

Research domain

Student experiences (SE)

Cultural interfaces: new conditions that inform student experience within international higher education contexts

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Introduction

The notion of student experience and the significance of researching student experience for effective teaching and learning have always received prominence in higher education across contexts. Currently, student experience has become one of the central attractions of research within UK higher education, mainly to comply with the neoliberal framework which constructs 'student as the heart of higher education system' (The Department for Business, Innovations and Skills (2011, 3.15). Within this policy agenda student experience in international sites of higher education is being used as a 'tool' to promote international markets (see Sabri, 2011). This approach to exploring and understanding student experience has tremendous impact on teaching and learning.

Since the early part of 1990s the sudden influx of the international student composition across higher education in the Western world has changed the process of teaching and learning. The alternative ways and meanings of learning identified among international students challenged the monolithic epistemic comfort zones in the host universities in the English-speaking host universities. The most prominent response to such epistemic differences was to differentiate between the host culture of learning and the international students' previous cultures of learning, which are often recognized and positioned as deficient and, moreover, problematic (Carroll and Ryan, 2005). Assimilation into the host culture of learning was therefore highlighted as the best strategy for international students to overcome their learning-related problems.

The 21st century higher education, however, has encountered a profound sense of integration of knowledge on a world scale (Altbach et al., 2009). The near-ubiquitous access to technology which has created a 'new breed of students' whose lives and learning are experienced mostly online. In addition, multiple dynamics shaped by interconnectedness of societies have shifted the 'nation-state definition of society and politics to a cosmopolitan outlook' and consequently, students tend to reconceptualise their positioning within local-global contexts rather than confining to locations bounded in space (Kim Anh and Marginson, 2013). Nevertheless, research and literature on student experience within international contexts still focus on culture-based theoretical and conceptual frameworks which were used for over three decades (Deardorf et al., 2012). This context encouraged me to synthesize findings of three studies I have conducted on student experience over the years to explore how student experience and the related meanings and actions have developed over the years.

The research context

Study 1

This study was designed within a constructivist framework and narrative approach and involved active interviews (2004-2005) and explored how international students learning in British universities make sense of their experience of learning. Data were analysed using constructivist grounded theory (Bryant and Charmaz, 2010).

Study 2

This study was a follow-up study for study 1 and the main focus was to explore how academics in British universities confront, make sense of, and respond to diverse student experiences they encounter while teaching within international contexts of higher education. In-depth interviews were conducted (2006-2008) with a sample of fifteen academics that reflected a significant mix of disciplines.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed at exploring and investigating how students across different geo-political contexts (India, Ireland and UK) make meaning of their learning experiences using in-depth interview conversations. Quantitative data were collected to position the students in the local higher education contexts.

Methodology and methods

Informed by a social constructivist stance of knowledge making (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) interview data has been collected from diverse cohorts of students in higher education between 2004 and 2013. The data has been recorded and analysed using constant comparison (Creswell, 2009-study 1); narrative analysis (Clandinin 2007-study 2); and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998 -study3).

For the purpose of this paper, the data collected for the three studies have been synthesized using a constant comparison approach (Bryant and Charmaz, 2010) within a framework of social constructivism.

Findings

Synthesis of findings from all three studies showed that culture plays a significant role in their teaching and learning but to different degrees. The patterns of the emergent themes suggested that the ways in which cultural dimension is experienced and perceived by students has changed over the years and across contexts. Rather than being bounded by a particular national culture, students simultaneously dwell on three different conditions: a multicultural condition; an intercultural condition and an emerging post-culture condition. This results in complicating the meaning of student experience and problematizing the possibility of constructing student identities which are static and bounded by socio-cultural frameworks.

Theoretical framework

The findings were interpreted using two key elements of Heidegger's account of being; *being and time* and the *temporality of being in the world* (see Heidegger, 1996). In the process of developing *being and time* Heidegger emphasised on the everydayness of human beings within which he recognised an ontological structure which helps us understand our place in this world highlighting the interdependence of human beings and the world she or he exists (Donnelly, 1999). This notion of *being in time* has informed the interpretation of the nature of student experience and the multiple ways in which students locate their scripts for learning across cultural contexts they sojourn (welikala and Watkins, 2008). It was identified that the life worlds inhabited by students do not necessarily reflect intercultural or multicultural spaces, rather they occupy cultural interfaces. It was also revealed that even though the research on internationalisation and student experience still tend to categorise students into socio-cultural compartments, students do not restrict themselves within one particular cultural sphere. Rather they sometimes resist such cultural identities constructed for them and enact agency and identify that their place within the host university context reflect multiple mobility.

The *temporality of being in the world* is epitomised by the diverse networks students belong to and the device -connected mobile worlds they co-exist. Their co-presence amidst different motilities -geographic, social and intellectual-have led to an emergent post-culture condition.

Implications for pedagogy

The paper highlights that student experience within the 21st century international contexts of higher education is informed by new forms of ontological structures. The contexts students occupy and the knowledges they come to know are increasingly getting mobile and fragile. Students are now living cultural interfaces than cultural borderlands, which this paper identifies as post-culture condition.

The synthesis of the findings of the three studies discussed in this paper includes data collected from a limited number of participants across a particular time frame and therefore will not be used to make bigger claims. In the meantime, new ontological structures implied by the three main conditions identified in this study: the multicultural condition; intercultural condition and the emerging post-culture condition will invite academics, policy makers and service providers in to reconsider curricular and pedagogy in higher education to address the rapidly changing nature of student experience and their on-going response to multiple complexities which in turn shape students' knowing and unknowing. The paper also suggests the need for new methodologies that can address the volume of the complexity of student experience and the diverse dynamics of the students' interdependent relationship with an increasingly unpredictable world.

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