CULTURAL JOURNEYS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Student Voices and Narratives

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

Understanding culture is, as Geertz suggests, the interpretation of individuals' stories about their cultural interactions and activities. The story allows for a 'metasocial commentary' of the participants within 'a story they tell themselves about themselves' (Geertz, 1974, p. 448).

This interpretation of culture by Clifford Geertz frames for us the journey that the reader will take in reading this book. Culture frames our existence, our lives and our learning. In writing this book, we have drawn not only on our collective years of working in higher education but also on our own cultural identities, in terms of family background and cultural interactions throughout our lives. These experiences have informed our world view and have been the genesis for this book.

We have previously known and supported students from both a typical UK background and those who come to university from different cultures, whether that is from a UK base or indeed arriving in the United Kingdom from the country where they grew up. We have witnessed increasingly culturally diverse classrooms which bring challenges to communication amongst different student groups and between students and their lecturers. The importance of understanding communication patterns and how to communicate across different groups is given a lot of attention in the business world but as yet, there still appears to be insufficient

acknowledgement within higher education of the importance of differing communication patterns and the impact that this can have on the education process. Our observations of student interactions over the years led us to explore in more detail the impact of these differing communication patterns from the students' perspectives. We have framed these communications in a relationship discourse because that is the way that they appear to impact on cultural identity and on the learning processes.

We were inspired by the narratives of students in our previous research, which we have drawn on to frame the discussion in our first chapter, to delve further work into understanding the experiences, struggles and barriers that students face throughout their time in higher education. We believe that more attention should be given to the complex issues that arise around cultural communication in the classroom and around the impact of cultural interactions as part of the learning process. There is certainly more discussion to be had with regard to the existential and ontological aspects of the higher education process. This book sits firmly within the existential in terms of its parameters because of its focus on relationships and the link between relationships and learning in a cultural context. It is not a philosophical work, and we have not attempted to enter into a philosophical discussion or a discussion about multiculturalism, migrants and global cultural shifts; instead, we have focused on the students' experience of their higher education in a cultural context and via their own recounting of their cultural journeys.

Students wanted us to give voice to the conversations that we had as they felt passionately about being heard and sometimes felt they were silenced and ignored. It is this expression of passion in the desire to be heard, to have their stories told that formed the approach for this book. In using their words to retell their stories, sometimes, the grammar is incorrect or there

is a use of slang expression. We draw the reader's attention to this so that a clearer understanding of the aims and objectives of this work is achieved. The stories are sometimes challenging to read and sometimes make for uncomfortable reading. We have repeated these uncomfortable sections of students' narratives both for impact and to ensure that we have presented their stories in a way that is as true a representation as possible. Inevitably, we recognise that perceptions are just that and are situated in a particular time and place. The perceptions are important, however, in understanding the 'lived reality' of our higher education experience for students. The narratives therefore cannot be viewed as one dimensional and are framed by time and space and location on a number of levels.

We feel that the stories that have been repeated in this book are powerful and point to a need for change. A view that universities need to shift in their approach in aiding students to achieve their best in increasingly culturally diverse classrooms. Higher education is ideally placed to affect changes and shine a light on the lived reality through the voices of the participants in this book and their cultural journeys. The stories that have been retold here highlight the ways in the multitude of deeply held beliefs, values, behaviours, traditions and approaches to others inform the journey of each individual in this book. These complexities allow us to nether into their world in their words.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout our time working in higher education, we continue to be struck by the importance of understanding and listening to students who enter our university systems. A shared interest in the cultural diversity of the higher education environment is what drew us to embark on this research journey. The value of recognising the student perspective was reinforced by research that we undertook in 2012 on student engagement in culturally diverse classrooms (Bamford, Djebbour, & Pollard, 2015; Bamford & Pollard, 2018). This research formed the basis for developing this book as we were struck by the number of home students[1] who reported that English was not the language spoken at home and the seeming lack of communication across what we define as different cultural groups. Perhaps this should not have come as a surprise to us, but it gave us an opportunity to reflect on our own assumptions and our teaching practices, together with the cultural encounters these students have and the challenges that may arise as a consequence.

In writing this book, we hope to provide readers with a unique and as yet hidden insight into students' perspectives of their higher education experience in the United Kingdom; the trials that they encounter; and the skills they use in negotiating their way through higher education. We have taken

the view that the narratives recounted by the students in this book represent journeys which are unique to each individual but which also demonstrate some commonality amongst the barriers and benefits that the students described. Our writing has been informed not only by the research data we collected for this book but also by our combined research experience of students' cultural interactions and the importance of such interactions in navigating higher education in this country, particularly for those studying in urban universities. Whilst we acknowledge the limitations of such an approach, we believe the insights that we provide outweigh the methodological challenges and limitations of space.

This chapter provides the context for the reasons we have chosen to undertake this research. It gives voice to a project that explored and analysed the cultural interactions of students in the context of a journey that they have embarked on and which has at its centre the higher education learning experience. It is our view that, despite the plethora of research on international students and their experiences, little work has been undertaken that explores first-, second- and third-generation migrant experiences together with the challenges and barriers they face. In giving a voice to these students' cultural journeys, we hope to provide a clearer understanding of the importance of relationships and culture to the higher education learning environment.

Our previously Higher Education Academy (HEA) funded research project demonstrated to us that there was the need for more qualitative and in-depth exploration of the students' voices with regard to their higher education experience. This project surveyed over 390 students in two post-92 institutions[2] in London. The student demographics were similar at each institution and can be viewed as typical for an urban higher education institution (HEI). What was striking to us was that of the 56.3% of respondents who identified

themselves as home students, 70.3% had parents who were not born in the United Kingdom and 48.3% of all respondents identified that they were non-native speakers of English. In addition, 43.9% identified themselves as European students (Bamford et al., 2015; Bamford & Pollard, 2018). Data from the HEA project provided us with further context and contributed to the themes that we identify in subsequent chapters. Our findings highlight the need to hear more from the individuals themselves, their lived experience and the way in which the phenomenon of individuals' cultural backgrounds formed part of their educational journey.

1.1. THE CULTURAL CLASSROOM

In 2016/2017, there were just over 2.3 million people studying at UK HEIs (HESA, 2018). As the make-up of the UK population changes, there are increasing numbers of students either whose parents or grandparents immigrated to the United Kingdom or who are recent immigrants themselves. For those students where English is not the language spoken at home, and where there is less congruency between their home culture and that found within the UK academic settings, there appears to be a greater requirement to support their transition into university (Bamford et al., 2015). This need is heightened where, as many of them are, these students are the first generation in their family to embark on a journey into higher education.

When we refer to 'culture' in this book, we reference it in its broadest sense and have found McNamee and Faulkner's definition of culture useful:

> *[…] norms, roles, values, beliefs, rituals, traditions – represents the boundary between members and*

> *non-members. Culture provides what one needs to know to function as a member in good standing within various groups to which the person belongs. Culture gives one both a way to make sense of the world and an orientation to it. It represents a set of assumptions about how the world works and how people within the group are expected to relate to one another. Culture includes guidelines for acceptable behaviour, including appropriate gestures, words, tones and demeanour expected in rituals of greeting, eating and meeting and so on.*
> *(McNamee & Faulkner, 2001, p. 67)*

Understanding modes of 'acceptable behaviour' (including gestures, tone, words and demeanour) is important in framing students' interaction in the culturally diverse classrooms of contemporary HE. Hence, this leads us to viewing classroom interactions as culturally and relationally steeped (Bamford & Pollard, 2018). This is further informed by Clifford Geertz' (1973) view that culture is the fabric of meaning for individuals.

The focus in the current literature is predominantly on Black and Asian Ethnic Minority (BAME) students' attainment, and this literature has provided the backdrop to our research. The tapestry of the current debate is centred around the differential outcomes data for these students. In addition, the issue of culture in the classroom is discussed in the current literature, predominantly within the context of the international student experience and not in relation to BAME students. Where is the cultural discussion of those who come from diverse backgrounds but who are not defined as 'international' by universities? Despite this lack of recognition, Black and Asian students are more likely to apply to universities than they did in previous years (UCAS, 2017). Research

suggests that these students tend to fare less well than their white counterparts, irrespective of entry qualifications, age and academic provider (Dent, 2017; Miller, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars, Sanders, Jones, Sabri, & Moore, 2015). Another dynamic is that the students who are the focus of this book tend to come from lower socio-economic groups and are often the first in their family to attend university. There is a wealth of research that suggests that these socio-economic differences have a role to play in student attainment. Students from the most deprived socio-economic groups are more likely to leave university within two years, less likely to complete their degrees within five years and less likely to graduate with a first-class honours degree or a 2:1 (Crawford, 2014; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

What if student attainment in itself is culturally defined? In essence, do we as academics tend to view culture from the perspective of our own culturally defined framework and rarely see the world through the eyes of those from other cultures? As we think and dream in our native language, it is difficult to have an understanding of the deep-seated cultural behaviours of other cultures in which another language is the basis for communication. This standpoint affects multiple levels of reality, and awareness of the challenge is the first step to understand the viewpoint of those who have differing cultural norms, rules and values. For example, Rowntree, Zufferey, and King (2016) argue that Western concepts of attainment are based solely on high academic performance and grade outcome; yet attainment for many students is simply being able to integrate well into university life. For international students, this may include adapting to host societies (Grayson, 2008), while for other groups of students, it may simply be about gaining an understanding of the 'higher education culture' (Bamford et al., 2015). These differences may in part explain why, in spite of the clearly articulated

commitments that UK universities make to diversity and inclusion, these have not yet been translated into equality of opportunity, a concern that some attribute to the teaching and learning experiences encountered (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017). This might suggest that universities focus too heavily on academic outcomes, ignoring the more nuanced aspects of university life, the class-cultural discontinuities, the relationality between students and the importance of 'feeling university' (Bamford et al., 2015; Bamford & Pollard, 2018; Lehmann, 2007).

Clearly, the reasons for the differences in experience and attainment are complex and are challenging to pinpoint in terms of single points of action. Do students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less social capital, or is it simply that they have external pressures that hinder their academic achievement? (Crawford, 2014; Jones, 2017) However, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds may have better adaption skills and may be more resilient: or are they simply better at integrating into the university culture and at fitting in (Jury et al., 2017)?

1.2. METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to address these questions, we designed a research approach that would retell the students' experiences and their journeys in higher education, thereby understanding the 'lived experiences' from the perspective of those that have transitioned into higher education.

A narrative approach was chosen as it was felt that this would provide a stronger appreciation of the students' lived experiences: an approach that Goodson and Sikes (2001) define as 'learning from lives'. This narrative-telling allowed us to gain an understanding of the students' past and present,

together with how relationships and the overcoming of challenges impacted on their academic success. Story-telling is part of the fabric of human lives, bringing meaning to experiences and supporting the concept of community. A narrative approach gives voice to the journeys these students had been on and provides us with insights into how their lives have been shaped and how they interpret their lives through the telling of stories (Clandinin & Huber, 2005).

As Roland Barthes reminds us:

> *Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative […] Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, trans historical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (1993, pp. 251−252)*

The narrative interview has been accepted as a qualitative research method for over 40 years (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Narrative inquiry can focus on a single event or series of events. In our study, face-to-face biographical narrative interviews were conducted with 20 students from eight HEIs. They included both post-92 and Russell Group universities which were located either in London or in the North of England. Interviewees recalled not only their educational journeys that took them to university but also their transition and persistence at university.

Male and female students were self-selecting through open requests, facilitated by academic staff, and came from a range of socio-demographic, religious and ethnic groups. Using the frameworks of Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), unstructured in-depth interviews were utilised with selected themes and topics. These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the students' journeys, the key moments in that journey, as well as their perceptions and experiences to date. They sought to learn about the adaption that individual students made throughout that journey, the cultural interactions that took place, the challenges faced inside and outside the classroom and the potential benefits that arose from these interactions. We sought to understand the complexity of the interactions that students had with others, and how they perceived themselves and their peers, that is, their agency. We also learnt through the process the importance of family: family background and the value that family placed on the education they were receiving.

It is recognised that a major limitation of this approach is that we as researchers interpret the narrative, shaping it and retelling it through our perceived standpoint. There is a risk that the stories we are narrating are recounted in a selective way in as much that what we share with the reader may only be a small part of the conversations that we have heard. However, Clandinin and Huber (2005) warn of the dangers of coding data as this opposes the very concept of narration. Therefore, in our analysis, we have attempted to ensure that the interviewees' cultural and institutional points of reference are dominant. In order to give voice to the experiences, the words are theirs and we have chosen to present lengthy excerpts, retold verbatim, from the narratives to allow the reader to hear directly from the students. Perception and memory are not stationary and the lens through which they are recounted is limited by those perceptions and time