

## **Introduction**

Cowen (1996) predicted that in late-modernity the international market would define the purposes, the content of education, the structure and pedagogic approaches. Employability and competitiveness are the key concepts of this neoliberal market structure which encourages fast globalisation. The policy shift from knowledge society to knowledge economy has intensified the need to prioritise the concepts of global citizenship and diversity within higher education policy. Congruent with the focus on a knowledge economy is the growing importance of economic efficiency which redefines the purpose and the role of university as a social institution (Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005). Experience of students in higher education is increasingly seen as an instrumental response to the neoliberal economic imaginary rather than a conscious individual response to contextual challenges. The postmodern, postcosmopolitan theoretical arguments and their implications on higher education highlight the limited nature of such conceptualisation of student experience and command the need for a fresh critique and a re-conceptualisation of learning in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Richard and Usher, 1994; Spring, 2008; Andreotti and Souza, 2008).

## **The Research context**

The study discussed in this paper is based on the social constructivist view of making knowledge which recognizes the possibility of multiple realities and interpretations of the world (Gergen, 1999; Berger & Luckman, 1996). A narrative approach informed by a postmodern theoretical framework was used to engage in an authentic relationship with the participants' stories (Mishler 1986; Sarbin, 1986).

This study employs active interviewing to construct stories about the participants' experience of being learners in higher education. The active interview agenda assumes that meaning is socially constructed and all knowledge is created from the action taken to obtain it (Silverman, 1993). The post-1992 university in this study prioritises widening access and has a large proportion of 'non-traditional' students who represent 60 different cultures. Ten student volunteers (both undergraduates and postgraduates) who represented a range of subjects, engaged in active interview conversations with nine students from a university located in global South and seven students from a university in the global North via Skype. The student researchers also conducted face-to-face interview conversations with nine students from their own university.

The data collected were analysed using a thematic approach. The main themes emerged evidence that students' narratives of their learning experiences critically complicate many 'stereotypes relating to nationality which suggest a causal link between certain behaviours and particular nationalities' (Bauman, 1996:1). The data reveals that learners go about learning proactively making meaning of their learning as subjects who occupy multiple socio-cultural interfaces. They respond to their immediate local context and the demands of the wider socio-economic trends at the same time (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Learning interfaces**

<p><b>IMMEDIATE LOCAL CONTEXT</b></p> <p>Institutional culture</p> <p>Availability of Resources</p> <p>Family</p> <p>Affiliation with the university</p> <p>Friendship groups</p> <p>Networks outside the university</p> <p>Community values and ethos related to the concept of university</p>	<p>←</p> <p>→</p> <p>L</p> <p>E</p> <p>A</p> <p>R</p> <p>N</p> <p>I</p> <p>N</p> <p>G</p>	<p><b>WIDER SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT</b></p> <p>Financial issues</p> <p>Future job market</p> <p>Government policy on funding higher education</p> <p>Global job market</p> <p>Contemporary views about knowledge and learning</p> <p>Choice of university abroad</p>
<p><b>Discipline-specific issues</b></p>		<p><b>Individual circumstances and preferences</b></p>

**Immediate, local context**

The interview data indicates that students’ learning experiences are largely shaped by different demands and characteristics of the immediate context as well as the wider global factors. For example, various festivals celebrated in the university are considered a major way of interaction with the outside society and a window for ‘global learning’ by students from the South while the students in both universities in the global North consider the university just as a place to gain credentials for the work place. For the majority of these students, global learning means knowing about developing countries.

It is well documented that students particularly from Asia inherit a passive system of learning centred on lecture method of teaching (Bochner and McLeod, 1997; Sawir, 2005). However, the respondents in the three different universities mentioned that they sit for two to three hour lectures in large classes of 50-250 students. Interestingly the class sizes were smaller in the University in the global South.

### **Wider socio-economic context**

Students' choice of course and country of study, expectations of future education and future career plans are shaped mainly by the current economic context of their own country rather than the global trends (Montgomery, 2010).

### **Discipline-specific issues**

In contrast to the literature that evidences the influence of culture on learning (Welikala and Watkins, 2008; Trahar, 2011) this study showed a disciplinary-based nature of academic writing and styles of learning. Students also develop idiosyncratic learning styles depending on their gender, age and other personal circumstances.

### **Individual circumstances and preferences**

The data strongly evidenced that students' behaviour and choices are shaped by individual circumstances. For instance, finance was a major issue for students in the universities in the North and they prioritised getting a job after graduation whereas students in the university in the South had clear visions for postgraduate studies since higher education is well-funded by their government.

### **Implications for pedagogy**

In this paper we problematize the current interpretations of student experience which reflect culture-specific responses to Euro-centric views about *knowledge*, *learning* and *university* since they do not adequately portray the complex local-global interfaces occupied by the students in this post-cosmopolitan age. Instead, they encourage the continuation of the supremacy of particular epistemic experiences as universal and neutral. This study suggests that students occupy complex and multiple socio-cultural and geo-political interfaces and hence interpret their experience in terms of multiple belongings (Foster, 1985). They respond to and live within pedagogic and socio-cultural interfaces which are continuously being reshaped both by various aspects of the global, neoliberal consumer society (Lyotard, 1984)

and their immediate local contexts. This implies the theoretically problematic nature of the practice of relating the process of knowing to students' national cultures or to the influence of global factors without complications. The data implies the dissolving lines between 'local' and 'global' in terms of their influence on learning across different societies and suggest the need to reconceptualise learning within the 21<sup>st</sup> century University.

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