

Learning identities and *characters of studentship*: an alternative to learning styles

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Abstract

The paper argues that a focus on learning styles has obscured the complex nature of student experience and need. Drawing on broadly postmodern conceptualisations, the paper contends that contemporary identities are essentially fluid, fractured and plural. In attempting to make sense of learning experiences, therefore, an understanding of student identities as multiple, contested and situated is required. Learning identities derive in part from the dispositions of learners, but also are constructed and reconstructed within discourses of what it means to be a student. Six characters of studentship were identified during eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in a further education college. While some of these 'characters' are empowering, and can result in enriched shared learning experiences, others are inhibiting, leading to restrictive classroom encounters. The paper concludes by considering strategies for enabling more positive characters of studentship to be cultivated.

Key words: *post compulsory education, learning identities, learning styles*

Introduction

The paper makes use of data gathered during eighteen months of ethnographic research at Summerton College, an FE college in the south-west of England. While the theorisations below have been derived from data gathered in an A-level further education setting, the strategy developed to examine learning might plausibly have wider educational scope. Many educational institutions, like this case study college, have taken to adopting a 'learning styles' approach in a rather passive and uncritical manner. It is not uncommon for young people to complete an inventory and then be assigned a learning label which supposedly defines their learning 'type'. The paper contends that, although there may be benefits to such a 'neat' and structured approach, learning is a far more contested, social and fluid activity, and that a means of analysis that can deal with this complexity might prove of more use.

Not 'learning styles' but 'learning identities'

A comprehensive literature review of 'learning styles' has recently been completed by the LSRC (Coffield et al., 2004). This is largely critical of the approach, arguing that there is significant 'conceptual confusion' and 'a bedlam of contradictory claims', as well as a lack of self-criticism, reliability and validity in research (ibid). Though it argues 'learning styles' can aid students (and teachers) in recognising their own strengths and weaknesses, the review states that its present use has negligible impact on teaching and learning. What 'learning styles' literature at its best seems to tell us, is that people learn in different ways and that this

needs to be taken into account, both in classroom interactions and in developing students' self-perceptions. Yet, both seem more appropriately developed through an understanding of the wider contexts of individualised learning, rather than to fixed and abstracted learner types. As Lave and Wenger have convincingly argued:

'...learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 35)

Correspondingly, a notion of learning identities may prove more constructive. There are six reasons for this: that learning is understood as situational, as relational, as incomplete, as part of wider personal contexts, as contested and as complex. That is not to say that all 'learning styles' models possess none of these attributes. Rather, the way they have come to be used, as in Summerton College, where a student completes a questionnaire to discover what sort of learner they are, tends to cultivate an attitude (in both students and lecturers) that 'learning' is something essential and almost primordial.

Learning identities are the dispositions and the negotiated social characteristics of individuals within (and outside) educational settings. As such, they both shape and are shaped by discourses of studentship. Students bring learning dispositions with them into the classroom, and these contribute towards shaping these discourses. But these dispositions are shaped, moulded, exaggerated and confined within classroom encounters, where what it means to be a student are constructed, negotiated and maintained. Consequently, learning identities are situational: they are different in different contexts. A student who may appear (and feel) a stranger in one class may be (and feel) a pilgrim in the next, dependent on the predominance of particular studentship characters (see below). Likewise, these learning identities are relational: they are dependent on the relationships each student has with her/his fellow students and with their lecturers. Different lecturer/student relations bring about different learning identities.

What both these points mean is that learning identities are not complete or fixed: it is not that a student is a particular 'type' of learner and needs to manage their learning behaviour around that 'type'. Rather, learning identities are intensely fragile and malleable. As each student progresses through some educational pathway their approach to learning, their confidence, their own understanding of themselves as learners and the contexts of their learning alter (cf. Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001, 'learning career'). In large part, such changes result from factors outside formal learning settings. The fourth reason for adopting a notion of learning identities, therefore, points to a need to view learning as an activity that is not distinct from the individual's wider concerns and interests. Some of these may be instrumental, as in future goals or employment, but they may equally be social, relating to friendships, family or leisure activities. All of which means that learning, as opposed to the 'performativity' approach to it that many colleges seem to have adopted in recent years, is a highly complex and contested individual as well as social activity.

The complexity of learning identities

The wider contexts of learning are increasingly viewed as crucial in understanding the experiences and attitudes of the (post-compulsory) student. Since the first major 'ethnographic' study of A-level learning in further education by Aggleton (1987), theorists have explored the experiences of learners inside and outside their formal education within the sector. Today's A-level students are used to having their voices listened to: by their

parents and friends and through media representations, as well as by the industries and agencies that they interact with. As Aggleton (1987) insightfully demonstrates, students see their A-level study as simply one aspect of their wider social relations, which are complex and fast moving and which they feel they have control over. He explores the ways in which middle class A-level students emphasise and celebrate their own autonomy, individuality and their authenticity across all areas of their lives. In more recent years, a clearly identified pattern is the breakdown of a coherent and homogenous education narrative (Ball, Maguire and McCrae, 2000). As the numbers studying for A-levels rise, they argue, 'traditional' middle class 'A-levellers' have been joined by 'new' A-levellers, who may be the first in their family to study at this level.

As such, a more sophisticated and holistic approach to understanding student learning (identities) has informed much recent work, such as Palmer's (2001) work on student drop-out in FE, Kehily and Pattman's (2006) exploration of middle-class student identity-work and leisure, Foskett, Lumby and Maringe (2003) on 'fashionability' as a factor in 16-19 decision making, Richards' (2005) examination of the curriculum through his research into A-level Media Studies, Foskett, Dyke and Maringe's (2003) discussion of the impact of school on post-16 choices, and Moogan and Baron's (2003) on the multiple factors impacting on the decision making process of FE students. Of these, Kehily and Pattman's study has most parallels with the findings of this thesis (see chapter 8 for a further discussion). For example, they find that (middle-class) student cultures and identities in A-level are defined in opposition to 'the naughty ones' (who held the power while they were at school) and the 'wasters' and 'dropouts'. Students contrasted the maturity, tolerance and individuality of their sixth form study with previous schooling experiences, viewing themselves as autonomous and 'without allegiance to an identity' (2006, p. 50).

Bloomer developed the concept of 'studentship' to illustrate the ways that the students he studied 'acted upon' their learning opportunities (1996, p. 137). They were 'making through action': selecting, accepting, modifying, rejecting and supplanting their learning opportunities, depending on their 'dispositions to learning' (1996). 'Studentship' is not static: it is subject to gradual, and sometimes radical, changes, shaped by events both inside and outside educational settings. It also emphasises the capacity of students to exert agency.

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) coined the term 'learning career' to examine changing student trajectories over time, as well as students' perceptions towards study. They criticise the simplistic and static accounts of students as rational decision-makers which are prevalent in policy documents, preferring to view educational pathways as a combination of change and continuity. Students are in the process of developing an identity, whilst they are also changing as a person throughout their developing educational (and social) experiences (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001, p. 136). Although A-level routes are found to be the least fluctuating education pathways in their work, this does not mean they are unproblematic. Hodkinson and Bloomer are also critical of policy which portrays education as distinct from other aspects of a learner's life, rather conceiving of educational experiences and decision-making within the contexts of wider lifestyles, which their use of habitus enables (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999).

The stories of 16-19 students in Bloomer and Hodkinson's work indicate the extent that learning is fragmentary, contingent, unpredictable, complex, varied, and above all, individual. Any account of learning identities cannot treat 'studentship' (either collectively or individually) as a homogenous whole. One account that captures some of this diversity of studentship has been compiled by Ecclestone (2002). She identifies at least four types of student, evident in the wider further education literature. 'Pragmatists' view their qualification as a

necessary hurdle to clear in order to progress. This is viewed as the most common motivation for educational choices. 'Hangers on' are similarly instrumental, though they are more reluctant and more easily displaced from their pathways than 'pragmatists'. Like 'hangers on', 'drifters' are easily marginalized in an education system that values individual 'credentialism', yet they lack the motivation for future success that 'hangers on' possess. In contrast 'embedded' learners fully adopt and relish their studentship, enjoying good relationships with lecturers and peers and seeking high grades and subject expertise (p. 31). As Ecclestone develops an account of assessment related to student motivation and autonomy, she illustrates how students *possess elements of each of these characteristics* and that educational processes impact upon how students relate to their studies.

Characters of studentship

From fieldwork, six 'characters of studentship' were identified as constituting a studentship discourse. They reflect the range of ambiguities and ambivalences of studentship today and they are highly complex and situational: any student is likely to experience, perceive and act in accordance with a number of them in different times and places (though, from the outside, it may seem appropriate to assign a particular 'character' to each student). Moreover, these characters of studentship are relational: they are constructed and defined in relation to each other. For example, during student interviews, descriptions of what other students think and do were frequently more revealing than commentary on their own experiences and motivations. There is a clear sense of othering and it is in these accounts that the following characters are most clearly evident, indicating their use as general studentship roles, rather than a static schema describing distinct learner types.

Pilgrimage

For Bauman, the pilgrim is the epitome of modernity, in contrast with postmodernity's tourist (Bauman, 1997). The pilgrim is the social actor who knows where he or she is going. They have the idea of the solidity of the ground on which they are walking. The world of the pilgrim is orderly, predictable and coherent. They have a trajectory to follow, along a path that has been travelled many times before. The pilgrim's journey is one in which the delay of gratification, although troublesome, is an energizing factor which provides a sense of purpose. This evidently corresponds with a modernist outlook, but perhaps Bauman underestimates the attraction of the pilgrim way of life within postmodernity.

Bauman is right that the precariousness and unpredictability of postmodernity undermines the pilgrim's progress. But that does not mean that the character of the pilgrim disappears. Rather, it may result in an impulse towards odyssey but one where the ultimate destination may seem somewhat obscured. As life becomes increasingly disjointed and unpredictable, perhaps the attraction of a life-course or plan is revived. And the path towards A-level success is a pilgrimage. Arguably, the pilgrim impulse ignites all A-level students: they have come a considerable way along the educational 'pilgrimage' simply by reaching A-levels. For example, all students interviewed were evidently goal-oriented and were able to articulate their plans convincingly.

While A-levels continue to have a special place in educational attempts to build some greater predictability to the life-course, what seems less apparent today is a structured pathway that is complete and predictable. A pilgrimage is no longer a journey one takes throughout life. But what has replaced this for many is the prospect of a series of smaller pilgrimages (which can all be moving in the same direction). As such, the postmodern pilgrim may choose to undergo many shorter journeys in order to reach their final goal.

Some may complement each other while others may follow a different direction. A-level today seems to accommodate this (in the way it is managed in policy frameworks, policy provision and classroom practices). It is increasingly sliced up into smaller and more manageable chunks: the recent division of AS and A2 has meant an AS pilgrimage followed, if successful, by an A2 one. But this is not an inevitable route: students can increasingly pick and mix their routes.

Moreover, the postmodern pilgrim is aware of the complexity of the journey(s). They recognise the contingencies and complexities of their choices and pathways and this is also evident in the fractured nature of HE choices (Moogan and Baron, 2003). This pilgrim has a course to follow, but not with the singularity of purpose and direction of her/his religious counterpart. Their pathways are fractured, in part ordered and predictable (coinciding with a 'rational-choice' model), in part fluid and scattered - as portrayed in Hodgkinson and Bloomer's (2001) studentships. As such, the goals of A-level success are always present in the pilgrim's outlook, but they are mingled with other interests and concerns. While most interviewed students hoped to reach university, this was no definite teleology: their motivations were never absolute and defined, and they did not seem to view this as the 'end-goal' but rather as a new stage of a journey giving rise to new problems.

The postmodern pilgrim, therefore, is most likely to correspond with Ball et al's (2000) description of A-level student pathways. A-level study is not really a choice for many (middle class) students; it is simply what happens after their GCSEs. For them, compulsory education does not finish at 16. This perspective was clearly evident in interview and survey data. There is an educational journey, and A-level is one distinct but intrinsic part of it. That part of their role is not part of their choices or contingency, and that is what defines them as pilgrims. But the other elements of their studentship identities are far more contingent, reflected upon and fragmented. Where they study; how long it will take; what courses they take; the ways that they respond to their lecturers and so on are far less clearly laid out. And these discrepancies and idiosyncrasies may obscure their pilgrim identity, both from those around them, and even from themselves.

Tourism

For Bauman, the tourist is the ultimate character of postmodernity, with the ability to avoid being fixed to anything solid (1997). Postmodernity fragments structure and order, so that the social actor can only ever have partial and ephemeral connections with the settings they inhabit and the people they 'travel' with. Relationships, from this perspective, are attractive in so far as they do not anchor the individual: they are passing acquaintances that must be easily terminated. Permanence, constraint and immersion within relationships are facets of social spaces to be avoided within postmodernity:

'The tourist is the epitome of such avoidance. Indeed tourists worth their salt are the masters of the supreme art of melting the solids and unfixing the fixed. First of all they perform the feat of not belonging to the place they might be visiting; theirs is the miracle of being in and out of place at the same time.' (Bauman, 1997, p. 89)

As such, the tourist continuously seeks new and different experiences, needing to keep moving and 'travel light'. Relationships with others are skin deep and must not tie the tourist down so they are able to move around contingent fields whenever they wish. They participate within cultures, but they are aware that this participation is only transient and

incomplete. This is empowering to them: they can take the aspects that attract them and leave those that do not.

A-level in Further Education provides a setting in which the desires and needs of the tourist are easily met. The ambiguity identified above makes it a fragmentary and contradictory space. While other characters of studentship may be ill at ease with the divergence of their experiences, the tourist seeks such varied experiences. Their 'being in and out of' qualities mean that they have less invested in these A-level cultures and, as a result, they can enjoy the range of experiences, instead of being disconcerted by the lack of consistency. More specifically, rather than having an affiliation to one expression of teaching and learning (as the other characters are likely to have), the tourist can embrace a range of alternatives. More than the others, the tourist is influenced by the 'fashionability' of the course (Foskett, Lumby and Maringe, 2003). They study, having no real commitment to particular pathways or disciplines. They are just passing through a setting, so can take what they wish from their experiences within it.

While the tourist does not have the strong ties and affiliations of the other characters of studentship identified here (other than the stranger), this does not mean they are a solitary figure. Rather, and perhaps even more than the romantic or the consumer, they are drawn to the group and the collective experiences that the learning cultures offer them. People go on holiday not simply for new experiences, but also to meet new people. Likewise, tourist studentship is based on shared experiences that will not last but that are, nevertheless, meaningful. Students that were interviewed after they had completed their A-levels often indicated that they no longer had contact with other students who had been their close friends and this did not seem unusual or sad to them. These tourist friendships were 'A-level college friendships': situated within the settings they temporarily inhabited together.

As a character of studentship, the tourist is in danger of being (or appearing as) a dilettante. Their engagement may be/appear superficial, undependable or even fickle. They will involve themselves in classes and relationships only as far as they are stimulated. They are easily bored and move on quickly. But there is further ambivalence here. When they are stimulated, they are perhaps more engaged than the other characters of studentship. This is evident in observations and interview data. The immediate experience was clearly so important to these tourists who sought out stimulation (demanding rich learning experiences) and avoided boredom (usually through non-attendance). These characters of studentship are also more likely to take risks. They are studying for the experiences, not for an external reward or because it has been intended that they will. Their experiences exist in the presence and not as part of a wider plan. Though exam grades remain a focus for the tourist, they are not their *raison d'être*.

Consumerism

Postmodernity, arguably above all else, provides social actors with a range of alternatives and the capacity to choose between them: the metaphor of the child at the pick and mix counter is often used to illustrate the postmodern actor. Rather than having one place to buy a loaf of bread, today there are numerous choices of outlet and, within each, a wide selection of breads (or even bread-making machines) from many different cultures. The contemporary consumer has substantial choice and this both gives them a sense of empowerment and gives them real power: the consumer outlets need their business. While consumers today may have some loyalty to a particular brand name, they are more likely to 'shop around' for the best deal, the best quality, or simply to keep trying new things.

This sense of consumer freedom and power permeates the individual, such that they come to see all aspects of their lives through the eyes of a consumer. Everything becomes commodified. For example, Bauman argues that within 'liquid modernity', personal relationships are consumed and therefore disposable (Bauman, 2003): they exist as long as each partner is getting something from the relationship and when they feel they no longer are, they move on to their next one. The consumer impulse (it has become an insatiable appetite as Marx had predicted it would 150 years previously) is manifested in the repeated questioning, 'What am I getting from this?' and 'Where can I get a better deal/product?'

Like the tourist, therefore, the consumer has the capacity to be detached and flexible. Whereas tourists have little invested in the settings in which they find themselves (though not to the extent of the 'stranger'), consumers are deeply involved in theirs. While the tourist is, in effect, a consumer of experience (of place and culture), the consumer makes use of a service (an education) and a product (a qualification). What makes them distinct, therefore, is their ambivalent attachment/detachment mindset: at the same time they have much invested in their settings in addition to the continual eagerness to seek out more favourable alternatives. Though the tourist may be critical, therefore, it is the consumer who is likely to move elsewhere: they are much less likely to be satisfied.

Consumer studentship, therefore, is simultaneously empowered and dissatisfied. This character of studentship will complain to the lecturer if the group is disruptive, to their tutor if they are not happy with their lecturer, to the local paper if they feel the college is letting them down. They will change groups, drop courses and even move college. More than any of the other characters of studentship noted here, therefore, the consumer is individualised. Like the rush of shoppers in the January sales, they are on their own, looking for the best deals, and in direct competition with everyone else.

The ultimate commodity of further education is the A-level exam grade, so it is this that stimulates the consumer character. This 'motivation by external reward' is the driving force for many students: it is the main focus of their activity and their reason for studying. This is clearly evident in the questionnaire data, with 'gaining grades for university' identified as a main reason to study by all. In fact, this response was three times more popular as the top reason than the next for both AS and A2 students. Like the pilgrim on one side and the reactionary on the other, the consumer has exam success as their central target. For them, their concern is in how best to gain their grades, as well as in which grades are of more value to them. For example, if Key Skills is not recognised by universities, there is no point in doing it. Therefore, although the consumer is driven by an impulse (as noted above), their behaviour is quite rational: they seek the best routes to personal success.

Romanticism

A further group of well-recognised characters of postmodernity are romantics. Their existence is responsible for the recent growth in complementary medicines and organic produce, as well as emergent localised and humanitarian movements (Harvey, 2000). The ambiguity of postmodernity generates the romantic by challenging the established order and offering the prospect of autonomy. For the romantic, the fragmentation of modernist constraints (of relations, of legitimate knowledge and of roles) is liberating and enriching. The romantic embraces choice, democratic classroom relations and the relativity of knowledge that postmodernity initiates. More than any of the other characters of studentship, they are studying for the sake of learning, rather than for instrumental purposes or external reward. Although the prevalence of this character may be representative of a relatively small number of students, it is one that is highly visible: many of the students view

themselves, at least in part, in this way (as reflected in interview and survey data). For example, during interviews all participants could recount enthusiastically positive classroom experiences, in which they described the learning process rather than the impact on their knowledge. Likewise, the most common survey responses to the question of best A-level experiences, referred to class discussion, debates and activities 'when everyone joins in'.

Like the early-modern romantics, the A-level romantic character is an ambivalent social actor: she/he possesses contradictory individualised and communal sentiments. They enjoy the discursive session and the group dynamic; they fully participate in teaching and learning cultures and feel dissatisfied in classes where the lecturer dominates, though they are unlikely to partake in less attractive forms of study (like essay writing or exam revision): like Aggleton's students, there is a tendency for romanticism about their individual talent shining through regardless of whether they do any work or not (1987). They want to engage in the free exchange of ideas that the classes of the fieldwork usually offer. As individuals though, their experiences and developments are extremely personal. Their social self is a result of 'puissance' (Maffesoli, 1996), the desire to be together and belong. But this attachment is 'neo-tribal' (ibid), in that it exists in so far as it enriches the individual. Like the consumer, therefore, the romantic only has attachment to the learning cultures in a partial way: it continues as long as it is not restrictive to them.

It is perhaps most clear in the case of the romantic that these six characters of studentship are not distinct. It was particularly evident during interviews that a romantic thread connected many of the students who chose to participate in the fieldwork. But this sentiment was very often associated with the voice of the stranger as well. Many students considered they were detached from their peers, in their reasons for study, what they take from their studies, and their perspectives on the purposes of education. They felt that their romantic outlook distanced them from other students and was unusual within the FE A-level cultures to which they belonged. As such, they may retreat from certain classroom activities that conflict with their personal values and practices. In a wider sense, romantics define themselves in their opposition to markets, to industry, to science and so on. Similarly, the A-level romantic resists the pressures of instrumentalism and finds pleasure in the exploration of ideas. Unlike other characters of studentship, they perceive increasing examinations as restrictive to their learning experiences.

Estrangement

It is from Bauman again that the next character gets her/his name, though the stranger is a much written about inhabitant of postmodernity (Bauman, 1991). For Bauman, the stranger is capable of being 'physically close while remaining spiritually remote' (Bauman, 1991 p. 60). He uses the concept of the stranger to demonstrate that 'sociality' consists of belonging to more than one category: always ambivalent, contingent, inconsistent and indeterminate. Accordingly, for Bauman, the social can only define itself against its strangers. If all inhabitants of the classroom were strangers, then there would be no shared learning experience. This is why, for Bauman, the stranger is more dangerous to 'sociality' than any enemy of it (and in it) could be.

The stranger can be characterised by his/her detachment/alooofness from the values and practices of A-level. While the other characters all participate in the A-level cultures, the stranger is apart. Although the character of the stranger is present, she or he does not bring anything of themselves to the classroom. They may participate in discussions, exam preparation, group work and so on, but only in partial and detached ways. This character is

less likely to be explicitly critical due to the perception that they can impact very little on the cultures and that the cultures can have little impact on them.

The stranger is an outsider in the classroom where the lecturer maintains a strict sense of authority and where classroom relations are more democratic and equal. In this sense, the character is structured around detachment. It is defined by non-involvement and disengagement. Of the interviewed students, Bobby most clearly articulates the qualities of this character. He defined himself in relation to the internet music company he runs, viewing his A-level study as 'something that has to be done'. He did not want to be involved in class activities, while, at the same time being critical of the authoritarian approach of some of his teachers, especially his Business Studies lecturer. Although he was observed participating in class discussions, he admitted to temporary involvement in topics that interested him, but that his general approach was to 'turn up' and 'get by without drawing attention to myself'.

The prominence of the stranger character is both enabling and constraining to a student's learning identity. The stranger takes refuge in estrangement, but also resents the rules it imposes on their behaviour. When a stranger contributes, the sense of involvement in a topic/group/idea overrides their detachment. That may be why these contributions are often so insightful. After an event like this, the student may recede back into this character or may increasingly have involvement in the class (by emphasising alternative characters). In other words, it may be a momentary disjuncture, or it may be like the releasing of a cork after which engagement flows.

Reactionism

The reactionary seeks certainty, especially when it is most evidently challenged. To this character of studentship, the ambiguity of the A-level teaching and learning site is both unsettling to them and a source of prevalence. This character needs to feel that transitions are predictable and coherent, and that there are rules to be regarded. The role and status of the A-level student needs to be clearly and unequivocally defined, much as they feel it had been at school. For example, unlike the first four of the characters above who enjoy the college cultures more than the school (for different reasons), the reactionary is disconcerted. They seek security and the ambiguity of college as something between school and university causes discomfort to them.

As such, any lecturer attempting to embrace learning cultures in postmodernity must face a backlash from the character of the reactionary. That is, acknowledging the relativity and situativity of knowledge and relationships, the lecturer is likely to experience some resistance. By opening up the classroom to competing perspectives, and by adopting an approach to lecturer/student relations akin to a 'senior buddy', the lecturer heightens the ambiguity of the setting. What is very common, according to the Sociology, Psychology and English classes observed, is student ambivalence to the lack of a single, correct answer.

The lack of right/wrong and lecturer/student demarcations, characteristic of these postmodern teaching and learning sites, is a source of engagement for the first four student types. But, whereas the stranger is detached from this site whatever its particular practices are, the reactionary impact on learning identity is undermining. They react with hostility to choice, to relativity, to openness and to equity of lecturer/student relations. The reactionary will be heard uttering phrases such as, 'Why don't you just tell us the answer?', 'If we do it, it will take ages and you will have to give us the answers afterwards anyway' and 'How do we write this in an exam?'. Therefore, while the stranger may say 'What is the point?' and mean

the point of studying an issue itself, the reactionary will mean the point if there is no agreed answer.

As the above quotes indicate, the character of the reactionary is a conservative force in the classroom: an ally of the authoritarian lecturer and the antithesis of the romantic student. The reactionary does not want to go out and find the answers for themselves, they do not like class discussions and they want sessions to be tightly ordered, managed and controlled: from the lecturers' point of view, it appears as if the reactionary does not want to do the thinking for themselves. For example, in interviews after observations, lecturers were most frequently critical of some students need for 'safety nets' and to have the answers given to them 'on a plate'.

Most particularly, the reactionary character seemed inhibited by the absence of order, predictability and certainty. They seek these qualities in their educational experiences and, without alternatives, the exam becomes their constant and their goal. Survey data supported the claim that students wanted their lecturers to provide clear frameworks and instruction. Without this, the exam is the one thing they could know: they know when it is, what it will look like, what it is for, what happens from it, and so on. Therefore, they are likely to frame their experiences and their behaviour accordingly. During classroom observations, it was noted on three separate occasions that students directed their lecturers onto discussions more closely related to their exams.

Table 1: A-level 'characters of studentship'

	Educational values	Classroom behaviour	Most empowered in class by...	Most disempowered in class by...
Pilgrim	Education is a distinct but intrinsic part of their educational pathway	Enthusiastic and participating. A concern with moving forward	A sense of personal progress. Small targets that explicitly relate to whole	A lack of direction / instruction from lecturer and/or group
Tourist	Education is a place to go and to gain experiences: to meet people	Optimistic and light. Involved in ideas that are interesting, detached when bored	Engaging classroom experiences / learning new things. Stimulation	Being told what to do and being talked at. Class not to wider experiences
Consumer	Education provide a service that needs to be of a high standard	Strong presence. Likely to complain if dissatisfied	Choices Feeling they are receiving quality educational experiences	Feeling like they do not have control over their experiences
Romantic	Education is about personal development, enrichment and sociality – freedom	Keen to participate and relate to wider personal experiences	Exploratory discussion, personal study, relating to lecturer personally	Having rules imposed on them. Too centred on exam preparation
	Education is	Detached and	Being given	Being left

Stranger	something to do, but has little meaning or impact	disengaged. Unwilling to participate in class or group work	the possibility to be involved. Personal or peer tutoring	detached for long period. No attempt made to aid inclusion
Reactionary	Education is about passing targets and success	Focused on exam preparation. Wants lecturer in control of time/class/plan	Being given clear guidelines, instructions and targets	Classwork perceived as disordered and/or not focused on exam prep.

Conclusions – Some suggestions for practice

The types of characters of studentship that prevail in a student's learning identity depend on the settings. Learning identities are manifestly different in different settings. Their ambivalence can make them feel empowered and connected in some settings, detached and isolated in others. Dominance of particular characters of studentship can be both action-making and inhibiting, prompting both neo-tribalism and privatisation. So the presents of a particular character might have a positive or negative impact on a student's learning identity. Though a continuum of hopeful and fearful characters of studentship is somewhat over simplistic, there is a sense that each character is more or less hopeful.

Particular types of learning experience encourage particular characters to thrive – not only within a student but also collectively. For instance, one class observed during fieldwork had become dominated by a consumer studentship character, and the breakdown of trust had led to severely inhibited and distrustful learning cultures to emerge, as students feared for (and complained about) the quality of the service they were receiving. In particular, strategies that encourage the characters of the pilgrim, romantic and tourist will result in more positive learning identities and shared classroom experiences. There seem to be a number of teaching practices that might help develop these characters:

- *Developing a range of explicit individual and collective goals to aim towards.* While pilgrims need targets, romantics and tourists need their positivity to be given direction. The fears that raise the presence of reactionary and consumer characters, that classes have little focus or direction, won't exist.
- *Being optimistic.* The overtly disenchanting lecturer (or student) is so inhibiting to the development of hopeful learning cultures and identities. Students and lecturers need to feel (and demonstrate) that their shared experiences are worthwhile and valued: that their hard work has meaning, impact and purpose.
- *Developing classroom relations based on warmth not distance.* A level of symmetry/congruence between student and lecturer encourages positive experiences and provides a setting where estrangement is least likely to develop. But this doesn't entail a total loss of the demarcation between roles – in such a setting the reactionary character will flourish. Thus, as Harkin has argued, 'The relationship should be neither "that fear and contempt which

used to stalk school corridors” nor “the casualness which implies there is no distinction in role between teachers and students” (Harkin, 1998, p. 5).

- *Offering a balance between structure and freedom.* Pilgrims need structure to provide them with hope, while the negativity of reactionaries and consumers spring from the fears of fluidity and change. But too much structure will alienate the tourist and the romantic by imposing constraints and restrictions on experience. There needs to be the space for experimentation and independence, as well as the flexibility and unpredictability of the organic, yet these need to take place within fixed and defined parameters. Where freedom is cultivated, its value needs to be made very clear.

The central purpose of this analysis is to emphasise that learning and the construction, negotiation and maintenance of positive learning identities are experiential and developmental processes. The focus must be on the *activity* of learning, rather than on the outcomes of it – especially in the form of external rewards such as exam grades. Assigning fixed learner types seems to fit more closely with the latter of these, whereas an emphasis on the fluid, fractured and incomplete nature of the person as learner allies itself more closely the former.

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