

'Knowledge in Action': International Students and their Interaction with Cultural Knowledge

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Abstract

The number and proportion of international students in Higher Education in the UK has increased significantly in the last forty years, rising from 8% of student population in 1962-63 to 13% (300,000) in 2003-04 (DfES, 2003:11; UKCOSA, 2005). As institutional and government policies take effect these figures look set to grow further in future years. However, despite both financial and human investment in improving conditions, the life of an international student in the UK is not easy. Research has shown that international students experience difficulties in cultural adjustment (e.g. Turner 2006; McNay 1995) and while some of these may be due to discrepancies in 'national' culture, many others relate to educational cultural differences (Coates 2005). Such experiences may lead to avoidance of problematic situations and disengagement from intercultural contact.

Against this background, consideration of the ways in which students experience new aspects of life and study in UK Higher Education is of interest. It is essential, however, that student transitions are not problematised through a focus on student difficulties, but that such work also more widely considers the ways in which students learn new cultures and interact with new cultural information. The aim of this paper is to explore these processes within the context of a summer pre-session English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme. The pre-session programme is a key site for such an investigation since it represents an important transition point for students, the beginning of their intercultural experience and a time at which their learning of a new culture may be most intensive. The inextricable relationship between language and culture adds to the force of learning which takes place here (Saville-Troike 1989; Kramsch 1998). With such a context in mind, this paper describes an action research study centered around a cultural project during the pre-session programme at one UK HE institution.

Learning Culture

A useful overview of the processes of cultural teaching and learning is provided by Byram and Feng (2004). Within their review a key notion is that arising from Sfarid's work on metaphors of learning (1998). Sfarid proposes two models: Learning as Acquisition and Learning as Participation. The first of these presents knowledge as an object or commodity transmitted into the 'empty vessel' of the learner through the actions of the teacher. In contrast, the participation metaphor views learning as occurring through socialisation and engagement with others. Knowing relates to becoming part of a larger whole, and learning a 'process of becoming a member of a certain community' (Sfarid 1998:6). The metaphors concern the 'what' (acquisition) and the 'how' (participation) of learning. Although for Sfarid these two models are complementary, for Byram and Feng and for other commentators in this field (e.g. Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000) it is the participation metaphor which provides the most valuable perspective for learning of cultures. They contend that cultural learning is achieved not through the transmission of information, but through acting as part of a culture and as such process is key. For Byram and Feng it is experience which is essential: "Culture learning... needs to be experiential and experience of difference has to be at the centre of learners' and teachers' attention" (2004:152).

Research within the slightly different context of UK students' Study Abroad also insists on the centrality of experience. Deardorff's model (2006) of intercultural competence suggests that a process orientation is crucial. For Deardorff cultural learning occurs through the application of the necessary process skills (ibid:244), which include analysis, evaluation, interpretation and the abilities to listen and observe. Deardorff indicates that while successful intercultural learners are recognised externally through their appropriate communicative behaviour in new cultural settings, internally, these learners are likely to have undergone some adjustment in their frames of reference, becoming more flexible, adaptable and empathetic to new cultures. It is through this reframing and widening of perspective rather than through a simple assumption of new behaviour patterns that students develop their intercultural competence.

Working within a social constructionist framework, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) consider immigrants who become native speakers of a second language as part of their research. A central question concerns 'what happens to a self when an individual moves from participation in the discursive practices of one culture... to those of another culture?' (ibid:163). Answers here focus on the role of agency within the process of reconstruction of self. An essential element which emerges is 'transgression', a Bakhtinian term defined as 'the ability to perceive interactional events from outside of the event itself and in which attention is focused on the resources and identities involved in the events' (Hall 1995: 225 in Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000:174). For the immigrants within the study, transgression is achieved through writing, either in diaries or first-person

narratives and Pavlenko and Lantolf argue that it is this re-narrating of their lives which allows for a strong reconstruction of selves and successful 'border crossing'.

It would appear from the above that involvement in process and experience of new cultures coupled with an opportunity to observe and reflect on these processes in an ordered way are essential aspects of cultural learning. Taking these perspectives on cultural learning together, the present researchers formulated the terms 'knowledge as object' and 'knowledge in action' to indicate ways in which learners might react to new cultural information within the project. The second of these is close to Schon's term 'knowing in action' (1983:51), used to describe the professional, practice-based knowledge which teachers develop. Schon contends that this knowing arises from 'experience, trial and error, intuition and muddling through' (ibid: 43) rather than from intellectual actions. The 'knowledge in action' which we propose here has a similar basis, aiming to capture students' experiential understandings which become transferable to other contexts.

The Project

In response to previous research (Coates 2005), the authors collaborated on an educational cultures project for the subsequent summer pre-session programme. At the heart of the project were student interviews with University staff members about topics of academic life and study which were then used as the basis of a poster presentation. The project aimed to provide a site for potentially useful cultural learning for students by:

- Introducing students to the concept of academic cultures
- Raising student consciousness about their own academic cultures and backgrounds
- Helping students to explore student expectations of UK HE
- Allowing students to investigate one aspect of educational culture as practised within Salford University
- Helping students to develop transferable 'ethnographic' skills for the study of cultures
- Allowing students to experience some (possibly) challenging aspects of differences of academic culture

The project covered four weeks of the pre-session programme with two classroom sessions per week. In week 1, students discussed their own academic cultural expectations and analysed examples of interview data from Coates' project. In week 2, students formed project groups, chose a topic related to academic cultural differences and decided on questions for their interviews. The poster topics chosen by student groups were:

- Group Work
- Independent Learning
- Critical Thinking
- Exams and Assessment
- Time management
- Staff-student interaction

The researchers provided each group with the name of an academic as interviewee, but students themselves arranged appointments. Interviews took place outside class time and again it was the students' responsibility to decide on how to organise the interview, record and analyse the interview data. Interviews with staff rather than observation or fieldwork aspects of ethnographic study were chosen as a method of data collection in order to provide students with some spoken interaction with staff members. In week 3, students analysed their interview data and decided on the form of their poster. In the final week, students prepared for and took part in a poster session. Staff interviewees were invited to the poster session where students explained and discussed their posters as guests circulated during a 90 minute session. This proved to be a very lively and enjoyable session with some healthy competition between groups for best poster prizes.

Methodology

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with focus groups and individuals. Interviews took place at the end of the summer pre-session programme and again following students' first

(and in some cases second) semester of full academic study. Volunteer participants were recruited from the pre-session student body. In accordance with research ethics procedures, students gave full informed consent for their participation. Seven students participated in the focus group interviews and three in the second semester interviews. Interviews of typically thirty to forty-five minutes were recorded, then transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. The notions of 'learning as participation', 'knowledge as object' and 'knowledge in action' were helpful analytical tools in this process.

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis indicated learners had learned from both the content and process aspects of the project. Within each of these areas there is evidence for the development of 'knowledge in action' by students. Data also indicate variance in effective cultural learning among students, most strikingly seen in a comparison of two individual experiences. (In the reporting of interview data below, the bracketed codes refer to the interviewee name and interview number).

Content Knowledge: recognising differences

Student comments on the content knowledge gained through the project clearly showed that they were able to recognise differences between their previous experiences and the UK HE context. For example,

'It's not the same in China, because in China you always have final examination and on the paper there is question, question, question and you should answer, answer'. (J-1)

'Here the system of education is very easy than the system of education in Russia...in Russia, it's not like that- you have to do the assessment alone' (H-1)

Given the focus of the project, this was to be expected. It was, however, where students started to engage further with content information that more interesting interaction emerged.

Potential 'Knowledge in Action'

Several students projected how the content knowledge they have discovered might be applied in the future, beginning to turn their content knowledge into *potential* 'knowledge in action'. For example, the student here acknowledges the difference and speculates as to her possible actions in a future situation:

"the difference here is that they give the student more time to prepare the exam, whereas in Russia, like we have exam at the end of the semester. Here I think the exam is two times, you have more time at home before the exam. But also here, if you fail your exam you have more chance to repeat and repeat... But about assessment, it's a good thing for her for the student to assess maybe with the teacher, but in Russia it's not like that. You have to do assessment alone... maybe here you go and find the teacher, you have some problem and ask..." (H-1)

In a similar way, another group developed their thinking about time management to include wider aspects of their future student lives. They changed their poster topic to 'student life', their explorations helping them reflect that that managing time is not only managing study time and that there is more to being a student in England than study:

"...he told us about study – that – just like I told you – we should spend individual study for 20 hours per week... and it is possible for students that they can work to gain more experience – because at first I thought that if I have to work then I will have no time to study, but he said that it's normally here in England the students work and study at the same time." (L3-1)

This group's poster took the form of an illustrated walk through the 'garden' of student life; an creative and emotional response placing new content information within a vision of their futures.

Developing 'Knowledge in Action'

Further work done by students on topic information came through conscious reflection on the connection between the content knowledge and the experiential aspects of the project and the programme as a whole. For example, one learner who had focused on assessment in her project, later experienced an alternative type of assessment within the project itself.

"The difference I discovered here when I did the project, after writing the project we are asked to do the group presentation in front of, so is different" (Brenda 1).

Similarly, a student who had focused on independent learning in the poster content, also reflected on the type of independent learning involved in the poster project:

"I think independent learning means that you study on your own, but our interview said it is not, maybe that is a kind of independent learning, but the group work is independent learning." (J-1)

Both students were able to reflect on the project as whole, integrating the content information with their experiential learning through process aspects of the project. They learned both in an 'ethnographic' sense, stepping outside their experience and learning from it, as well as from the fundamental content of their posters. Discussions with students during the poster sessions indicated that several other students, and particularly those who had focused on Group Work, had similar experiences. This interaction between two elements of the project may be seen as developing 'knowledge in action'. The dual learning experience is similar to 'loop input' (Woodward 1988) approaches used with trainee teachers to assist in the parallel development of informational and process knowledge. The nature of project topics here provided these opportunities for reflexivity, but this may be more difficult to achieve for other areas of culture learning.

Learning the Process: Projection to Future Contexts

The majority of the students were able to project their experiential learning into future study contexts, suggesting that this also is becoming potential 'knowledge in action'. Elements mentioned by students were the project work itself, the dynamics of group work, interaction with staff members, use of language in new settings, and the mechanics of the project.

a. Undertaking a project

For those who had not undertaken project work before, it was easy to see how the experience would be useful in the future:

"... I don't know how to introduce and organise a project before do this, but now I think I know, I know something about this, but now I think I know, I know something about this – yeah, and now I prepare for the report – I know how to find information about this and how to organise... I think in future I need to do a lot of things about this, so I think it is useful." (L2-1)

Building in further reflective opportunities for the group as a whole may have enabled students to connect this experience to the poster topics of independent learning and group work, helping all students to make links between this specific content knowledge and their own experiential learning.

b. Dynamics of Group Work

"I think the next time if I happen to have to work in group, my skill, I mean my teamwork skill will be better. I learn a lot. I think my communication skills also improve after that." (Victoria-1)

Many of the students spoke about the challenges of working as a group, and how they had learned from this for the future. Aspects of group work which students found potentially valuable were teamwork and communication skills, and dealing with differences of age, gender and background among the group:

"... here all group member have different background, different age, so that is difficult for us to agree. Although I found that this is difficult... I learn a lot of things from our group member, just because they are different." (J-1)

Students also learned about the support possible from other group members, finding that groups could overcome problems which an individual might find insurmountable.

"I think maybe when you do something by yourself you have many – you have some problems but you don't know how to do – when you work with your group, you can get lots of help from your classmates." (L2-1)

c. Working with staff

Students also reflected on the staff-student relationship in the UK. For many students the nature of this relationship was something different to their previous experiences.

"I think the way of helpful – to help students is the same but the way of interact – face to face or – the way of talking is different – because in my country students have to respect teachers very much – we cannot just say

their first name or last name we have to say some words before the name and we have to be very polite but here I think it's equal.” (L3-1)

“Another thing I learn is the teachers and tutors here, they are very friendly, but the students also look up to them and admire them. I find this very difficult because if they are friendly with you, they will treat you as friend, but the tutors are so friendly but they make the students respect them... I don't know how they can do that...” (Victoria-1)

The ways in which contact with tutors happened was also new to many students. The experience of mailing and arranging appointments was a learning opportunity:

“...we had to wait a lot for the answer for the interviewee – because just one day before the interview we had the answer..” (L1-1)

Contacting and conducting an interview with a member of staff provided a new context for language use, which several students found useful. This aspect of the project was strongly linked to an affective experience for students, who initially experienced doubts and fears about interacting with staff. For all those interviewed the experience was positive, as they learned that staff were friendly and helpful. Once again, students could easily see how this experiential learning would be useful in the future:

“When I tried to contact the tutor and during the interview and after the interview. I think in the future if they are like her, I will be OK” (Victoria-1)

“I want to say that first it scared me the expectation but during the interview it was quite good, it was friendly.” (Brenda-1)

d. Language-related elements

The aspects of the project outlined above clearly have implications for students' language learning. Politeness and persuasion in group work, writing to staff members, and using an appropriate tone for interviewing staff, represent language and cultural gains from the project. However, some students also discussed the more obvious language gains from the project.

“another student, his English is very good, but we had to write an email, he didn't know how to write an email, I mean a formal one- I was very surprisedI also learned a lot from writing emails to a tutor.”(V-1)

“I think the project, when I was coming my first time it's difficult because it's English and it's my first time study in English, so the project helped me to express myself in English, to learn, to improve my speaking, improve my writing, I think it's very helpful.” (H-1)

This was a strong theme, perhaps inevitably since the first interviews were conducted within a context of the English language programme and with at least one interviewer seen as primarily in the role of language teacher.

e. Mechanics of the project:

Students also talked about the technical aspects of the project and their use in the future. These included poster design:

‘the content is one thing, but another thing also important you have to make it attractive, and you have to be creative in order to make your poster impressive’ (V-1)

and the use of IT:

‘for me it was the opportunity to, to use the PowerPoint...I didn't know how to use it before but because of the project I had to use it’ (H-1)

The development of such skills could be viewed as external to cultural learning, simply covering peripheral skills. However, it could be argued that learning to manipulate the established tools of an academic setting represents an important aspect of becoming a member of that culture. Thus, gaining confidence in these elements is a key part of students' cultural learning.

Experiences of Individual Students

Against the background of these generalised findings, it is valuable to consider the individual experiences of certain students who seem to represent particular orientations towards the project's learning opportunities.

Two contrasting reactions are evident: one student seems unable to transfer information to more active learning, where another displays a strong internalisation of knowledge gained from the project. These portraits allow some insight into the process of transformation of content and process knowledge into ‘knowledge in action’.

The Non-Learner

Lily’s experience is interesting for the negative outcomes which she relates. Where other students found group work a valuable experience, she clearly demonstrates non-transfer of learning, failing to see how lessons from this process could be applied to other situations:

I think the good thing is that we can know that which person have more responsibility to their duty and maybe if we have if in the future if we have to work together in masters degree we can know that we should not choose this person in our group (Lily-1)

The lessons from the group work remain firmly rooted in that particular experience. This perception may be due to her negative experience of group work within the project. Lily seemed to want the group to function completely as a whole and when problems arose retreated from the situation, rather than attempting to manage the group.:

“I think the benefit from group work is not very much because some students, some of my friends, they don’t care, they just don’t come when we have appointment to do poster... it’s just a couple of people doing on the poster.” (Lily-1)

“...just let them go – if they don’t want to work just – you know it’s hard to tell them that – don’t go, come to work, it’s hard cos if they don’t want to work if I try to convey them to come to work then they just not help.” (Lily-1)

She does not seem to have considered that even a faulty process could constitute a learning context. This product rather than process orientation can also be detected in Lily’s comments on her interview with the staff member. Here she indicates a tendency to see the staff informant as the key element during the project .

‘And from what I did in the poster I get to interview with the person which he is very nice, he is give a lot of information and he told me here you just study 2 days for Masters degree and 8 to 10 hours’ (Lily-1)

‘At first we were thinking that- is he going to answer enough information to put all the information in the big poster – we were very worried about that but after we did interview the results quite good’ (Lily-1)

The comments here suggest that Lily sees learning as occurring not through participation or interaction within the group, but only through transmission of information from the staff member. She makes several more references to the tutor’s input with many uses of phrases ‘he told us’ and ‘he said’. The staff member seems to constitute the sole source of knowledge and there is a view that learning can only happen through him.

A further key element of Lily’s experience was the negative emotions raised by the content knowledge she discovers. Much of what she discusses are her fears about her future learning context:

“I had no idea before I get interview the staff – I thought it is going to be the same, but after I interview so I can know that it is not, it sound like easier but harder for students to study by their own.” (Lily-1)

“I’m so scared – because at first before I came to England I thought that my English is OK – I mean not too bad and not too good but after I took a test and divide into groups, I feel that my English is not very good, I have to improve my writing, reading – which is very hard for me, because even though I study in International university, but still we are Thai students – so when we don’t understand we can explain in Thai to each other but here I think it’s very hard – which is I’m so scared whether I’m going to finish my master degree – and I’m very worried about masters degree.” (Lily-1)

“That’s what I’m scared – you know – but I think I try my best, but my friend said that – I talk this topic to my friend and she said that if other can do you can do – but I said ‘what, me not same ability maybe I cannot do it’ and she said ‘don’t scare, just start first’. That help me because when you’re here I think you need a lot of spirit” (Lily-1)

Discovery of information about the realities of student life in the UK did not seem to be empowering for Lily, rather it provokes more fears about her studies than may have arisen without her participation in the project.

Although the data relates only to one student, there may be a connection here between the ways in which Lily views the learning on the project, her lack of transfer, and fears about future study. Kember (2001) suggests that student beliefs about the processes of teaching and learning have an effect on their ability to adjust to new settings and on the ultimate success of their learning. He distinguishes between two contrasting student orientations, the didactic/reproductive and the facilitative/transformational. The former holds knowledge to be defined by an authority and absolute, with teaching through transmission, and learning occurring as students absorb material provided by the teacher. The second orientation views knowledge as relative and constructed; teaching as a process of facilitation with students learning independently with guidance from the teacher; the learner's role is to reach an understanding of concepts and to transform knowledge for their own purposes and own context. Kember's study concludes that students with a didactic set of beliefs find the process of transition to higher education difficult and even traumatic. Lily's reproductive/transmission orientation to learning and knowledge seems to be part of her difficulty. Such an understanding about learning is perhaps more likely to produce uncertainty about one's own capacity for learning, since it emphasises the learner's ability to take in sufficient information at a fast enough rate to succeed. In contrast, a view of learning as participation allows for development of understandings over time. Where transmission of knowledge is not seen as equivalent to learning, this may provide space and less pressure for individuals to grow. Additionally, transmitted or received knowledge is not constructed for oneself and is more strongly anchored within a context. Knowledge, which comes through experience, however, has a closer relationship with the self and can perhaps more easily be applied to other contexts. Lily's experience provokes questions about the need for student support. The destabilisation caused by realisations about her new context and the negative feelings this raises need to be addressed in some way. Access to further discussion about her experiences, perhaps through academic personal tutoring, may have helped Lily. This element needs to be added to the cultural project in future years.

The Affective Learner:

Lily's experience contrasts with that of Brenda who clearly benefits from the knowledge, both content and experiential, she has gained from her project on Assessment. A telling example is in her discussion of her learning of the level of pass mark in UK universities:

B: Yes, it's useful because I come again to the point that the way they are giving us marks, you know the 40%, although our system is still in my mind, so I think oh no, I didn't pass, I fail, that still in my mind. But I think about the British system and I think ah it is a pass. I pass. But our system is still my mind if I get marks below 50, I say to myself that didn't succeed.

S: So there's still an overlap there between the two systems?

B: Yes, but if I get marks below 50 I try to remove that stress, to say for example, yes I pass. (B2)

A fairly prosaic piece of content knowledge becomes knowledge in action in an unexpected way, highlighting the affective side of learning. The importance of attention to affective factors in student transition and cross-cultural experiences has been noted by other researchers (e.g. Luzio-Lockett 1998). However, the focus has usually been on students' inability to cope with the emotions relating to transition: here we see Brenda's very successful management of this element of her learning. It is also notable that Brenda's learning is ongoing several months after first discovering about pass mark differences, emphasising its dynamic nature. One piece of information does not simply replace another in her thinking, she continues to work on the meanings of each for herself.

A similar example is provided by this response to a question about assessment in her present academic context:

'Yes, we had many assignments in English, which if you make some, they are helping us to improve, to collect some marks. Compare it to my country I can say you can remain all year without being assessed, although we have the timetable, plans for the whole year, the same in the UK and in my country. But this, in the UK, is helping student to see how they can – it's giving responsibility to the student to see how, how much you have collected the marks. But in my country, because it is just the once, you can lose everything. So this is helpful

because you can collect this or that to create the big mark in the end. - So assessment is benefit - And also less stressful. You can say oh, maybe I fail in this, but next time I can catch up.' (B2)

Brenda seems to have gained the habit of comparing experiences in her learning context with those from her previous context (reflecting on her academic situation). Again she goes beyond the facts to use the information to manage her emotions. There are other examples throughout her interviews of Brenda's affective use of her experiential learning:

'...it (the project) opened my mind and prepared what will come next, so I will not have that much stress. I will know what to do, which orientation to follow' (B2)

'...opening my mind because I didn't do something such as project before, so I know that it exist, so even if it comes in the future, I will not have to show the impression that this is new for me.' (B2)

It appears that Brenda consciously attends to the affective side of her learning. She is able to see herself from outside, take note of the effects which new learning has upon her emotions and start to manage this. In this way she appears to display the quality of 'transgredience', vital for productive participation in new settings and enabling the reconstruction of self within new contexts. It could be argued that it is through this kind of personal application of knowledge that cultural learning becomes of most relevance. In hierarchies of conceptions of learning (e.g. Perry 1970; Marton *et al* 1993) it is learning through personal transformation which occupies the highest levels. Brenda's actions and words indicate that she is adept at making constructive use of new information and experiences at this level.

Conclusion

The study has provided useful insights into the nature of cultural learning within the context of the pre-sessional project. Students are able to recognise the future value of a range of process aspects of the project and to project these forward. Content knowledge can also become 'knowledge in action' for some learners, but this may occur more readily where there is a connection to project experience through 'loop input'. Future projects may wish to facilitate this through choice of topics.

However, transfer of information into knowledge in action is not guaranteed. One student's failure in this regard seems to have been influenced by her own 'transmission' view of knowledge and learning, and lack of support. Where students' views of pedagogy allows them to construe experience as knowledge and learning, this may enable them to transfer it more easily to other situations. Time for reflection and access to others' views on the process aspects of the project may have been another factor in lack of transfer to knowledge in action for some. Future iterations of the project will seek to include these through additional group discussion following the poster session.

Finally, knowledge in action is shown to be more than projection of learning to inform future action. The indication that it may also relate to emotional aspects of learning provides a new dimension to descriptions of cultural learning. Evidence suggests that cultural learning of this kind possesses a dynamic quality and is strongly resonant for some students. Following on from this study, work with students on the affective elements of their learning may support more successful adjustments to higher education.

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