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Parker Matias
Reed College

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FOUR SIDES OF TRANSITION

Parker Matias, Reed College, Class of 2020

Transition I

Still water,
like a lake in early morning.
Eerily still,
like brittle glass resting on a pin.
On the brink
of shattering under its own weight.

Transition II

Leaves are falling in June. Maybe it's just in my front yard. When everything seems to have been deferred—"until the fall," "until next year," "until it is safe"—the leaves are falling early. Or perhaps that towering tree in my front yard is finally—after all these years—dying.

The poles have shifted. Gradual change has become accelerated change: change has changed. A cultural eclipse blocking out the sun, cutting the day short, ending early, and returning hours late.

Millions of students returning home early and graduations postponed. These are waves.

Racial justice coming centuries too late. These are waves, too; churning from the deepest oceans.

And another wave gathering out in the stormy horizon. We can see its shape even from here: that's a sign.

A reflection is, at once, an image of the past and a now-moment of the present. Its relationship with the future is unclear. Do we use it to proceed? Do we do anything at all? Without certainty, and with little plan to speak of, we set off into the thickness.

Here is what I remember about the spring semester:

I used to fear the ocean, now I just fear people. When we don't go out into the world every day, it feels like nothing's happening.

My timing is all out-of-order, my balance is off. Each night feels like the end of a day that never began.

Transition III

In the blog post “Troubling transitions: Re-thinking dominant narratives surrounding students’ educational transitions,” Karen Gravett (2020) writes, “Student transitions are a central part of higher education policy and practice internationally. However it is striking that much of the work within this important area is underpinned by unquestioned assumptions surrounding what transition as a concept might mean.” Respectfully, and without preserving Gravett’s meaning whatsoever, I would like to rewrite the second sentence as: “it is striking that much of the work within this important area is underpinned by unquestioned *transitions* surrounding what *assumptions* as a concept might mean.” This inversion demonstrates my theme for this reflection: to enact change while preserving nothing of the original.

First, to follow from this modified sentence, I ask: what is an assumption? Perhaps before this, we might ask: what do we *assume* in asking this first question? In this gesture we can already see the recursive nature of assumption: it postpones and defers at every step. One can never land before assumption when inquiring about assumption. This is where the trouble starts.

So, let’s avoid it. The question, then, is not “how do we assume nothing?” or “how do we reach the zero-degree of assumption?” Rather, we should ask, “have we assumed enough?” This echoes the other meaning of “assume” which can be evoked by the question, “have we *undertaken* enough?” With the concept of transitions, it is not that we have assumed too much, as Gravett argues, rather that we have assumed *too little*, and as a result, transitions have been left “unquestioned.” How do we begin to maximize assumptions in this realm? What if we assumed difference in the student experience, rather than resemblance and homogeneity? What if we assumed (as both a supposition and an undertaking) heterogeneity and many pathways? What if assumption was wide instead of narrow, positive instead of negative? Gravett (2020) asks a similar question: “is it still appropriate to speak in terms of rites of passage, linear pathways and first year experiences?” The answer is a resounding “No.” And thus, we must assume only difference, that is, we must assume nothing at all. Nothing, except assumption. That is all we have.

When we assume only difference, what happens to transition?

Transition is the attempt to homogenize two heterogenous states. It softens the blow of difference. Transition is a process that carries one state through to another in order to demonstrate a chain of causes and effects. And a singular chain like this does not take into account uncertainty; it does not surrender itself to the possibility of real change; one of an altered state that preserves nothing of the former.

As a pedagogical partner during the spring semester, I did not feel it was part of my role to help facilitate a “period of transition.” To try to establish “a new normal” from an old one during this time felt wrong. I watched my faculty partner, a French professor, Corine Stoffle, surrender to the changes wrought by a distanced and quarantined classroom. She had to embrace difference fully, without reverting to old practices. She could no longer assume a homogeneity in students’ experience (as if such a thing ever existed).

Distance learning uncovered the heterogeneity that was always there. It showed the fallacy of transition. One stability transitioning to another stability was no longer a viable model. My faculty partner had to teach at the heart of transition. She had to embrace a state of constant change, one that eschewed the beginnings and ends presupposed by transition, or the idea that a new normal could follow from an old one.

Now in this moment, professors and students alike, embrace a groundless reality in which transition is both the means and the ends.

Transition IV

An unstable center
Above ground and untethered.
Assumptions as our wings.
We watch one pathway give way to the next
Each beginning and ending
And beginning again.

Reference

Gravett, K. (2020). Troubling transitions: Re-thinking dominant narratives surrounding students' educational transitions. *SRHE The Society for Research into Higher Education*, SRHE News Blog. <https://srheblog.com/2020/04/09/troubling-transitions-re-thinking-dominant-narratives-surrounding-students-educational-transitions/> (accessed 21 July 2020)