

From bearers of problems to bearers of culture: Developing community in the community development classroom

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International Students and the Massification of Education

In recent decades, higher education has been transformed globally by two key trends: massification and the global knowledge economy (Altbach, 2013). As access has increased to ever larger portions of the population, the higher education system has been transformed from an elite education experience to a 'mass participation system' (Teaching and Educational Development Institute, 2001, p. 4). Altbach (2013) observes a key part of this 'massification' of education is the increasing emphasis upon non-traditional learners (particularly older individuals) and international students. A mixture of global student mobility and decreasing state funding of education, has meant that Western universities are under increasing pressure to recruit students from non-western, non-English speaking backgrounds (Zeegers & Barron, 2008).

While there are numerous systemic issues associated with massification, including declining standards, lowered conditions, and a move from education as public good to private commodity (see, for example, Guri-Rosenblit, Šebková & Teichler,

2007; Rossi, 2010; Shin & Harman, 2009), the focus of this paper is on the experience of those in the classroom. For many non-traditional and international students their experience of the new educational context is one marked by a pervading sense of anonymity, vulnerability and feeling overwhelmed (Teaching and Educational Development Institute, 2001). For traditional students there are also challenges as the pace of learning slows to accommodate different levels of academic preparation and language barriers. For teachers, increasing diversification requires new ways of supporting students – and student learning (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). In such circumstances it is easy to see non-traditional learners – particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds – as the bearers of problems, for their peers, their teachers and for themselves. This is what is known as the “deficit discourse”, whereby differences are defined as deficiencies and students are blamed for lacking the requisite skills (Lawrence, 2005). The New London Group (1996, p.72) argues that such deficit discourses involve ‘writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture’ (1996, p. 72). They argue that what is needed is to recognise cultural diversity and for teaching and curriculum to engage with students’ own experiences and discourses in education. Increasing diversity in the classroom is not merely a means of increasing access to higher education for greater numbers of students, but also as a means of fostering students' academic and social growth (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002).

While this ideal seems straightforward, translating this ideal into classroom practice is more complex, particularly given some of the accompanying symptoms of massification including declining public funding, increasing class sizes and new delivery modes. And as Haslerig et al (2013) argue, the mere presence of diversity does not necessarily educe benefits.

Thus the question posed in this paper is how, as educators, we can help shift the perception of students as ‘bearers of problems’ to ‘bearers of culture’ (The Higher Education Academy, 2012). As we attempt to respond to the demands of this new educational context, how might we not only appreciate but actively use diversity to build student support and maximise learning? Utilising an approach known as ‘collective narrative practice’ this research project examines the use of personal story in the higher education classroom as a means of building community in the classroom. In doing so it takes up the challenge of Haslerig et al to ‘activate’ diversity (2013).

The Classroom Experience

Part of the landscape of higher education, at least in Australia, the UK and USA is the growth of the graduate skills agenda, and the adoption by universities of ‘graduate attributes’ (Green, Hammer & Star, 2009). These so-called lifelong or generic capabilities and skills are considered necessary to facilitate the development of capable global citizens in the new knowledge society and era of ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000). It is beyond the scope of this article to engage with debates about the composition of these attributes, or indeed their usefulness and attainability (see for example, Barnett, 2012). However, what is worth noting is that these attributes are imbued with values about the role and purpose of education and the relationship of the individual to society. Graduate attributes such as independence and creativity, effective communication, critical judgement, ethical and social understanding, while deemed to be generic, are mediated by culture and context (Barrie, 2006). For example, in my own postgraduate teaching, problem-solving and independence means students are expected to use their initiative, to go beyond given resources and to find additional resources to support their learning. Effective communication means engaging in discussions and

asking questions. Yet what becomes evident is that at least for some students, problem solving appears to mean waiting for the correct answer to a problem to be provided, effective communication is about listening carefully to the lecturer and independence means working – and potentially suffering – alone.

. Rather than a failure on part of student or lecturer, these differences in expectations and assumptions represent pedagogical differences, language barriers, and heightened vulnerability. The temptation is to blame students or teachers rather than understand how educational structures have moulded particular behaviours.

At first glance, the dilemma appears to rest in a conflict between what is espoused in the classroom and students' prior experience of education. The active presence of past experiences is far more powerful in determining behaviour than the explicit norms and formal rules of a situation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994). And as Sawir (2005) explains, many international students have been schooled in more passive styles of learning than is the norm in some Australian higher education classrooms. Wong (2004) argues that many international students (and indeed one could argue – many domestic students) are accustomed to a didactic and teacher-centred environment with less classroom conversation, and hence find it difficult to make the transition from passive to active learning modes. In certain cultures arguing or asking for help are interpreted as weakness and loss of face (Wu, 2010) or as a waste of valuable class time (Chalmers & Volet, 1997). Although students can see that these interpretations differ from the liberal and Socratic based pedagogy espoused in some Australian tertiary classrooms, 'our inherited cultural practices are difficult to alter' (Hellstén, 2002, p. 10).

The theory of 'structuration' provides a more optimistic view on this dilemma (Giddens, 1984). Through this lens, structure, as contained in culture, language and

tradition, is reproduced by individuals repeating acts. However, while acknowledged as powerful, students' educational histories are not seen as immovable. Rather, structures can be changed by people ignoring them, replacing them or reproducing them differently. Researchers of this persuasion argue that the extent to which international students strategically adjust their learning and study strategies to the Australian context is under-recognised (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Biggs, 2012). This has been borne out in the work of Hellstén (2002) who argues that while there is a difference between Australian domestic and international students, it is one of experience not ability, and that international students are actually curious about alternative learning styles and show motivation to master these new ways of engaging. Studies of approaches to learning show that there are few differences between international and Australian students in their overall approach (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). Rather than an inability to participate or an innate passivity on the part of international students, it is actually compounding stress factors such as feelings of inadequacy about English language competency and culture shock that hinder interaction in public settings (Hellstén, 2002; Sawir, 2005). And it appears that stress factors are the norm for the majority of students – let alone those with the additional challenges of international study.

In her studies into psychological distress in university students, Stallman (2010) reveals that the vast majority of university students (83.9%) reported elevated distress levels, which is significantly greater than that found in the general population (29%) suggesting that university students are a very high-risk population for mental health problems. So while students may claim active participation, as Schön (1983) explains, the capacity of people to reflect on the difference between what they believe about themselves and what they actually do is inhibited by the context they are in. This is

exacerbated when the situation is uncertain and when expectations are unclear – which is a good descriptor of many educational experiences! Thus as Biggs reflects, the difference between international and domestic student challenges is one of degree not kind (2012).

In response to these findings, solutions have been posed in the form of decreasing the gap between experience and expectations (Berno & Ward, 2002, cited in Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008), raising accepted levels of English language proficiency, as measured by IELTS tests scores (Feast 2002), the provision of more culturally appropriate student services (Burns, 1991), the need for a population health approach to student wellbeing (Stallman, 2010) and better professional development for teachers (Leask & Carroll, 2011). Such solutions appear to correspond with what Biggs refers to as management rather than facilitation of learning (2012). They locate the source of the problem within the broader system or the teacher or student; with the former offering minimal agency for the teacher and the latter residing in a debilitating deficit model of human interaction. An even more cautionary note is sounded by Chalmers and Volet who observe that ‘when the “problem” is attributed to the students, teachers can avoid examining their own attitudes and practices’ (1997, p. 96).

Alternatively, it is argued that by focusing upon students’ activities rather than their fixed characteristics, teachers are able to respond to larger and more diversified classes (Biggs, 2012). If students’ seeming reluctance to actively engage with other students is understood not as a personal trait or as a fixed cultural attribute, but instead understood as a by-product of cultural shock and social isolation (Sümer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008), then this moves potential solutions from institutional responses to seeking change in student interaction in the classroom. Such responses could include the creation of safe spaces for students to interact with native English speakers to practice

communication skills. For example, programs such as peer-pairing have been shown to increase language fluency and confidence (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994, cited in Chalmers & Volet, 1997). Responses could also include maximising many international students' preference for collectivism, through small group discussion (Haslerig et al, 2013; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). Additional time for preparation of answers (Chalmers & Volet, 1997), and multiple forms of participation (Biggs, 2012), might also be embraced. In trying to make the learning experience more personalised, the teacher may focus on creating personalised student-to-student experiences, such as establishing student-to-student buzz groups and feedback mechanisms (TEDI, 2003, p. 4). Thus the focus is on the creation of a 'strong container' (Lakey, 2010, p. 15) for learning and support – rather than for the teacher to position themselves as the main source of learning and support. In this way the focus moves from reforming students' so-called 'passive' behaviour, to restructuring classroom activities, and repositioning the teacher role from expert or rescuer to facilitator.

Strategies such as these are not about denying difference or homogenising the learning experience. Indeed Lakey (2010) distinguishes between the need for safety and a desire for comfort. According to Lakey, learning requires discomfort. However learning also requires a sense of safety: 'most participants want to be safe so they can be themselves. Their own deep learning goals can't be reached from a place of pretence. They need a strong container to do their best work, to feel proud of themselves, and to experience their power' (Lakey, 2010, p. 14). It is this strong sense of safety that the massification of education undermines.

Responses to Massification

Thus the change sought is not simply shifting behaviour at the level of the individual student, but transforming the context of learning so that seeking and providing collaborative responses to learning challenges are more likely. Aimed at both domestic and international students, such an approach would foster what Freire calls ‘the invention of unity in diversity’ (1994, p.157). The shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning is now well understood as a means to deepen learning and create rich and meaningful learning experiences (Harden & Crosby, 2000; Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010). However this paper argues that the new educational context requires a move beyond this individualistic and potentially isolating idea of learning to a community-centred response. A more sophisticated and structured process is required to move beyond superficial interactions to explore, acknowledge, document, and share the strengths both partners bring to the relationship. Thus what is required is a shift in classroom culture.

The shift in perspective named through this literature review is vital to creating a constructive starting point. It is not a denial of difference, but instead it refocuses teaching on students’ interest and ability in making this transition. Concentrating upon what the students do rather than who they are assumed to be, or the constraints of the institutional context, leads to a conception of greater agency on the part of both students and teachers, and creates a more useful starting point for intervention. Such a distinction is also compatible with more recent understandings of community.

Everyday understandings of community, underpinned by modernist assumptions, describe community as a noun: a place or thing, something which can be built, lost or destroyed. They are often accompanied by romanticised and utopian community myths (Smith, 1996). Rose (1997) concludes that imagining community as

a three-dimensional space, with a centre and a margin fundamentally structures exclusion. In contrast, Burkett (2001) holds that community is a verb. It is not an object, but an ongoing process (or many ongoing processes). This accords with recent constructions of community as dialogue (Westoby & Dowling, 2013). Drawing heavily upon the work of philosopher Martin Buber, community is understood as being created in moments where people turns towards the other with an attitude of authentic encounter, are 'deeply present' to each other and reach for understanding (p. 23). 'It is a third space where neither party to the dialogue gives up their own point of view and yet both experience the other as a whole' (Westoby & Dowling 2013, p. 23). This holistic and humanising vision sits in stark contrast to the dominant rational and separatist views of the world which distinguish between the subject-knowers and object-known. It moves understanding from community as a place, or even mutual activity, to an act of communion. It is this postmodernist revisioning of community that is employed within this paper: community as an act of creating meaning (Burkett, 2001, p. 239).

To encourage this shift, a specific process known as collective narrative practice, was employed in the present study. As Mort et al articulate, 'by enabling learners to be co-constructors of narratives, narrative-centred learning environments can promote the deep, connection-building meaning-making activities that define constructivist learning' (1999, p. 80).

A Learning Intervention: Collective Narrative Practice in the Classroom

Denborough (2008) observes that people experiencing hardship are often seen to be requiring help, healing, therapy, counselling or psychosocial support. It is also presumed that this help is to be provided through professional services. Collective narrative practice is an alternative to this thinking. It holds that what may be more

useful is the creation of a context in which individuals and communities enduring hard times can make contributions to the lives of others who are going through similar difficulties (Denborough et al, 2006). This makes it particularly useful for the present context. At the same time, while collective narrative practices have been used widely to address trauma, the use of narrative approaches within the 'realms of living side-by-side' have not been significantly developed (Denborough, 2012, p. 150), which provides a second impetus for this approach.

Narrative practice is a qualitative research approach located within the interpretist research paradigm (Dulwich Centre Publications, 2004). The aim in interpretive research is not to predefine independent variables and dependent variables, but to acknowledge context and seek to 'understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them' (Klein & Myers, 1999, p. 69). The challenge in any educational intervention is the inability to hold variables constant and to isolate the impact of an intervention. For this reason a narrative approach is relevant as the focus is not on cause and effect, but on the complexity of human sense making as the situation emerges (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994).

The strength of this approach is that it elicits thick description (Geertz, 1973). As Denzin observes, thick description 'does more than record what a person is doing...It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another' (1989, p. 83). However in doing so, it encounters the main limitation of the narrative approach which involves the challenges of collecting, analysing and telling of individual stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Who owns a story, who can tell it, and who can change it are questions about power and authority

which makes addressing ethics a vital part of this learning intervention, as will be explored further in this article.

The word ‘narrative’ refers to the emphasis that is placed upon the stories of people’s lives and the differences that can be made through particular tellings and retellings of these stories. Narrative approaches involve ways of understanding the stories of people’s lives, and ways of collaboratively re-authoring these stories (Denborough, 2008). To do this it is necessary to listen for what is called ‘double-storied testimony’, which means listening to the same story for two different things at the same time. Listening to one side of a narrative or testimony might elicit stories of social suffering, including the effects of suffering and loss, the ongoing injustice of suffering and loss, and the obstacles that continue to keep alive the suffering. In contrast listening to the ‘second’ story enables stories of response and sustenance to be heard. Listening for second stories reveals not only acts of resistance the person is taking but also ways in which the person may be taking steps to protect, care for, and assist others (Denborough, 2008).

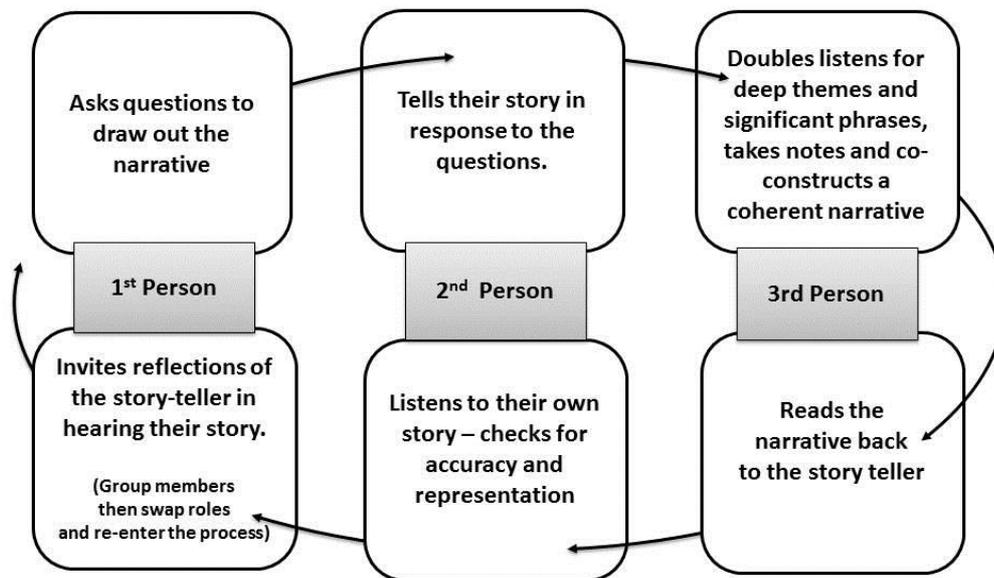
Method

The site of this study is a postgraduate community development (CD) class within development practice studies, in an Australian university. The program – and hence this class – is characterised by its diversity. Of the 75 students enrolled, students range in age from 21 to 57 with an average age of 30 years. The majority of students (n=43, 57%) are international students. Of these 43 international students 32 (42% of the class) arrived in Australia in 2012 and 26 (35%) arrived at the start of the semester. This means that nearly half the class may have limited familiarity with Australian systems, the education environment, and may be struggling with language and cultural

changes, as well as economic, diet, and accommodation stress. These create cultural barriers and isolation long before students enter the classroom (Hellstén, 2002; Sawir, 2005). These factors, alongside the mass education system, create enormous barriers to student participation and interpersonal connection. In addition, there is only one staff member allocated to the course, which minimises the amount of individual attention that students may receive.

The starting point for the research was to invite students to share their experiences of learning and the stories, values, and histories connected to these skills and knowledges (Denborough, 2008). This occurred in class time, in Week 1 of the course before students had begun to know each other. Small groups were constructed by the lecturer to maximise cultural and linguistic diversity. Students took turns in the roles of interviewer, story-teller, and note-taker. Utilising the questions below, the interviewer elicited a story from the story-teller, while the note-taker listened to the exchange, and developed a written version of the story. This written version was then read back to the story-teller to verify the account, to elicit insight and feedback, and to collaboratively refine and finalise the transcript. The process they undertook is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The creation of personal narratives



The role of collective narrative practice in community development was first explored theoretically with students and a practical activity was explained. Students were then provided with both written and verbal details of this research prior to the commencement of the collective narrative practice activity. The activity formed part of the curriculum, so all students participated in the activity, to learn and practice the skills. However only those narratives by students who granted written permission for their use in the study, were submitted to the lecturer for inclusion in the research. Thirty-two of the 75 students gave formal consent for their written narrative to be used in this study.

Of greatest ethical concern in this process was the recognition that the researcher is also the lecturer and marker of students' work and this may be perceived by students as pressure to participate in the project. To guard against this it was made clear that the exercise was not tied to assessment in any way. A second concern was that participants

would distort their experiences to what they believed the lecturer-researcher wanted to hear. To safeguard against this the lecturer-researcher did not actually conduct interviews. The students interviewed each other and checked and corrected their transcripts privately so that they could make any changes they wanted before submitting them to the project. Furthermore, the methodology provided anonymity; while the interviews were individual, transcripts could be de-identified before submission, and the final narrative was collective. This addresses the issues of authority and power raised above. The study received formal ethical clearance from the university prior to the start of semester.

Students used the following questions as the starting point for the process:

1. What is one thing that you value about learning?
2. Can you share a story of a time when you learnt something that brought you pleasure/satisfaction - and that involved this value that you have named?
3. Can you share a story about the history of this value in your life – who did you learn it from/with, where?
4. Who would be least surprised to know about this?
5. Is this linked to any collective traditions/ practices?

These questions are based on the method for gathering rich material, developed by Denborough (2008). He suggests starting with skill, locating the skill within story, embedding the story in history and linking to the collective. He argues that these four themes encourage material to be “more richly collective” and “more clearly linked to cultural contexts” (p. 29).

Individual transcripts were collected and the lecturer-researcher compiled these into a collective narrative.¹ In the third workshop the lecturer shared this with the class and invited students to respond and to challenge and affirm the collective narrative. This movement from the personal to the collective is central to the collective narrative process and understood as the means by which shared identity is developed. The construction and reading of the narrative assists a movement from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, with students constructing and listening to their own content and meaning making. However it does not stop at the narrative. The process is reflexive. Students are invited to respond both publicly (in small and large group discussions) as well as privately (in written form), Narratives are exchanged back and forth between our past and present selves, and between us and others (Couldry, 2010). It is this process that creates the further movement from student-centred to community-centred learning. As Couldry observes, “this process is not accidental but necessary: humans have a *desire* to narrate...a desire to make sense of their lives” (2010, p. 8). Denborough (2008) notes that a central part of the crafting of documents is that they must leave space for diversity. “Through these forms of collective documentation, it is important that people experience a sense of commonalities and simultaneously become more aware of differences” (p. 38).

In its favour, collective narrative practice has the advantage of being not only highly relevant as *content* to the curriculum of an international community development course but as a *process* it also provides a means of direct intervention, as well as a method of gathering data and part of the evaluation strategy. It is also a rigorous process in that the participants are positioned as co-researchers and interpreters of the data. This allows the assumptions of the researcher to be challenged. While collective narrative

¹ See Denborough 2008 for specific details on the collective narrative construction process.

practice has been used widely in intercultural work (see for example, Denborough, 2011; MacLeod, Olsen, Ghulam, Al Ansari, 2011) where this work departs from Denborough's research is the application within higher education and to look at the interplay of culture and story within the classroom. While collective narrative practice is growing in popularity as a developmental method, its use as a research method is relatively new. This article therefore also contributes to new thinking about research methodologies in community development.

To move this work beyond community practice and into research, an additional layer of analysis has been added, beyond the classroom. The commonalities and differences identified by students, as well as their observations on both process and content, were analysed thematically to enable a more critical engagement, by the author, of the narrative process. The following section shares the collective narrative that was read aloud in class², before turning to a discussion on what this means for both students and teachers in engaging with cultural diversity.

The Narratives

We are a group of student-practitioners, here in Brisbane, to pursue postgraduate study. We come from 29 different countries, from all around the world, and together we have 19 different first languages. Despite differences in culture and background we share an interest in furthering our understanding and practice of community development. Today we met to talk about our experiences of learning. Here is some of what we said.

² As per Denborough's (2008) guidelines, given that English is not a first language for the majority of students, in some places grammar and punctuation have been altered slightly to ensure accurate communication.

Learning is fun

For me the value of learning is making fun. My mother always said, 'You don't have to study, but if you do it is fun!' There is one specific event: when my father taught me how to use chopsticks. I was five years old. He would hold me here, on his lap. He gave me two pens and he tried to show me how to hold them and how to move my fingers. And it was fun for me; it was learning how to use chopsticks, but also how to use a pen. He taught me two things at the same time. He tried to move my hand. He showed me and I did it. Then he took away one chopstick and said, 'this is how you use a pen'. I learnt both at the one time. My memory of learning is related to this interaction with my father: the interaction and finding a new thing. In Japan, usually children are told to be hard workers, to study hard. But my mum told me only to do things I can feel fun. While the father is traditionally 'the most important', the mother takes care of the children very very much – so the relationship is very strong and they listen to their mothers.

Creating my path

I was five years old, there were no kindergartens, and my neighbours were going to school and I was not. I was not allowed to go to school because of my age. So my mum went to talk to the teacher 'My daughter is crying every day – her neighbours go to school and she can't. Let her go to class – just let her. Don't count her in the class'. I sat at the back, did classwork and everything. At the end of the year I had the best mark of the class. My mum was surprised. Everyone was surprised. This led me to university, although in my country, it is not popular for girls to go to university. After this story they knew I could go far. I was proud because I knew I was smart!

Learning through relationships

I value learning something that is practical and of use in everyday life. I would call this 'practical learning'. I learnt cooking from my Grandma last summer, who is very good at cooking and this experience brought me immense pleasure and satisfaction. Since my Grandma is getting old I thought it would be good to learn some of her traditional Norwegian recipes, which are mostly used on special occasions like birthdays. Svele was one of the recipes that I was particularly interested in learning since I enjoy eating it. It is kind of similar to muffins or pancakes, but not as sweet. My grandma also enjoyed the quality time she got to spend with me while teaching me her methods.

Out of my comfort zone

I went to the city to study. I was fifteen years old and away from my family for the first time. It was difficult for my family to visit me – they lived eight hours away and the road was not good. I was in a dormitory, with no private room, out of my comfort zone, struggling, away from my loving, caring family. I invited my parents to visit me – I just wanted to see them to get their support. My mother wrote to me and said 'Life is a long journey. And we will not always be beside you. There will be many times both good and difficult that you have to go through alone'. I was encouraged by the letter, and the idea that I will always have positive and negative times, and that maybe my parents won't ever be there. But the letter made me strong enough to face my exams and further my life.

Turning point in my life

When I finished high school, I moved from the provinces to the city. I studied at university, learning 'education'. After some time though, I volunteered at an organisation. They did project management and development projects. I translated documents at this organisation. After maybe six months, I applied for an internship at the organisation. However, the organisation offered me a job. That was in 2007. I was happy to be offered a job, even though I hadn't studied for it at university. They said that because I knew how the organisation worked and I had been volunteering there, I got the job. While I volunteered, my supervisor would explain the concepts behind the documents I was translating. As a child I wanted to get involved in development. Everyone was surprised when I got the job – except my supervisor.

Learning of the strength within myself

I had been in East Timor for three months. One night a Timorese man came into my bedroom and fell on me whilst I was sleeping. He put a machete on my neck and covered my mouth so I could not scream. Once he got his balance, he climbed back off my window and took my mobile and camera. It was scary but I hadn't been there long enough to know that robbery was not common in East Timor. When I told my parents about what happened they became scared and asked me if I would come home or stay there. Although something bad had happened I wanted to stay. The people in my village thought I would go home and were very upset that this had happened to me. I thought, if I stay, I could show that I believed in them as a community. I wanted to stay, understand and learn why this happened to me because apparently it was not normal. So I gained the satisfaction and pleasure of knowing that robbery does not always happen and it does not

represent the behaviour of the Timorese. I learnt about the strength I had within myself to push through the ordeal but more importantly, if I had left, I would have left with a negative view of Timor-Leste and would not have discovered the incredible and positive aspects of Timor and learnt to love its people through their strengths and inabilities, nor learnt the true reasons behind why one person would behave the way he did. Now when I think of East Timor, it is never of that incident, but because I stayed, it is of love and friendship!

Learning is like a tree

I feel like learning is like a tree that has to grow. So the more we learn the more we grow. My previous experience of learning was just copy and paste and not critical thinking. Once I started studying in Australia my ideas changed. Now I think critically not like parrots. I think learning also makes you liberal. It is important if you think you are liberal because it's not about just getting a degree or good jobs. Learning is about extending your knowledge and perceptions. These perceptions let us learn the other side of the stories, different sides of things. Sometimes we think what we have learnt is 100% good but perceptions of other people provide us insights, just as from little things big things grow.

I will share the idea of being liberal and critical when I go back home. I faced the cultural shock when I came here and will face similar shock when I go back home. In Laos perceptions about learning in general, especially for women are narrow. I would not be able to change everything when I go back but will share my ideas that I have learned.

'Helping muted voices to be voiceful': Responses to the Collective Narrative

In the next class the narratives were read aloud by randomly selected class members. People responded with murmurs, nods, smiles and laughter upon hearing the stories. Students were then invited to reflect upon the narratives and the process of hearing other people's stories and also invited to submit their written responses to the project. Again, this was anonymous and voluntary.

Of those students who chose to share their responses, their comments were overwhelmingly positive. As one student said, *'I feel compassion for other members of the class and respect for their struggles to learn'*. This captures the idea of double-storied testimony; people could hear the second story. Words such as *'bravery'* and *'courage'* were used as well as admiration for the willingness of people to share. Curiosity was another response mentioned by four participants, *'I would like to respond to these stories with questions. I have become interested in each story and am intrigued to gain more information from each person'*. Others responded with their own narratives.

The most frequent response was the idea of *'connection'*. As one student explained, *'I feel more connected to other members of the class – even anonymously'*. People spoke of *'being in the same boat'*, and the *'common threads'*, that were woven through the stories. They also expressed surprise at the amount of connection they felt: *'I was quite surprise when I heard the stories from my classmates about learning today. Because when I heard the stories, I feel like my experiences are read out loud'*.

Another participant saw this movement as an invitation to become a partner in a process rather than a mere recipient – and equated this with a positive approach to development. This speaks to the concerns of power raised in the methodology above. In a similar way collective narrative practice was understood as a means by which more

marginalised people could be heard and for *'muted voices to be voiceful'*. This is important as it means that the exercise was successful at multiple levels of learning. Students were able to reflect upon the personal experience as well as fulfil the learning goal, which was to develop a skill for their own practice beyond the classroom. They were able to connect their personal and local experiences with global practice.

It appears that the process of hearing the narratives and identifying the commonalities across the class enabled a movement from the 'I' to the 'we' that is vital to community development work (Buber, 1947/2002). One student names this experience of connection as the difference between being in 'society' versus being part of a 'community': *'I was in the society, but not actually positively put myself into a community before'*. Another participant explained this experience by saying,

'It was interesting to hear the diverse backgrounds of the students in the class and the kinds of experiences they have had. It also reinforced the commonalities – all the stories showed a passion for learning, some to the point of overcoming traumatic events or societal expectations. It made me feel a strong sense of camaraderie, that we are all here because we are passionate and want to make a difference in our world'.

Thus it appears that hearing stories can be a means of awakening consciousness: it named the experience for participants differently and in doing so, enabled them to see themselves as other than who they were (White 2005). Participants appeared to be more reflexive about their own learning processes. As the above participant goes on to say,

'It is not that I thought differently beforehand, but that I hadn't really thought of us as a cohesive group until then'.

However it is not merely the act of hearing stories that creates this movement and sense of solidarity. As Burkett's (2001) definition of community reveals, the processes for the collecting and telling of stories are vital. Meyerhoff (1982) refers to the initial re-telling of stories as 'outsider witnessing': a means by which storytellers are able to publicly define themselves and be witnessed for it. Outsider-witness practices challenge the isolating and individualising effects of problems and create acknowledgement and authentication (Carey & Russell, 2003). This telling and witnessing of stories is captured eloquently by one student who said,

'Because the recording of the stories was done in small groups and the stories were read out by different people, it allowed more detail and more intimacy than we would hear if someone was asked to speak to the class directly. It feels that this process is actually more honest, and makes the audience focus on the words and the story, not on the appearance or gender or age or background of the person telling it. It allows the audience to connect far more with someone's experience because of the detail and the emotion evident in the words'.

The process of outsider witnessing is different from other forms of receiving stories which see story as performance and require judgement or applause. Rather, outsider witnesses engage each other in dialogue about what was heard and what response the narrative elicited for them (White, 2005). People are a witness, which implies more than a passive audience role.

'When I listened to the story called Learning is Fun, I accidentally think that the owner of this story is a Western student. This is because the way that her mother teaches her is so independent and liberal, plus the reader of this story was Australian. However, the truth is that the story's owner was Japanese. This

proves that I let stereotypes influence my thoughts. After this lesson, when I think about this I always laugh to myself and warn myself to not to make too many assumptions about things. This Japanese friend gave me the real lesson!

As Douglass notes, the act of witnessing unsettles the boundaries between speaker and audience (2003). The process invites all participants to move ‘in that it contributes to options for them to be become other than who they were’ (White, 2005, p. 16). The following response reflects this individual movement in the outsider-witness:

‘Before today workshop, I always thought my personal experience is unique, and it’s just applied for myself only. Especially for fellow who comes from another culture, it is definitely no common things between us. So personal stories if have been told, are just something to entertain other people, but not actually helpful for them. This thought made me hardly share my private stories or problem/difficulties with anyone. However, at the workshop, after experiencing how those stories made me happy when I thought about my childhood, or how it make me feel safe inside the community that have not only one but several people share the same experiences, and appreciate the same values...Now, I have confidence not only to share my personal stories, both good one and bad one, because if I share my stories, there will be someone in the community have experienced that in some ways, and may be my experiences will helpful with other people.’

This student demonstrates a shift from understanding stories as performance – with an accompanying reluctance to personally share – to an awareness of the personal effect of hearing stories from others and the contribution of hearing stories to his or her own

growing sense of safety. In turn the student acknowledges the potential of his or her own story to assist others in a similar way. This speaks to Denborough's fundamental theme in CNP; the opportunity to contribute to others can actually be an enabling and strengthening act.

'I think this process makes people who heard the stories feel very engaged, especially some who have the similar experiences feel happy, strong, and safe because they can see many other people/or a small community have experience the same thing... The goal of sharing memories is not to find the solution or lesson but to feel the strength of community and it is a good way for people to be confident and move forwards.'

The discussion to date suggests that gentle collaborative experiences, like collective narrative practice, may help reduce the stress experienced by ALL students, including those from non-English speaking backgrounds. The formal CNP practice within the classroom opens doors to ongoing relationships and the continual building of trust. As one student observed,

'Maybe this is the learning! A wonderful idea that we do not just study together and work on our [group assessment] but also make strong relations and be good friends to learn more informally. Keeping this in mind we four girls agreed on having a get-together in one of our houses. We went there and had dinner together and learnt a lot about our cultures, current affairs and our hopes and ambitions.'

Processes that encourage an authentic sharing of experience also set up the classroom to maximise the positive aspects of diversity and to encourage the students to

open themselves up to each other in genuine dialogue. By concentrating upon what students do and how they learn, rather than who they are assumed to be, the perception of students can be shifted from 'bearers of problems' to 'bearers of culture'. Such a shift is not only an asset to a course on international community development, but enables both students and lecturer to see all class members as resilient, capable, and resourceful.

As the qualitative feedback above demonstrates, the majority of students who chose to participate and share their responses reported the exercise to be an overwhelmingly positive one that shifted their perceptions – not only of their classmates – but also of themselves. It lends strong support for structuration theory and the idea that students may be shaped by cultural experience yet remain open to new ways of learning. However it should be noted that not all students responded positively to the exercise. From this positive interpretation of findings the final section of this article will now turn to a more critical analysis.

Dissonant Voices

The first point of concern is that of the 75 students, less than half of all students chose to participate in the research and to share their narratives (n = 32). As discussed earlier, students' habitus is ever present, and this includes the experience of power exercised in the classroom. Despite the precautions undertaken to protect students' identity, it is likely that some students excluded themselves from the study due to fear of retribution or a concern about how their information might be used by the teacher or institution. The deliberate timing of the exercise for Week 1 – prior to the establishment of trusting relationships – meant that norms of reciprocity, engagement and trust had not been developed. The lack of response may also reflect a lack of

connection with the exercise or a lack of understanding. Students may have been unclear as to its purpose or not understood what was required.

What is of particular interest is that while the *content* of the collective narrative went unchallenged when shared, the collective narrative *process* was not always embraced. As one student commented,

'Perhaps the narrative exercise is eluding my grasp although as an anthropologist I understand its use and I was excited by it. I couldn't relate to tonight's questions and felt frustrated to not be able to do something'.

An additional issue is that some students struggled to express a depth of thought in English, and needed more time to refine their response. The responses received from students are not necessarily an accurate reflection of their thinking. What appears as a relatively simple response to content, such as the comment, *'Individuals have different phases to learn'*, may actually be a reflection of limited English expression. As one student explained *'As you know, English is the biggest challenge facing international students'* [email correspondence, postgraduate international student 17 October 2012]. It is not that students do not comprehend or have no response, but rather that some students may lack the linguistic skills to quickly and easily capture the complexity of their more meaningful ideas.

What is even more interesting for the present research agenda is understanding the limits of the collective narrative practice process. The first is the limit of time and the slow developmental processes need to build the strong containers of trust in a group that Lakey (2010) speaks of. Without attending to this, the deep learning that might be possible is compromised. Yet attention to group process, while providing deep learning

for students in and of itself, also comes at the expense of formal content. Thus, as teachers, we need to use the formal mechanisms of our higher education system to legitimise the time spent in this way. In the context of a mass participation education system attention to positive group processes becomes a central part of the education experience rather than an optional add-on. This is not a matter of simply placing students into groups but requires skills for the facilitator and ongoing investment and support.

The second thing to note is that while these experiences may provide students with greater connection, and for some, a sense of community, it is not a substitute for teacher support. The massification of the education system is accompanied by the corporatisation of the education system and the moulding of students into consumers of education (Molesworth, Nixon, & Sculion, 2009). This raises expectations of service from teachers, without necessarily accompanying resources to meet these heightened expectations.

This article has wrestled with the forces of structure and agency. On one hand it seeks to maximise teachers' agency in the face of overwhelming structures. Yet these external influences cannot be simply argued away. Such forces have very real consequences that shape and limit what can occur in the classroom. For example, the market discourses, which accompany the construction of student as consumer, privilege individual choice and flexibility. Yet such choice assumes students are able to scaffold their learning appropriately. Programs that privilege choice and generic transferable skills may come at the expense of depth of knowledge. The loosening of degree structures sacrifice opportunities for more peer supports across a program, while the wider diversity of students means that some common core knowledge or experience

cannot be assumed within a class. All of this adds pressure to curriculum content and reduces opportunities for developing the kind of classroom culture that might better aid learning in a diversified, flexible and mass-oriented learning context. The insights gleaned from this study suggest the need to temper the overly simplistic call to acknowledge diversity (New London Group, 1996). Diversity in age, language and culture, educational levels, modes of learning and pedagogical expectations all require different responses and supports.

Finally the issue of language skill cannot be ignored. There is no question that studying in another language adds an extraordinary degree of difficulty and complexity and institutions need to be very careful they are not setting students up to fail.

Postgraduate study assumes an ability to grapple with multifarious and complex ideas and postgraduate students from all cultures often have extremely high expectations of themselves and their educational experiences and outcomes. But there are limits to the capacity of thoughtful classroom activities and innovative group processes to overcome basic literacy and language proficiency issues. The consequence is that teachers become not only facilitators of processes for learning within their own subject areas but spend time translating and supporting basic English language development. Furthermore, at a pedagogical level and as Jonas (2010) observes, if teachers become overly concerned about students' wellbeing they may avoid challenging their students to ensure that their learning is smooth and comfortable.

Conclusion

This article has focused upon the telling and receiving of stories of learning as a means of building unity in diversity. Utilising collective narrative practice as a classroom intervention it has sought to create a means for students to overcome a sense

of isolation by contributing positively to the lives of others. In this way it has encouraged students to enact community in the classroom. In doing so it has served as an illustration of one way of shifting the deficits discourse that surrounds international students.

However, as the more critical analysis above has shown, thoughtful processes and innovative classroom interventions are not a simple solution to the complex structural forces that shape the current higher educational context. Not all diversity is a point for unity and without adequate supports, the careful creation of learning communities is easily undermined. The individual experience of education and the institutional context of competition can crowd out the classroom experience in terms of influencing behaviour in any sustained way. Furthermore, while part of this research agenda is to enhance the agency of teachers, the dilemmas created by the massification of education will not be solved by simply transferring the deficit discourse from student to teacher.

This analysis demonstrates that classroom innovations, such as Collective Narrative Practice, can create a more welcoming environment and collaborative opportunities and can help shape students' constructions of each other in more positive ways. However there are limits to the influence of a single course in shaping student behaviour. For some students this process may also require more time and a greater degree of trust than the classroom experience can enable.

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