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## Thriving as an International Student: Personal responses and the trajectories they create.

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### Abstract:

During a study investigating their experiences on a British university campus, relatively successful long stay international students critically reflect on their experiences of cross-cultural interactions and how these have shaped not just their current behaviour but also their longer term attitudes and aims, or in Wenger's term their trajectories.

A tentative taxonomy of trajectories is described and its pedagogical relevance discussed in terms of ways that this understanding can inform staff interventions to enhance intercultural learning, not only of international students but of home students and staff also, and lead to further critical reflection by all participants on their own cultural influences.

## Introduction

The experience of living and studying in another country is regarded as having a potentially transformative effect on the individual on a wide variety of levels, academic, cultural, intercultural, linguistic, personal and professional (Coleman, 2011). The comparison of different cultures and the learning which takes place, both for the sojourner and members of the host community with which they have contact, is seen as beneficial as it can foster the development of intercultural competence, 'an amalgam of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and behaviours, representing both cognitive and affective learning, and comprising an awareness of the relativity of cultures, including their own, and a recognition that culture is a social construct' (Coleman, 2011: 3) However much research in recent years has revealed disappointingly low levels of interaction between International and local students due to perceived shyness, indifference, negative stereotypes and linguistic difficulties on both sides (Volet & Ang, 1998; Otten, 2003; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009; Sovic, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010). In an overview of studies published between 1995 and 2005, focused mostly on adaptation to US universities, Andrade (2006) reports that these language and cultural issues are often detrimental to the level of international students' health and ability/opportunity to establish supportive social links, potentially reinforcing a cycle of ever decreasing contact with locals, to the detriment of cultural learning opportunities for home and international students alike.

Research intended to shed light on ways to improve contacts has tended to focus on identifying problems encountered during the initial transition period (Brown, 2009; Sovic, 2009). An alternative approach is to investigate the experiences of relatively successful students and the resulting effects on their knowledge of and approach to intercultural learning. A study of the experiences of students resident on a multicultural campus for longer than one year, who have developed some confidence in describing their successes in coping with this cross-cultural experience, may increase our knowledge of the range of successful behaviours and possible outcomes, leading to the identification of strategies which will support cross-cultural learning.

In the first part of this paper a study of the experiences of students resident for 18 months or

longer is described. This is followed by an attempt to outline possible implications for our pedagogy.

## Method

14 (9 female/5 male) students from overseas were interviewed about their experience of studying for 18-30 months at the University of Wolverhampton. Students from nine countries, from Europe, Central Africa and East Asia took part. Volunteers (aged between 22 and 38) were studying a range of disciplines on the Wolverhampton City site. During 50-60 minute semi-structured interviews the students were asked about their domestic, social and study networks and the nature of their cross-cultural contacts. They described their adjustment over time to a multicultural campus and strategic choices that they made, and offered suggestions to improve communication between home and international students. Responses were recorded, transcribed and analysed to draw out common themes.

## Findings

Most students contrasted their approach to social and domestic contacts, compared to study-related interaction; like the respondents in Brown's (2009) study of newly arrived students, they quickly developed and maintained a strong supportive domestic network based on nationality or cultural affinity wherever possible, but unlike with Brown's interviewees this secure emotional base was not constraining as it also served as a solid platform from which they could venture into cross-cultural interaction with classmates from different cultures. Over time students adopted a variety of roles with classmates and tutors, positioning themselves at various times as dependent, e.g. as non-native speakers, but also as pro-active members of the collective, e.g. as good organisers in group work (Shannon-Little, 2011).

From interviewees' descriptions of their own responses towards other cultures and their motivations, a sense of coherence in attitudes and aims emerges for five relatively distinct types, influenced by domestic context, medium-term plans and self-image. Some of the types have aspects in common so are not mutually exclusive, but each type displays a distinctive attitude to cross-cultural interaction heavily influenced by, and in some case influencing, their future aims – for which I have utilised Wenger's term (1998) 'trajectory'.

The following brief descriptions of each type, with supporting quotes (using pseudonyms), will illustrate this tentative typology of approaches to intercultural learning. The classification is divided into 5 trajectories, termed Settler, Discoverer, Adventurer, Collector and Miner, although this typology could be added to or refined through further research.

**Settler** (three females): mature student already resident in the UK for 3+ years, having chosen or been forced to emigrate, studying to improve their employment prospects with a view to permanent residence. They wish to make the most of opportunities including cross-cultural dialogue and all adopt a strategy of minimising underlying differences, to allow them to come to terms with new environment more easily (without ignoring their own strong moral codes). Thus they stress our common humanity, regardless of culture, as the following quote demonstrates:

We are all human beings we share the same emotions, more or less the same stories and stuff, so it's been a good experience for me and slowly I start to feel like I belong. I don't feel like the outsider anymore. (Lucy)

**(Self) Discoverer** (two females): individuals with a strong emotional base within their first culture, but who are open to the host culture and feel more comfortable with some aspects of it compared to their home culture. Gina remarks: 'And people here they teach me to be humble and low profile, I mean because sometimes Chinese is quite high profile, they like to showing off everything. People here tend to be low profile even a simple life make them happy, so I learned to be simple and be more happy. And to be independent', while Karen appreciates the greater privacy: 'Chinese people talk a lot about things and gossip. English are like – as long as you are happy. That's the big difference. So I more prefer to go out with English people. I feel like I got more privacy'. She describes a fundamental change in her relationship with her parents:

I changed my values, attitudes, changed the way I see the world. The first thing is about my parents. Before I came to England I listened to them, everything what they told to me, because they give me money to live for whatever I do. (...). When I come to England I realised it's my life, I should be the one who says if I want to do it or not, rather than what they tell me to do or not. (...) Even though I

didn't want to do it, I got to do it because I thought I should be respectful. Now, I start to argue, I start to tell her why I think it's not right. (Karen)

Both Gina and Karen emphasise, in different ways, their curiosity and the satisfaction they gain from developing their creativity through interaction with other students' ideas. They feel as if they have a better understanding of themselves after this experience, and wish to continue learning from less culturally bound perspectives, even if intending to return to their home country after study.

**Adventurer** (four European females): broadly speaking they have all successfully adapted to this cultural experience (and sometimes others) and are proud of their resilience. They have to some extent outgrown their home culture and are now interested in further cross-cultural experiences. When I am looking at my home town right now, it seems so small and unimportant somehow, because I know that I come from there but when I go back and meet all the people that I have known from since I was a child, I don't have much in common now with them and I feel more, I feel that I can read people in more careful way now whereas when I go back to Poland there are people there who are 'self-centred' maybe I would say. They don't take others views into consideration. (Beata)

Many have previous experiences from other countries, including Erasmus placements, and all have longer term plans for further residence abroad. There is a strong sense of excitement about future opportunities,

**Collector** (four males): The interviewees on this trajectory, while studying hard to gain a good qualification, have a related goal to collect knowledge of other cultures for use later in achieving their strong ambitions for a future (often clearly planned) job, either back in the home culture or in a more international setting. As Henry explains: 'I want to start my own business. I want to be an auditor, my own company. (...) With foreign companies.[The contact with other nationalities here will be useful, because] basically I don't feel nervous, because everyday I stay there and have contact. It will help you to improve your conversation skills'. The emphasis is on seizing the current opportunities through proactive cross-cultural interaction, sometimes going to great lengths, as time is limited/precious. Although they

make use of a co-cultural safe zone in their domestic life, there is scarce sympathy for peers who are too anxious to participate in the necessary cross-cultural interaction. Information on cultural differences and practices is seen almost as a practical set of experiences or data to collect, and there are no value judgements against home culture norms. In fact Mark declares that it is necessary to accept them as they are: 'for you to really work well in other cultures you have to accept them, to integrate yourself to be part of them to understand their ways, and that will help you to get on'. They are accepted as the rules of the game as played in the culture currently under scrutiny, and potentially useful information for other contexts.

**Miner** (one male): Although there is only one of the interviewees whose approach is placed in this category, there are references from several interviewees (and in the literature, e.g. Spurling 2006) to co-nationals who have not integrated into the multicultural campus as fully as the interviewees in this study have done. Students in this category will operate almost exclusively in comfortable home-culture networks, learning whatever intercultural skills are needed for survival, while minimising the disruption this may cause. They may regard the cross-cultural experience as positive, as is the case with the

student in this study, or as a frustratingly inaccessible opportunity because of difficulties in engineering deeper contacts, or even as an ordeal which they would prefer to put behind them, but in any case they have adjusted their targets and aim to achieve the goal of their qualification and leave, and look forward to the end of their stay and a return to familiarity.

There is limited curiosity about the host culture, either because it has been experienced and found relatively uninteresting or unattractive, or because it has been difficult to engage with and thus remains impenetrable to the student who retreats to its margins, and thus is even more strongly attracted to home culture networks. Another interviewee refers to other international students with just such an instrumental approach

Not every Chinese people [want to mix with other nationalities]. Some people just want to finish their degree. They spend their time on PS3 (...) They want the time pass so quick, and when they get their degree they can think 'Oh the task has finished! I can back to China. I can back home my normal life'. They think they are suffering here, they are not enjoying the experience here. (Joe)

The table below gives an overview of the primary benefit/motivation for each type of trajectory.

| Type       | Primary benefit from cultural contacts                          |
|------------|---|
| Settler    | Learn how to survive and thrive in this environment             |
| Discoverer | Understand myself better  |
| Adventurer | Rise to the interesting challenge of new encounters             |
| Collector  | Gather knowledge and skills to use later                        |
| Miner      | Instrumental: obtain what is needed and return to home culture. |

**Discussion**

This initial categorisation may prove to be insufficiently exhaustive or discriminating, but provides a starting point for a more discerning understanding of student motivations and trajectories, and can inform strategic intervention by staff to enhance the opportunities for greater cultural learning between home and international students.

The Settler type may describe a minority trajectory for international students, but is of interest because of the tension between a pragmatically useful universalist stance – that we are all the

same 'underneath' - and the individual's desire to maintain identity-defining characteristics which are at odds with the norms of the new culture.

The Miner type is perhaps of greater relevance because of the general lack of success that it can typify, as the student has withdrawn from any but cursory attempts at cultural learning. From a tutor's point of view it would be preferable to prevent (or reverse) this trajectory where possible through fostering increased interaction of a supportive nature, during the initial low risk familiarisation stages of forming the cohort in the early weeks of the semester before co-cultural

social networks become too entrenched and before the gradient of risk increases with assessed group work (Shannon-Little, 2011). Engineering multicultural membership of workgroups is a necessary but not sufficient step in this, and tutor support must be highly proactive. Osmond & Roed's five recommendations to institutions/academic staff for smoother interaction in group work between domestic and international students (2010: 123) are very helpful:

- provide language support classes
- emphasise to domestic and international students benefits of cross-cultural interactions
- establish clear rules and expectations in advance of group work for all students
- build in enough time for groups to gel, supported by regular tutorials
- include intercultural content to allow all students to make some unique contribution.

However these recommendations are not enough in themselves as they do not necessarily stimulate reflection on the process of collaboration. De Vita (2001) argues that in addition to clarifying with students the purpose within the module of groupwork and establishing rules for engagement, tutors need to devise in-class exercises to familiarise students with the skills needed, and to provide a structure and classtime for debriefing and evaluation of the process of group work both as a group and individually, supported by use of reflective journals.

Cross-cultural learning is not just a one-way-street, with local students particularly needing the sustained exposure to other perspectives, and the earlier that collective recognition and mutual respect are achieved, the greater progress that can be made towards acknowledgement of both interdependence and reciprocal learning opportunities.

This is where a more detailed understanding of possible trajectories can assist the tutor in structuring cultural learning activities to foster a more sophisticated understanding of the cross-cultural experience and its transferability beyond the current context. De Vita (2001: 32) refers to a two-phase process of 'ensuring both the exploration of what each cultural perspective has to offer (de-centering) and the integration of the strengths of each (re-centering), so as to produce more effective outcomes through cultural

synergy'. This works on the level of developing knowledge and skills for specific types of interaction (which is the prime motivation expressed by the collectors in the above study). However, there is also a possibility to stimulate learning at a metacognitive level, if we also ask learners to consider the experience from the perspective of an adventurer (how would you feel/react to a similar challenge in a different cultural context(s) as specified by the tutor?) or of a discoverer (what light does that shed on your own beliefs, attitudes, behaviour? Does that change your perspective in any way?). Not all students will necessarily be stimulated by such questions to consider the transferability of what they have learned from these experiences, but the greatest potential of cross-cultural contacts is not just in terms of what we can learn about others: as Adler (1975) remarks, interaction across national boundaries 'begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self' (p. 18)

Many academics might feel anxiety at their lack of training (Otten, 2003) for dealing with the cultural diversity that students in their courses represent, and indeed for coaching students in group work skill, and staff development is an issue which must be addressed, but in the meantime intercultural learning is such a priority for our students and ourselves that it must be addressed here and now. De Vita & Case (2003: 388) warn that interaction must be relevant to the students' courses and well-planned as such cultural learning must go beyond superficial mingling to 'the discovery and transcendence of difference through authentic experiences of cross-cultural interaction that involve real tasks and involve emotional as well as intellectual participation.' Our own participation as staff need not be expert but must be both emotional and intellectual if we are to do our students justice.

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## Student engagement and the role of feedback in learning

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### Abstract

Using an historical approach the intention of this paper is to identify from the literature better practice in feedback. Assessment is an essential element in the learning cycle, and is central to an understanding of how learning outcomes are achieved. It is through their assessments that we come to know our students, if our teaching has been successful and plays a significant role in determining the students' success. However, unlike the teaching process, assessment does not have the same dialogic element that learning and teaching now has. While feedback is a key element in formative assessment, we do not know how our feedback is understood by the learner, or what meaning they make of it. What makes good

feedback, and how do we ensure that learners can understand and act upon it? The current language of learning and teaching is underscored with the concept of student engagement with the curriculum. However, the language of assessment often remains in the realm of judgement and the way it is conveyed is clearly in the transmission model of teaching where rigidity, standards and rules stand in place of dialogue, flexibility and learner centeredness.

### Introduction

A seminal paper on feedback was published by Black & Wiliam (1998) in a special issue of *Assessment in Education*. Their research focused on formative assessment, and citing the work of