Identity and participation in UK universities: an exploration of student experiences and university practices.

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Contemporary socio-cultural theory argues that learning can be understood as identity shift as a result of participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). This process is not a straightforward, linear route. Rather, people enter a new community and bring with them their identities which have developed over time and place and so the new community and its practices are experienced and evaluated in terms of their past and their present preoccupations. It therefore follows that learning is idiosyncratic as it is constructed through the interaction of a multiplicity of personal meanings. Such theoretical understandings challenge institutional approaches which impose rigidity of practice and which identify student needs through stratification by social label such as 'international student' or 'mature student'. In this paper we will present data from interviews and observations with diverse undergraduate and postgraduate students from a range of UK higher education institutions and demonstrate that what all students need is flexible practices in order that they can enact their identities and make enabling interpersonal and learning relationships which allow for successful study. Our findings contest models which call for focus on artificially constructed social groups which assume homogeneity in identity which, in reality, do not exist.

Key words: *sociocultural theory, higher education, identity, participation*

Introduction

Traditional understandings of learning and the concomitant organisation of education have been challenged by contemporary socio-cultural theory. Simply put, traditional learning theory posits that learning is the transference of knowledge from one medium (perhaps a book or a teacher) to the student's brain. The success of transference is explained variously as a function of innate intelligence, motivation or perhaps external reinforcers. In sociocultural theory, specifically in Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory, learning is understood as shifts in identity as a result of participation in various communities. Learning is an essentially interactive process between the learning context and the individual. Education therefore is not something that is done to a student but is a collaborative endeavour with the student.

Consider a student beginning their career in higher education: to arrive at the University they will have participated in a range of other institutions, each one having its own idiosyncratic practices and policies. By definition the student will have been successful in that institution as few Universities operate open access systems. In addition, that student will have participated in many other communities such as their family circle, their friendship group or their religion. Again, each of these groups will be governed by their own practices. The putative student is therefore a reflection of all her or his past experiences which come together to construct her or his understanding of the present university context. The nature of the student's participation in the new context will depend on those understandings and crucially the practices of the new context which present as a continuum of enablement to disablement of participation. For example, at present in pre-higher education in the UK students are allowed a number of opportunities in their assessments with no cap on their grades; if they do not do well the first time they can repeat the assessment. This is not the case in HE in the UK. Students are only permitted to resit assessments if they fail at the first attempt and the grade for any subsequent attempts is capped, generally at 40%. To participate successfully, even in assessments which

may be considerably different to any attempted before, a student must negotiate the requirements immediately and often independently. Turner (2012) has commented that some students fail to understand the HE practice because they assume continuity between pre-HE and HE and the practice of capping reassessments is so ingrained in HE that it is taken for granted by educators and not made explicit. Although, many students do grasp this or alternatively, their identities encourage them to perform optimally at the first attempt. The point is that despite common assessment experience, students behave differently in the face common practice.

This notion of implicit and explicit practice is key to understanding participation. Wenger (1998) argues that community behaviour has emerged over the history of the community and reflects the reified meanings adopted by the participants. Those who are full participants, or old timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991), may have ceased to question practices and fail to understand the challenge for new participants (Tobbell, 2006). Very few practices are neutral and they are experienced differentially by individuals. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) report a pre-He programme run by a UK university which housed the students in a separate building from undergraduates and postgraduates. Some of the students valued this decision, feeling it gave them some protection whilst others questioned the practice, arguing that it disenfranchised them as legitimate students. Tobbell (2014) has argued that a significant challenge for educational institutions is that whilst there are some practices which all students experience negatively, there are very few, if any, that all experience positively. The key point is that whilst it is operationally practical to enforce the same procedures and practices for all, it is a denial of human motivation and behaviour. Discussing the experiences of international students studying in HE in the UK, Ippolito (2007), suggests that internationalisation appears to be understood, perhaps wrongly, as focussing on processes and practices to include or support them academically, rather than considering changes to philosophical underpinnings in curriculum development which would affect the wider student population as a whole. An important point here is that perhaps the focus should not only be related to solely addressing perceived deficits and widening participation needs of international students, but in understanding the interconnectedness of students' needs and identities.

It is perhaps this operational convenience which has led to the stratification of students by wider social labels: international students, mature students, standard entry students and concomitant representations of these groups as homogenous. A review of the literature establishes that research tends to focus on particular groups and in so doing, perhaps inadvertently, contributing to homogenous beliefs. Despite their conclusion that '... the interview data paints a nuanced picture of wide-ranging expectations and past experiences amongst international students, and differing levels of adaptation to, and enthusiasm for, an IBL approach.' (p 419), Bache and Hayton (2012) present their participants as 'international students', merely stating that the cohort studied represented 30 different nationalities. Iannelli and Huang (2014) call for wider research with 'Chinese students' to understand their decision making and motivation to join HE institutions in the UK in order to improve their experience. Given that it is predicted by the British Council that by 2020 there will be nearly 150,000 students from China in UK HEIs, it is difficult to believe that each student has the same needs or even similar needs. Habib, Johannesen, & Øgrim (2014) investigated 'international students in technology rich learning environments'. They found that levels of digital literacy, knowledge of academic language and the types of technology constructed experiences, although it seems self-evident that such factors would militate everybody's experience but the positioning of these factors as challenges for 'international students' positions those students in a particular manner and 'others' them.

Many papers start out by saying that the participation of international students brings benefits, this is often followed by a 'but ...' sentence which comments on the extra support needed for those students. Hung and Hyun (2010) suggest that universities (particularly western universities) should recognise the cognitive and affective challenges faced by students (particularly eastern students) accessing an education system in a different country and culture, arguing that most universities actually fall short in meeting this fully. Barron, Gourlay and Gannon-Leary (2010) note that universities must provide resources for staff who perceive international students as requiring additional interventions. Although they take pains to provide the following representative quote from their staff participants: 'There may be certain traits that can be said to be more prevalent in certain students and there are certain traits in ethnic groups. Some students tend to be better prepared than others – but it is as much to do with economic background etc in the home country. They are diverse, that is it really,' (p. 484). The paper also focuses on staff views that international students are less likely to participate in the classroom and more likely to plagiarise. McDonald (2014) in his abstract states that the paper '...examines the additional complications involved in supporting international students ...' (p. 62). The intentions of these papers are undoubtedly good, to improve experience, but the outcome contributes to constructions of international students in UK universities as a homogenous group who bring welcome cultural diversity to the classroom but who also require extra work. McDermott (1996) in his discussion of children labelled with learning difficulties in education has argued that a student can be acquired by her or his label. By this he means that understandings of the individual are influenced by the societal meanings attached to any social labels rather than by the behaviour of the individual. There is some evidence for this in Barron et al.'s (2010) where they report that the views of staff about individual 'international' students tended to shift as they got to know them. Overcoming the belief that they will cause additional work seems something of a burden for incoming students.

Other studies whilst being concerned with non-home students encourage focus on the individual and her or his experience. Caruana (2014) suggests that those students who are able to draw on resilient identities are better able to cope with adverse practices and that this resilience emerges from their experience which is an integral part of their learning. She argues that curricula need to embrace the possibilities offered by student difference and allow for 'cultural biographies' to be an integral part of HE. Such arguments are supported by Gladkikh, Lowman, Davis, Davies, Jennison, Jones and Tan (2013) and Hardy and Tolhurst (2014) both of whom focus on the experiences of individuals and their understandings of what learning is which emerges from their own cultural and epistemological beliefs. Each of these papers does foreground the international student, however, their arguments are just as applicable to all students. Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) suggest that university systems may not engender opportunities for what they term interculturality. Indeed, Rienties, Hélot and Jindal-Snape (2013) comment that larger, lecture groups may militate against intercultural mixing. Although, it is evidence from their analysis of social learning relations in the classroom that when there is a significant number of a given nationality, those students tend to mix together whilst by force where there is smaller representation, those students must seek relationship with others.

In examining the reviewed research through the socio-cultural lens the interaction of context and person is writ large. The putative student discussed above participates as a function of her or his life experience and how that translates and transforms in the new context. This claim would hold true for all students and as such homogenising labels become problematic because they construct environments which do not allow for the exercise of individual identity. In this paper we present data that represent a range of different students and we will argue that

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the experiences reported call for a reconceptualisation of HE practice and policy to allow for the participation of all.

Methodology

The aims of the research are:

- To explore the learning experiences of students in UK universities;
- To explore the interaction of student and context.

Data

The data in this paper emerge from a variety of sources. It is perhaps the qualitative equivalent to a meta-analysis, where diverse research is brought together and reanalysed. The data represents the following research projects:

- An exploration of the transition of African students to a UK university;
- An exploration of the transition of psychology students from UK further education to UK higher education;
- An exploration of the transition of postgraduate students;
- An exploration of the influences and experiences of overseas social science students in the UK.

All together in excess of 300 students representing over 25 nationalities in eight UK higher education institutions contributed to the data.

Data collection methods included:

- 1:1 interviews
- Focus groups
- Email diaries
- Observations

Analysis

We carried out a purposive, interpretivist analysis which follows Anderson's (2002) problem based approach. Each data set was analysed through the lens of student participation in practices and through a process of disassembling and reassembling the data, meanings and theoretical insights were developed. As a result of this process two main themes were identified.

Findings

Nobody knows what they're doing

Although we have argued against homogeneity in understanding student experience, it does appear from our data that there is a common experience – that of confusion. The important point for this paper is that this represents all students. Whilst the instigators of frustrations and reactions are very different, all our participant groups reported feeling adrift. In the excerpts below we have assigned labels to the respondents because our aim is to illustrate that experiences are common across students, rather than solely a function of the label.

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Many students reported multiple frustrations in trying to find out procedures and processes and were perturbed and discouraged by the struggle:

“Nobody’s telling me anything, should I just know?”

“I’m hoping there’s going to be a light bulb switched on somewhere, enlightenment”

Doctoral student, UK

“I think just having more time just to kind of settle into how things work...I mean we’re given what we need for the reading but that’s it – it’s really difficult to come to a new situation and work it out and in college you rely on your friends but your friends here don’t know what you’re doing either and you’re all, all in the same situation going we don’t know what to do...”

Undergraduate, UK

“I go to the library but I still can’t get my way around accessing latest journals, e-books and the rest using the computer.”

Undergraduate, Uganda

“... like there’s a massive library What do you take from where and like everyone says yeah go to the library but I’ve got no idea what book I’m looking for... and I can’t imagine getting the stage of looking through all of them and then going right this is what I need.”

Undergraduate, UK

“I think probably the support, the interaction that you get here is very different from what you get at college you don’t really know what you’re meant to be doing for a lot of it and just you’re expected to know what you’re meant to be doing and how to get there.”

Undergraduate, UK

“I attended the induction and found it interesting but I couldn’t remember most of the things.”

Undergraduate, Nigeria

The process of learning in the new context was also a source of confusion:

“Er I don’t know. I’ve been taking a lot of notes down in lectures and things and er I’m not sure...”

Undergraduate, UK

“I did not realise how much you have to do outside lectures and in groups. It is frustrating that sometimes you have to rely on others to do well. It is a different way of working than I am used to.”

Undergraduate, Sudan

“It’s different from India because (*in India*, author’s addition) they don’t support you,...they support you but they don’t give as much freedom to explore the subject, they just ask us to do this, this and this, but here we have the freedom so I think the UK system is better but it’s different from India”

Undergraduate, India

“Yeah, yeah like when the lecturer asks a question or says what do you think about it I don’t know what to say because like nothing is going through my head and there’s a load of people saying well it’s this or this and I think well I don’t know that and I feel really to say that I knew a lot at college I feel like I don’t know anything now...”

Undergraduate, UK

“But it seems a different ball game here, like most of the system is done through assignments and for my modules I will be writing assignments with no examinations. The challenge here is what is expected of me. I need to know how assignments are written and how to write because it is quite different from what I am used to because I have tried to interact with people, to ask and I think what they are telling me about assignments is quite different from my perception of things.”

Undergraduate, Zambia

All respondents here are revealing identities in transition. A fact of transition is that students do not know the practices which enable successful participation and the task of transition is to discover what these practices are. The process of discovery, of course, is not unproblematic. Practices are not neutral and different identities will understand and react to the practices in particular ways. These reactions will inevitably shape their participatory trajectories. Here, we can see the importance of how the Universities structure their environments, if they do not institute procedures which enable participation then they risk alienating the students.

In the quotes above students express frustration that they do not know who to ask for information. One student states that he attended induction but forgot most of the information given. This is not surprising given the weight of new information provided and needed. In universities there is a tendency to believe that induction is a one week event (Richardson & Tate, 2013). Students arrive and they are provided with all the documentation and information they will need at one time. But given the principles of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) we know that information becomes meaningful only when it is contextualized. This means that the institutional procedures need to respond to this and perhaps abandon the notion of a time limited induction event and rather reconceptualise it as an ongoing process.

Attention must also be given to pedagogy. All the students have come from different institutions and have become habituated and presumably quite skillful in the practices in those institutions. The goal of the transition is to ensure that they now become skillful in participating in the new practices. However, when those practices are obscure this is made more difficult. It is perhaps incumbent upon the new institutions to identify, clarify and communicate the new requirements.

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Participating in learning in the context of a large lecture is different to learning in a small class, there are methods which can maximize the learning opportunity but students do not necessarily know this. Therefore, an enabling pedagogic practice would be to embed learning to learn, or meta- learning skills in the curriculum. Our data suggest that this holds true for all students, from doctoral to undergraduate, both home and international.

It is interesting to note the attributions student make in explaining their difficulties in participation. Sometimes, perhaps inevitably given the othering of such people, international students attribute their difficulties to their nationality:

“I think the biggest problem that international students face is the lack of proper representation. I know the university talks about diversity etc on the website and in the prospectus, but it is just about ticking legislation boxes.”

Undergraduate, South Africa

“So in my view if a person has a problem there is no one that I know who could help. I think the problem is that the universities just feel that since there are other community groups like the Muslims and Caribbean, they think that all foreign students are represented. It would help if the university had a survey or questionnaire set out to find out if all the students’ issues academically and socially were being catered for. That way we may find a voice. I admit the library staff are excellent but there are no black staff there to represent us.”

Undergraduate, Zimbabwe

However, our data reveal that the confusion is more a function of transition and perhaps a lack of enabling practice. That is not to say that students from other countries do not face significant challenges in terms of situating themselves in a new and perhaps alien culture but **rather** that many of their struggles within the University are common to all students, including pedagogic process and accessing information.

Personal Educational Capital

The notion that transition represents a difficult struggle is widely discussed in the literature and represented theoretically by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation. This concept acknowledges that upon entering a new community, members are by force on the outside; they have little knowledge of the practices and must acquire the accepted behaviours. The key role for the educational institution is to support and enable effective transition. We might define effective transition by the trajectories of the identity shifts which new students undergo (Tobbell, 2014). As discussed above, identity shifts as a function of participation. Participation happens as a function of the interaction of the identity the students brings with her or him and the practices of the organization. The theme above demonstrates that many of the practices are not clearly communicated or they are disabling, which makes participation challenging. However, some students, whatever their nationality, gender or age, make successful transitions despite struggling with the practices:

“I thought I knew about it until I turned up to these lectures in the EdD and I came out every time more confused when I went in... and when I look back now I think I have

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learned a lot, but I've learned a lot because I've had to go away and really, really engage with the stuff that's in there. I don't feel it's been facilitated by the teachers. What was interesting to me though was that I did know this stuff but it was so densely presented that I couldn't unpick it. So I began to think that there was more, that I didn't understand..."

Doctoral Student, UK

"I think it's because of the nature of my course, it's more anti-discriminative and anti-oppressive, so everyone is trying to talk to me but they don't really have the cultural awareness that we are different and that there are some things that we do that are different"

Undergraduate, Hong Kong

"I felt isolated, maybe it's because I know I am here for my personal gain, so it does not matter if people talk to me or not. That is an advantage of being a mature student; you know you are here and who you are."

Undergraduate, Zimbabwe

"You needed to make sure that before each session you knew your stuff... you couldn't go into a discussion unless you knew your stuff and every week I'd have to present on a given subject and I'd managed to go through my undergraduate degree without presenting anything. But that flooding of presentations helped me, it did help me because when I went into the world of work ...but it was difficult to adjust to. The first few months were just a torture. Because just having to get used to a completely different style of learning. But then when I started work it did help me because I used to have to present research a lot and I started my part-time PhD and because I'd done my Masters I could achieve that level of study quite easily. I was quite able to achieve it, and I've often wondered, how do people achieve that level of study if they're coming straight from an undergraduate degree? Do they struggle or do they get any support in that transition."

Postgraduate student

The quotes above imply that in order to participate successfully the putative learner must face and overcome the difficulties they encounter. From the data it is clear that some students achieve this more easily than others. In searching for explanations of this we have considered theoretical notions of identity and suggest that successful participation is enabled by what we have termed personal educational capital. This notion emerges from Bordieu's ideas that, put simply, the amount and type of economic, social and cultural capital learners have influences educational success. Clearly, however, it is more than this – the personal capital which may emerge from past and present experience together with aspiration, also enables success. Moreover, there is evidence from our data that personal capital may influence how the challenges are understood: as destructive or constructive:

"Yeah but I did an essay in exactly the same way that I would do a project at work cos I was a project manager where I would decide what your aims are and then find out will

this work what people think about these things as they are now so I approached it in the same way really.”

Undergraduate, UK

JX has made efforts to attend a range of seminars and training sessions but essentially has enjoyed the observation of something so different and sits back and observes the mindsets of English students and compares these to Chinese students. “I think this transition has not just been about my learning but also my being, it has been transformative.”

Doctoral Student, China

“Well to be honest I love 99% of it anyway, I do, I feel like I’m learning so much that my head is full of it and I just wish I had more time and I think it’s so much more relaxed than I expected and you can just be yourself you’re not trying to be anybody else or trying to be better than which in industry sometimes you are it’s dog eat dog or it is where I came from but you don’t have anything to prove to anybody else except yourself and you’re not competing, it’s not competitive, it might become it but it doesn’t feel competitive it feels supportive you know.”

Undergraduate, UK

This concept does not undermine the argument that learning is the interaction of person and context but that some students by virtue of past experience are more enabled in the context. It would suggest that the task of the educational institution and the student is to build educational capital because this protects and enables. Educators in HE can take steps in identifying, addressing and meet the needs of such students within these contexts and then provide wider, more informed intercultural and diverse approaches to curricula as a whole (Burton and Kirshbaum, 2013).

Concluding Comments

In this paper we have argued that participation in University is a function of the person interacting with the context and that attention needs to be given to both these aspects in order to enable successful study. We have shown that nearly all students, whatever their background, struggle with the challenges of participating in new systems and understanding sometimes ill articulated practices. It is not necessarily helpful to assign a label to an individual because the diversity within the assigned label, here understood as personal educational capital, means that flexible practice is needed in order that all identities can find ways to participate. This means that Universities need to turn their attention to firstly, the nature of their practices; secondly, the communication of those practices and finally, to how they may work with students to enable them to build their own personal educational capital.

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