

Social networks and international students

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The internationalised university?

- Learning in an internationalised context provides intercultural contact and the chance to develop complex, plural competences that may enable graduates to live and work well in a globalised world (Ryan, 2012)
- Interaction in these educational contexts is a complex mix of language, cultural groups and social identities and this has implications for the learning process (Coupland, 2001)

The story so far....

- Mobile students can encounter challenges in intercultural interactions in the host culture:
- Study of mobile students into a British University (2004) found that international students became part of international social networks that sharpened their interest in the differences in others; they become socially adaptable and developed a keen interest in the local practices of communities geographically distant from their own
- They learned this ‘global literacy’ from an international social network that did not tend to include UK students (Montgomery, 2010)

Later study showed a sea change....

- More positive social networks (2008) and an increased valuing of the role of diversity in learning in the discipline
- suggestion that social cohesion has to come from formal and informal opportunities to mix in the study environment:

'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) (Montgomery, 2009).

New social networks: 'the multiplicity of communications channels and media'

- young people and learners are involved in many more divergent communities and in multiple lifeworlds (often as a result of technology)
- the *'increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity'* which is a result of this as a crucial factor in future learning contexts (The New London Group 1996, p. 60).

Fuzzy boundaries?

- Boundaries between what the university is and isn't..... are becoming increasingly fuzzy (Barnett, 2012)
- The DIY knowledge world
- How can the university curriculum provide open spaces and enable the wider possibilities of learning (Barnett, 2012)?

Projections of (negative) student identities

- New (negative) discourses emerging regarding students
- They are strategic and instrumental in their learning (focused on assessment), at university to guarantee a job and high salaries
- Potentially litigious and will behave like 'angry customers' because of fees

Discourses reflected in the media

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11745610>

New social networks and students' complex, multiple learning identities

- This paper shows a different picture of contemporary students: conceptualising their disciplines as part of an interconnected world and engaging in the fuzzy boundaries between the university and the community
- University students are already engaging in broader, more holistic learning experiences provided by social networks beyond the formal university curriculum, enabling them to develop complex, multiple learning identities
- These complex learner identities appear to be in conflict with what's expected in the formal university curriculum.

Methodology: three cases studies

- drawn from a purposive selection of student accounts of engagement with activity beyond the classroom.
- part of a (5 year) wider project, a multi-site case study exploring teaching, learning and assessment in an internationalised university context
- three case studies selected from contributions to a student conference held in March 2010
- socially constructed narratives of experience
- auto-ethnographic accounts which are suitable as a means of exploring intercultural interaction (Trahar, 2011).

Three student accounts

- Mumba Chakulya
- John Paul Ndoumin
- Claire Sedgewick



Negotiating disciplinary identities: Mumba

- LLB Solicitor's exempting Law degree: became involved in voluntary work in Human Rights
- *'The Law degree here is very different from my country of origin, Zambia, and at first I found the Law course to be very focused on particular aspects of the law and very academic and theoretical. The university idea of Law seemed to be traditional and had strong boundaries. After a few months on the course I got involved in working with an organisation called World Vision that has helped me to see my degree differently and has allowed me to explore different aspects of Law that I originally thought were out of my reach'.*

John Paul Ndoumin: developing multi-literacies and multiple 'selves' through social networks

- BA Modern Languages student: worked for the North of England Refugee service as a voluntary interpreter and translator from French into English and from some African dialects such as Bamileke, Lingala, Bassakou into English.
- *'It has been 8 years since I came from the Cameroon to the UK and since then I have learned such a wide range of things as a result of everything that has happened to me here. Life in Cameroon is very different from the UK but as a student I have had the chance to encounter a very wide variety of people who have been such an inspiration and who have taught me such different things.'*

Claire Sedgwick: crossing boundaries

- Final year BA English Literature student: Became involved in a community creative writing project with asylum seekers and refugees
- Influenced choice of focus for BA dissertation: written on 'public poetry' but the university understanding in conflict with student's experience

- *‘The project provided a way for me to apply my skills and experiences as an English Literature student to a community setting. I was particularly interested in the issue of access to literature, this interest being partly initiated by the fact that during my degree I had studied how the canon of English Literature had tended to privilege a dominant white middle class experience. When looking for voluntary work, I wanted to do something which provided greater access to literature, as my academic work written for my degree had strongly criticised the way in which literature has marginalised certain groups in society.’*

- *‘When researching my dissertation, I chose to write about public poetry, with a particular emphasis on the role poetry plays in describing the experiences of the nation. Although not directly linked to the project, (my dissertation reflected the formal understanding of literature and was about the poet laureate, rather than community writing), I used the opinions and ideas that I had formed whilst volunteering to help develop my argument. There was an interaction between the knowledge I had learnt through volunteering and through my degree, so that they informed each other.’*

networks in conflict?

- Students are developing and negotiating complex and multiple networks: universities are (for the most part) a step behind in finding the words and ways to reflect this in the curriculum

Divisive and flawed concepts?

- 'international' vs 'home' student
- 'western' vs 'eastern'
(education/learning)
- active vs passive learners
- language 'competence' (e.g. IELTS)
- nationality and culture

Two underlying principles

- students need to feel a sense of belonging in relation to the content being learned, ways of knowing and the learning community itself (Rennie, 2010)
- learning should be transformative

Change requires more than an 'add-on'

- *'Add-on frameworks do not consistently or ethically integrate marginalised global knowledge into curriculum'* (Subedi, 2010: 3).

Disciplines in an interconnected world

- understanding how the world functions in the 21st century increasingly requires an interdisciplinary approach to using knowledge
- *'an increasingly interconnected and globalised world has necessitated a parallel interconnectivity within the curriculum'* (Razbully and Bamber, 2008)

Fighting with limitations?

- Each university, each discipline, each course can decide its own possibilities and grappling with the limitations inherent in this is part of the nature of the university (Barnett, 2012).

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