it is a core positive element.

Specifically, the ability to be fully there, the pleasantness of the interaction, the non-judgemental attitude, as well as the companion's comprehensive knowledge was emphasized in the interviews. Features of presence and trust created a relationship that valued and focused on the student as a person. This was also stressed by the program developer's vision.

5.2.2 - Approach

The data analysis revealed that an approach promoting responsibility, enhancing awareness, and considering the students experience in a holistic way was vital to the companioning process.

5.2.2.1 - Responsibility

Triggering the students' sense of responsibility emerged as a consequential feature of the approach that defined companioning relationship. External monitoring was a first step in helping students take charge of their academic projects. The structure of the program, and specifically the companion's support and encouragement reinforced the importance of routine in their daily activities as Manelle shared:

> I liked that it was once a week. That was great (…) It opens your eyes to what's going on so you can't help seeing 'Ok, I have this assignment to do, this to organize, this, and that. If it was just once a month it would be like 'I'll do it later.' So it kept you organized and up to date.

It appears however that Connie's presence accomplished more than simple monitoring. The notion that someone was aware of their progress prompted a feeling of accountability in students. Furthermore, seeing that someone cared about their work and success, had the effect of kindling their motivation and engagement in their academic projects. Mark was eloquent on this matter and became energetic as he explained why it was significant.

> I felt, I don't know, it made me want to do well, you know.
> Interviewer: Ok. What was it that made you want to do well?
>
> You know, where I was in my life is important but you want to do better when you know people are watching. And when you know that they have expectations for you, and especially when you know you can do it, you know. So I knew I could do it, I wanted to do, and I knew that I had people expecting me to do well. And so, those three things together kinda kicked me in gear.

Students benefited from a great deal of support during their participation in the companioning program. Their weekly meetings kept them focused on academic endeavors. Regular contact with the companion enhanced their sense of responsibility and ownership of their progress. They recognized that it was imperative for them to develop their independence in the academic setting and appreciated the importance of applying the lessons learned through the program to function autonomously. This evidently tapped into their motivation and commitment to their academic progress as Eva expressed:

> Even though I did miss it [the program], I don't think that it's something I should depend on. (…) I think she wanted the students to be able to, once they're done, to learn from it and keep moving. Without having to depend on somebody else.

This being said, the termination of the program was perceived as abrupt by some students for whom withdrawal of support was challenging. They expressed that the sharp ending after a four-month period of high support was unsettling, even if anticipated. On that topic Eva revealed:

> I was upset when it ended (…) I was upset because I considered her as an advisor, as a mentor, and I knew that I would be able to continue on my own but I liked her advice and that extra push. It was really helpful (…) I was receiving so much help and, like, mentally it was helping me so much too. And then it just abruptly ended just before Christmas.

Connie's viewpoint echoes Eva's understanding of the life of the student – companion relationship and its course of detachment. Although students received a high level of support for four months, the program was operationalized with the purpose to foster their independence. Support was regular and highly involved but as a companion, Connie kept in mind the program's ultimate objective of cultivating students' independence as she explained:

> Our philosophy has always been fostering student autonomy. Our view is not to support indefinitely, which might create dependence. We're here to help them get out of a tangle and we want to see them evolve and become self-reliant as quickly as possible.

Connie did not position herself as an expert and did not believe in prescription. In agreement with her companioning style, which centered on the student, she prefered to give them space and time to explore their experience, needs, and preferred ways to address them.

We are talking about young adults (…) who need to be exposed to different options but we must let them choose. And as I tell them 'I don't have the solutions, you have your [emphasis] solutions. So let's try to see what is happening with you and decide what would be most appropriate.'

5.2.2.2 - Awareness

A second category describing the approach that influenced the companioning relationship pertained to awareness. The format and activities of the program promoted the students' ability to reflect and enhance their awareness of their academic condition, their habits, and potential new ways of doing in university. For instance, it was quite clear for Anny that she needed a "reality check" through her companioning process. The companion's ability to foster her reflection was important for her to gain some perspective on a situation that had become blurry. When asked what qualities she sought in a companion she explained:

> I needed somebody to just tell me how it is and like strait up, not say 'Well you figure it out for yourself' kinda thing. I mean, you do have to figure it out for yourself but I think you need somebody that isn't that close to you to be able to guide you and ask the right questions.

Students appreciated the reflective activities integrated in the structure of the program. They indicated that they did not previously use reflection in a systematic way in their daily academic occupations. It was an important aspect of the program, which was valued for its immediate "therapeutic" effect as well as its benefits. Anny expressively explained how she involved herself in reflection with the help of Connie who probed her thinking during the Socratic Wheel activity:

> I think, for the first time, I had to do a goals chart, things you were trying to do and accomplish, and actually put it down in words (…) So I was able to answer questions on what I wanted to do. (…)
> Interviewer: So was that helpful for you?
> I think so. Forcing you to sit, and face it, and discuss it, and put it into words, and make it a reality.

In the same line of thought, Mark specified that he used his reflective journal seriously, enjoyed it, and drew important lessons from it as he shared here:

> So when I reflected and saw 'Yeah, I wrote two tests this week and I studies for 10 hours (…) And it's like man! It was a little more work but I felt a lot better at the end of the week. So I'm gonna keep doing that you know.

Connie's perspective further illustrates how the awareness component of the program shaped the relationship. Her philosophy, in line with the program's format fostered the students' reflection and observation of their ways of doing in the university context. Having observed that many students do not know how they learn best or how they can be most efficient, she described her role as a pathfinder, someone who helps shed light on a situation that may be hazy. In the excerpt below, she explains why enhancing awareness was a necessary step for many students:

> To help them take a step forward, help them see a little farther than they can perceive at that point in time. Propose tools, strategies, tips, after having identified what they believed was problematic for them with regards to learning, because we were interested in what they [emphasis] thought was challenging, why they thought it wasn't working out.

The findings presented here suggest that the companioning relationship, informed by the program's posture, promoted students' reflection, awareness and sense of responsibility. This was deemed central as it was believed it would contribute to the students' independence and help them better navigate the academic world. The analysis indicates however, that the conclusion of the program left them craving the companion's support, which suggests that they did not accomplish a sense of independence through the intervention. To cater this shortcoming, a progressive termination might help transition to a state of independence.

5.2.2.3 - Holism

A last thematic category emerging from the narrative analysis suggests that the holistic approach of the program also defined the companioning relationship. As stated earlier, five broad dimensions pertaining to (a) academic or professional goals, (b) learning strategies, (c) knowledge of course topic, (d) writing skills, and (e) personal challenges guided the probationary program. The first four goals were academically related whereas the fifth opened up to other aspects of the student's life, thus making the intervention more comprehensive.

Naturally, the students discussed academic related issues and how the companioning program targeted their needs in this regard. However, they also named various challenges that exceeded the education context but manifestly affected their academic performance. Opening up to the student's personal life allowed Connie to be in tune with their experience and tailor the intervention to their needs. Embracing the personal dimension and recognizing the uniqueness of each person's story helped individualize the support as illustrated by Mark and the interviewer:

> We talked a lot about what was happening in just personal life, you know. My biggest thing last year was finance, you know. (…)
> Interviewer: So Connie understood that and offered you personalized support?
> Absolutely, that's a good way of putting it.

The companion's openness to discuss challenges in personal life was of upmost support to the students. For most of them, participation in the program coincided with a budding social system in a host city. Insufficient personal support combined with a transition to university studies, which normally brings life changes likely enhanced the students' need to address personal issues with a trusting companion. This was key for Eva, who was physically and emotionally distant from her family:

> I remember I was having problems with my roommate at some point and she [Connie] helped me out with that as well. Yeah, and it was something that I really needed cause I couldn't, I had never spoken to anybody else about it.

Connie offered support in a variety of areas from relaxation to memorization to essay writing. She knew and introduced the plethora of campus services to students, she was qualified to offer counseling on personal issues, and had a wide-range of skills and competencies to approach companioning with a holistic outlook. Her ability to consider the person as a whole generated familiarity much appreciated by most students as Leena persuasively exemplified:

> My academic companion really helped me a lot (…) You would get in her office and, she's just like your favourite aunt you haven't seen in while. She was too good, the atmosphere she created, the energy she had (…)
> Interviewer: It sounds like she has been important to you.
> Really important [emphasis].

Although the comprehensive nature of the program was generally well received and valued by most students, it is important to mention that they do not all have the same level of readiness to connect personal matters to the process. Explicitly, Anny indicated that she did not wish to establish closeness with her companion and preferred to maintain her privacy: "I definitely think it helps to have some sort of connection with [the academic companion]. But I didn't have the desire to tell her things about me, so." In this regard, Connie explained that she respects students' (un)willingness to engage in discussion regarding their personal life but sustains her efforts to build a bridge and establish rapport.

Connie stressed the importance of being open to the personal dimension of students' life in the intervention. Her use of the term holistic to describe her companioning philosophy and the tone of her discourse suggest that she embraces a broad approach in her work with students, addressing their general experience, not only their academic practices or performance.

> Companioning is about giving the opportunity to discuss what's going on in their everyday life, in relation to university but also their personal life. For some it is more important than others. Personally I think every major aspect of someone's life has an influence on their success or failure in university (…) I think it's important to consider all elements in a holistic manner.

She evocatively explained why, in her view, students benefit from addressing the personal component of their life. She believed the emotional and psychological components of the student experience favored university success. She shared, for instance:

> I was open to the emotional and psychological aspects. When there is a thorn in the base of the morale or emotion, the rest is a little twisted and crooked. Often times when you remove that thorn, things go back to a state of balance, a little like a mobile of which you have pulled one string. When you let the string go, everything slowly goes back to a natural equilibrium.

The integration of personal challenges in the program's structure facilitated the personalized and comprehensive nature of the support offered and was appreciated by all but one student who did not seek familiarity with her companion. My analysis suggests that a holistic approach is a strong foundation for a companioning program.

6 - Discussion and Conclusion

A previous study highlighted that the relational dimension was a key component of a companioning process but did not elucidate how, and why this dynamic was decisive (Philion et al., 2010). In view of this gap, the current analysis took a deeper look at the companioning process to better understand what characterizes a fruitful companioning relationship and what form it takes in the context of academic probation. A document analysis and 18 qualitative in-depth interviews with 7 respondents were analyzed to gather three perspectives (i.e., probationary students', academic companion's, and program developer's) of a shared experience of a profitable companioning relationship. The nature and significance of the relationship and the meaningful role it played in the companioning process was recurrent and emphasized in the multiple interviews and documents analyzed.

A focus on the lived, shared, and storied experience of the students and companion as well as the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) allowed an in-depth exploration of a companioning relationship. In line with the Deweyan principle of interaction (Dewey, 1934/2005, 1938/1997, 1958), the perspectives explored were evocative in depicting the nature and quality of the companioning relationship. The transactions between the students and the academic companion were conducive to growth in the sense that they promoted students' receptivity and fostered future rich experiences in the form of engagement and motivation.

This analysis indicates that the perspectives of the students, the companion, and the program developer blended well. The three perspectives complement one another in defining a successful companioning relationship. Firstly, presence and trust typified the rapport between the students and companion. The program emphasized the value of the companion's ability to be "fully there" in her work with students. Also, given the impending mandatory withdrawal combined with an often-unsettling sense of self in probationary students, fostering a rapport of trust should be a core aim of the companion. Presence and trust are often stated as key components of a helping relationship. Wolfelt's (2004; 2009) conceptualization of companioning advocates walking together with, listening with the heart, being present to the other, and respecting the person's disorder or confusion. Furthermore, Rogers' view of the helping relationship as a central source of change has inspired the notion of companioning (Bouëdec & Pasquier, 2001; Paul, 2004). He promoted the development of a climate of mutual trust and advocated that warmth and the safety of being accepted as a person generated the client's comfort to explore the peculiarities of his life (Rogers, 1961/1995). Unconditional positive attitude, genuineness, and empathetic understanding are key features of this relationship (Rogers, 1980/1995). Much like the vision of the program developer and the shared experience expressed by the students and companion, these qualities of a relationship promote growth and constructive personal development.

Secondly, the findings exemplify that the program's and the companion's philosophy geared at fostering the student's awareness and sense of responsibility of his academic progress also shaped the helping relationship. The French literature on "accompagnement scolaire" advocates practices of doing *with* rather than doing *for* in seeking to help the student take ownership of his education. This literature also promotes student's understanding of his learning style and study methods, and favors reflection and regulation of his own habits and strategies (Glasman, 2001). Again, authors underline Rogers' influence on companioning (Bouëdec & Pasquier, 2001; Paul, 2004), emphasizing that the individual has the resources to understand himself, grow, and change (Rogers, 1961/1995). Correspondingly, the findings of this study suggest that an approach centered on the student fosters adequate functioning and autonomy, given proper climate and attitude.

Finally, the data support a holistic approach. The structure of the companioning program agrees with literature favoring a comprehensive approach to companioning with consideration of academic as well as non-academic factors to foster the student's physical, psychological and social well-being as well as his full academic potential (Morel, 2003; Pasquier, 2001). This analysis illustrates that being open to the emotional dimension was warranted in the companioning relationship. In effect, recognizing and managing emotion and cognition has been associated to a satisfying life and constructive habits (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989; Rogers, 1961/1995). Arguably, such a focus on the person as a whole facilitates an understanding of the meaning held by the student, which is central to the relationship and process of helping.

7 - *References*

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