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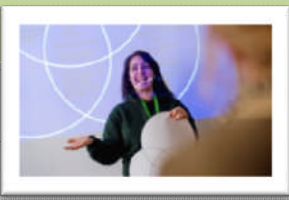
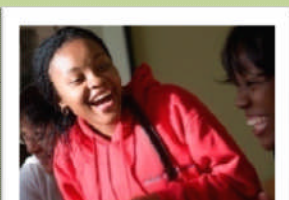
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# *Learning to be a 'global citizen': student transition to an internationalised university*

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European First Year Experience  
Conference

Antwerp, May 2010

Dr. Catherine Montgomery

***'All students will experience the transition into Higher Education in different ways, for almost all students this will entail significant life changes. Such changes and discontinuity can pose threats to their sense of who they are' (Jackson, 2003: 342).***

***'It is difficult to be tolerant if you are not sure who you are, who you want to be...'  
(Erikson, 1959: 93)***

## three research projects

- the development of younger home students' sense of 'self' as it develops through the course of their experience at university (Shipton, 2005)
- the social networks of international students and their effect on the learning experience (Montgomery, 2006)
- Student perceptions of intercultural interaction 2008-2010

# Being and becoming a student in HE: an appreciation of an evolving sense of self.

- To understand what is it 'to become and be a student' in a way that acknowledges the individual's experience of the university in the round, not just in isolated encounters with elements of a course

## the data

- Qualitative, longitudinal study (data collected 2002-2003)
- 40 interviews with 10 students at different stages of their university experience
- each participant was invited to tell the story of how they came to the university and recount their experience since they arrived

# findings

- students 'drifted' into HE as part of a pre-determined life-course
- the personal development of young undergraduate home students appeared to take place separately from the 'content' of HE
- students felt their academic programmes appeared simple, unengaging and straightforward in contrast to the complexity and ambiguity in the learning embedded in social practices

# the driving force of the social group

- *‘The main reason you stay is not because of the degree, it’s what’s attached to it. It’s the experience of meeting friends, the personal development, it’s that that keeps you... yes, I’d say for 85 per cent of people, that keeps you at university’ (Shipton, 2005: 130)*



## the social group dictates...

- *'Everybody just gets into these little groups and that little group is their identity, it can dictate what you do'* (Shipton, 2005: 45).

# trapped?

- *‘There is a lot of isolation at university, people don’t realise it, you think ‘Oh yeah, I’m going to meet people’ but it’s kind of hard to cross-breed out of those cells. You know you can’t jump out of these cells. I think it’s just the way society is. You just have to conform’ (Shipton, 2005: 45).*

## isolation?

- One young student's attempt to engage with other 'home' students:
- *'Sometimes nothing seems to be the best option. I try to be friendly but am just met with 'Hi'... no real interest... I am fed up trying to make an effort, they just don't know me'. (Shipton, 2005: 118).*

## university learning was like...

- a *'dark shadow'* that followed them in their pursuit of *'having a laugh'*, actually a complex phenomenon
- Part-time work and life away from campus was the students' *'centre of gravity'*

## developed over time...

- in final stages students appreciated the value of 'otherness', released from their preoccupation with image, having developed a confidence in themselves
- development of professional identities and an emerging awareness that they must change to *'fit in with the outside world'*

Shipton notes

*'I sensed that a' sense of self' had evolved as a result of interrelating, which led to flexibility and a new capacity to communicate'*

(Shipton, 2005: 71).

# Preparing for life in a global community?

- international students' social networks and their effect on the learning experience
- common assumption that international students need more social contact and academic exchange with their UK counterparts to improve their learning experience – needs interrogating?
- traced social networks and friendship groups of international students, looking at who they have contact with, the purpose of their social contact and how this affects their learning experience

## The data (gathered 2004)

- 12 students were studied in depth, range of nationality including Chinese, Indonesian, Italian, Dutch and Nepalese
- Students had all been in UK for at least a year and were on taught PG or final year UG courses
- Seven students were part of a linked social network, also formed part of a wider social network
- Observation element became most interesting element of the study



# Some findings

- The group 'centre of gravity' was on campus compared with UK student group which was off-campus
- Evidence of contact with UK students but these relationships tended to remain on the periphery of their network, superficial or ephemeral
- Some preconceptions about UK students were evident; these appeared a barrier to development of more positive academic and social exchange with UK students

## *Campus networks – an international community of practice*

- International students formed a supportive international network like a ‘community of practice’
- Shared the common goal of academic success
- Practical information was passed across the group over time and ‘elder’ group members supported new arrivals
- Group was purposeful in their choice of friends
- Shared interest, opportunity and time to meet were considered to be why international students were so close
- Supported each other academically and emotionally

## Students said...

- *'like even though we are not native speakers we can still figure it out if it's not clear. Read each others' assignments... like sharing knowledge'*
- *'If I really want to decide whether I've understood the course alright then when we are talking we definitely see the reflections of our knowledge that we have gained in class'*
- *'For some reason I find it easier to mingle with people who come from other countries because maybe it's the fact that we have something in common the fact that we're coming from a different background and joining a new culture... [since coming here] I find it easier to get on with everyone you know all sorts of people, like it doesn't matter where they come from.'*

## ...the global community?

- international students appeared to go through a learning experience that sharpened their interest in the differences in others; they became socially adaptable and developed a keen interest in the local practices of communities geographically distant from their own
- learned this ‘global literacy’ from other international students not from UK students - have they ‘lost’ anything by not having more profound contact with UK students?
- have UK students lost an opportunity to prepare for life in the global community?

## Students said...

- *‘It’s my personal qualities, I can deal with different environments because when I went abroad I went by myself and spent some time alone. I can adapt to that environment for a few days to get what I am looking for. I can cope with any environment due to that as well’*
- *‘I know a lot of people from different backgrounds. Since I [came here from] Indonesia I can talk differently. For example I can talk with my high-class friends or anyone. And I can have a nice informal chat with for example cleaners from my area. You know I like to talk to everyone’*

# complex and contradictory patterns?

- comparing using unreliable categories?

Need to move away from binaries:

‘home’ vs ‘international’

‘western’ vs ‘eastern’

‘individualist’ vs ‘collectivist’

## *the 2008-9 study*

- 1998 to 2008: has perceptions of intercultural interaction changed? (Volet and Ang, 1998 – Montgomery, 2009)
- Data collected in **‘Assessment for Learning’** modules: authentic, enquiry-based activity in complex and challenging learning environments - extended opportunities for interaction

## *a different social atmosphere?*

*‘The whole idea of working with people from different nationalities was quite appealing actually.’ (Indian PG Design student)*

*‘It’s interesting [working in mixed nationality groups]. Like I would ask questions all the time because I’m really interested in other people’s cultures and we talk about religion and everything... and clothes and that in Sri Lanka. It just makes it more fun.’ (British UG Business student)*



# *awareness of diversity within culture*

*'between Bombay and Delhi, there's so much difference'*

*acknowledgement of diversity within one's own culture*

## Valuing intercultural interaction...

*‘Experience with others [is important] because we can get different experience from different areas... we can [get to] know each other and a little about what these people think about from this country and this idea... so when we go back to our country we [have] more international information from each area.’ (PG Design student from India)*

## *different sources of conflict*

- difficulties arose from differences in disciplinary backgrounds – view of subject as a ‘culture’
- different ways of thinking and practising in the subject
- ‘how to get things done’ in groups

*‘There was a little bit of friction because...everyone, you know, is professionally qualified in their field and everyone thinks that they are right so there is like a clash between opinions and things like that.’*

# *beyond university walls – ‘not always serious’*

- interaction outside of class and virtual meetings on MSN and ‘Facebook’

*‘But we all work together really well anyway, it’s not like a divide... everybody has a say... Well everybody is on [Facebook]... so you are always in contact... We don’t just meet up as a group, like we would talk outside of that as well and as friends as well. It’s not always serious.’ (Business UG student from Northern Ireland)*

## *vestiges of prejudice?*

- some comments resonant of negativity and prejudices expressed in the 1998 study
- Negative discourse particularly for Chinese students:

*'We don't feel disadvantaged by having an international student in our group. Because sometimes in the past, like, some students, a lot of Chinese students don't like to contribute a lot, even in meetings and things, they don't like to talk, they don't express their opinions very well, just from my experience of working in groups like that.'* (Spanish UG Business Student)

## *The influence of the teaching, learning and assessment environment*

- The design of the teaching, learning and assessment environment could have a significant impact on student perceptions of intercultural learning

# A sea change?

*'I don't think there's one person in our class who's averse to diversity. I think we cherish and welcome it. As long as it's working and it's not just for the sake of it, but it's kind of a good thing. A good collaboration between other cultures [is] great. It's what we want.'*  
(British PG Design student)

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