

***Learning Experiences of Libyan Master's Students at a UK University:
Learning as Social Participation in Multicultural Class***

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The European Conference on Education 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper addresses the learning experiences of Libyan students studying master's courses in different disciplines at a UK University. It uses community of practice theory as a framework to highlight the significance of the knowledge and skills that are developed through social interaction with colleagues and tutors within the master's community. The aim of the research was to explore the nature of the interaction between Libyan students and their international and Libyan colleagues. The study was qualitative and interpretive and employed semi-structured interviews and observations to explore the perceptions of the Libyan student sample. Data analysis was done manually and presented according to apriori and emergent themes. The findings reveal that there is limited engagement between Libyan students themselves owing to tribal loyalties and political divisiveness that relate to the effects of the civil war and ongoing conflict within Libya. However, the findings also indicate that this prompts Libyan students in multicultural classes to create new communities of practice and an interaction and shared activity with international colleagues to acquire aspects of intercultural communicative competence and complementary contribution that nevertheless constitute a positive learning environment.

Key words: Libya, international students, intercultural interaction, community of social participation.

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Introduction

Most of the studies about the experiences of international students have problematized a stereotypical representation of their challenges (Ryan and Viète, 2009). Although some research adopts in-depth qualitative research to investigate international students' learning experiences, it has tended to focus on a deficient model, for example, Chinese students and their cultural learning styles (Doherty and Singh, 2005; Gill, 2007). Little has been documented about what is involved in the process that international students undergo to adapt to a new academic environment, although there has been awareness of the challenges that they face and their need for support (Tran, 2011). Thomas, 2007 (cited in Thomas and Sanderson, 2009, p. 7) highlights the lack of academic evidence in the previous literature about the experiences of postgraduate students, particularly the nature of the interaction amongst students from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding the nature of the interaction between Libyan students and their colleagues and tutors in shared practices and the effect of that on learning is significant in order to have a complete picture of the student experience.

Literature review

International students tend to belong to three social networks: 1) they may maintain their cultural behaviour within co-national network; 2) they may have interactions with host people who might facilitate academic success and from whom skills could be learnt, and 3) they may also have friendship with students from other cultures who might offer mutual support and social activities. These are classified as 'mono-cultural', 'bi-cultural' and 'multi-cultural' networks respectively (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). Each of the three are significant in different ways in assisting international students to overcome challenges and achieve success (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman, 2008). This study examines the nature of the interaction between Libyan students and their colleagues (other Libyans and international students) and its effects on their learning.

Maundeni (2001) and Fontaine, Gao, and Narui (2010) demonstrate that social support is a powerful coping strategy for international students, owing to the fact that interpersonal communication with family, friends, home students and other international students plays an essential role in reducing stress and facilitating students' adjustment. Maundeni states: "Communication with flatmates and host families facilitated their adjustment as they provided support in the form of information and companionship" (Maundeni, 2001, p.265). However, Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) have found that when international students are faced with an educational problem, they are likely to seek help from academic staff such as tutors. They further argue that "quality relationships with faculty [...] can provide a strong protective function against the development of depression in international students" (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992, p. 76). The interaction between international students and their tutors has the potential to enhance students' understanding of the requirements of their course and to facilitate their adaptation (Tran, 2011). The study considers the nature of the interaction Libyan students have with their tutors and the effects of that interaction on their learning and adaptation to their master's course.

Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000, p. 292) notes that a co-national network (colleagues and friends from the same nationality) assists international students to reduce stress

and enhance psychological adjustment. Social support from students of the same culture can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation (Furnham and Alibhai (1985, cited in Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000, p. 291). Moreover, Maundeni (2001) and Fontaine, Gao, and Narui (2010) demonstrate that by communicating with their families and friends from their home country, students receive emotional and spiritual support, such as consolation, encouragement and advice. Furthermore, Pitts states:

Within co-national network, sojourns are able to refine and create new expectations for study abroad through everyday talk. This process reduces expectation gaps enabling sojourners to adjust over time.

(Pitts, 2009, p.450)

It can be inferred that interaction on a regular basis with colleagues from the same nationality provides solidarity and assists students to adjust to their new academic environment. Overseas students, it seems are likely to prefer friends from the same culture (Zhou et al., 2008, p.70). Similarly, Lee (2009) points out that it is common for international students from the same cultural background on the same course to have regular interaction. This is because they are likely to meet outside the classroom in other social interactions. This study suggests; however, this is not the case for Libyan students because the Libyan context with its complexity and tensions adversely affects the relationship between Libyan nationals even outside the country.

Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer, and Lee (2011) state that when international students adapt to a new socio-cultural context, they may choose either to integrate with the host culture and its people or to separate themselves from them. Those who have difficulty in integration with a host people and their culture tend to experience “differentiation” and own identity as a “foreigner” rather than as “temporary member” of the host country (Pedersen et al., 2011, p.883). Experiences of differentiation from a host culture may lead to a feeling of exclusion, loss of comfort, and identity confusion, whereas identification with the host culture leads to success integration and cultural awareness (Pedersen et al., 2011, p.883). The investigation explores whether Libyan students are able to integrate with their international colleagues within their master’s community as temporary members of the academic community and/or how they differentiate themselves. This study also examines the role of the social network in assisting adaptation and adjustment to the new culture of teaching and learning and the sociocultural context. During acculturation, individuals might choose either to “withdraw” from the host country or to “change in an individual” in order to decrease conflict and increase “congruence” between the host environment and an individual (Navara and James, 2002, p.696). Little research has been conducted comparing one group’s degree of acculturation to another. It seems reasonable to assume that different groups will perceive a host culture in an alternative ways. Understanding how Libyan students adapt to the academic environment and the socio-cultural context is important for understanding their acculturation.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study examining the learning experiences of Libyan students, their perceptions, perspectives, expectations and aspirations in the UK HE system. Case study is defined as “an inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries

between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.18). It can be inferred that the case study aims to describe and explore an event or phenomenon in depth and in its natural context. Stake (1995, p.3) characterised two main types of case study: “intrinsic and instrumental case study”. For the purpose of this study, intrinsic case study has been chosen because of the significance of the case. Crowe, Robertson, Huby, Avery, and Sheikh state that “The case is selected because of its uniqueness, which is of genuine interest to the researchers” (Crowe et al. 2011, p.5). This research forms a case study because it focuses on Libyan students. As a case, they represent a group of people seeking higher educational experiences, but coming from a country that has experienced civil war and is experiencing ongoing conflict. Libyan students comprise a case, but within that case, there are narratives and strands that comprise the different disciplines and individual experiences.

The purposive sample was selected according to the following criteria: they are full-time Libyan students, studying master’s taught courses in a Yorkshire university (pseudonym) in different disciplines (Education, Humanities, Computing and Engineering, Applied Science, and Business) in order to compare and contrast any differences that might emerge in their perspectives or perceptions. They all obtained Bachelor’s degrees from their home country before coming to the UK and this is their first time studying in the west. They also volunteered to participate in the study. However, they are different in terms of age, gender, starting dates of their master’s courses and they are from different cities in Libya. Thirty students completed the questionnaire, of these: four males and nine females were interviewed three times and observed in class. The number was reviewed after the first phase of research process in order to ensure there is sufficiency and appropriately rich data.

Ethical issues

These students had experienced civil war and came from a country where there is ongoing conflict. The ethical issues permission, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and sensitivity were paramount (BERA, 2011).

Data generation

Semi-structured interviews

There are three types of interviews, they are: “structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews” (Robson, 2011, p.278). In this study, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were the main source of a significant data because Libyan students were interviewed over a period of time: in the first semester, in the middle, and during the dissertation stage in order to monitor change and development during their educational experience. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this study because allowed flexibility and responsiveness by which a participant might supply additional information stimulated by the situation and, in doing so, develop her or his thinking. Semi-structured interviews also give an opportunity to follow up the interviewees’ answers and to ask for clarification or to probe unexpected responses (Kvale, 2007).

The questions in the first phase focused on initial thoughts and feelings, students’ motivation, their attitudes to the UK HE system, expectations, challenges and academic and socio-cultural adjustments. The questions in the second stage of interviews which were conducted during the next semester were intended to evaluate

their course experience; what they had learnt; what is the most academic challenging skill. They considered settling into life at the university, their experience of classroom activities, their perceptions and opinions about their learning experience in the UK, and relationship with their tutors and colleagues. The questions in the third phase of interviewing were more focused on their thoughts and perceptions about going home, what they might feel they could contribute to the new Libya after an overseas experience and how they had developed. Sensitive questions about the civil war and ongoing conflict in Libya were raised at the end after the participants had answered neutral questions, and a rapport and trust had been established through the research process.

Interviews can be face-to-face, one-one interview, group interview, and internet interview (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.28). In the present study, all the interviews were one-to-one and face-to-face because they have the potential to provide an opportunity to listen to the interviewees' voices and to view facial expressions, and physical responses which might be significant (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). On each occasion, the interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted in a university tutorial room which is quiet and comfortable place that tended to encourage informal interaction.

Observations

Some Libyan students in the various and separate master's classes were observed during a number of two hours taught sessions in the first and the second semesters. The observations include: 1) the nature of the interaction between Libyan students and their colleagues (international and Libyan colleagues) and tutors and 2) Libyan students' participation in classroom activities such as discussion and group work. Observation offers an opportunity to gather first-hand classroom data, rather than asking the participants or relying on second-hand data (Robson, 2011). Furthermore, observation can be a supplementary and supportive method to the interview which explores the impact of context (Robson, 2011, p.317). The aims are to develop a relationship with participants and have the possibility of sharing an experience with them to see the impact of the context on them.

There are different roles that researchers adopt in the natural setting: "Complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-a participant, and complete observer" (Robson, 2011, 318). In this study, the complete observer role was implemented.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done manually and undertaken through identification of themes and codes, which provided an in-depth understanding of the issues being explored. The data was initially collected in Arabic, and then subsequently translated and transcribed. Thematic analysis and its five steps were followed: 1) familiarisation with data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; and 5) defining and naming themes (Braun and Clark, 2006, p.87).

Findings and Discussion

Developing intercultural communication competence

The findings suggest that some students such as Nora, Khaled, Sara, Omar, Ghada and Amina felt that being part of multicultural class and having interaction with different nationalities assisted them in developing aspects of intercultural

communication competence (ICC). Nora, for example, explained how her experience in Libya and her experience in the UK were different:

I studied in Libya with some students from Palestine and Sudan, but I viewed them as second class. My relationship with them was formal; greeting and that is it. In the UK, I met and interacted with Kurdish, Japanese and Chinese students, and this was the first time. This helped me to get rid of negative views towards others. Studying with international students is fantastic. We always interact with each other and exchange ideas and thoughts in groups in the lecture, we respect each other, although we are different in nationality and religion. (Nora, Applied Science, interview 3)

It was clear that in Libya, Nora did not have much opportunity to meet or to interact with many other international students. Libya is underdeveloped country and at a time of civil war, and, ongoing conflict, few international students chose Libya as a destination for study. Although Nora had an opportunity to study with students from neighbouring Arab countries in Libya, her comment reveals prejudice as she stereotyped them and had limited interaction with them. There would have been few opportunities for shared activity since the Libyan education system is teacher-centred. Working with others helps students to accept differences (Thomas and Sanderson, 2009). However, Nora's experience in the UK is different because she was a member of a dynamic multicultural classroom. Her comment reveals mutual engagement between herself and her international colleagues because they interact regularly in shared activity.

According to Wenger (1998), mutual engagement requires regular interaction because members negotiate meaning of their practice on a regular basis. It appears that the mutuality between Nora and her international colleagues assisted Nora to develop respect towards people from other cultures and to acquire two essential components of intercultural communication competence, becoming more open-minded and being empathic towards others. Intercultural interaction affects the relationship within in-groups and out-groups (Yue and Li, 2012). It could be that because she was herself an international student in the UK, she learnt the meaning of being an international student. It appears that she learnt ways of engaging with others and she developed certain expectations about how people treat and work together. Nora's view is consistent with the view of Leki (2001), who pointed out that the collaboration and mutual engagement help to undermine and eradicate stereotypes about other cultures. Intercultural interaction assists the production of new ideas that may be different from the ideas that already present within either one of them (Evanoff, 2006). Lave and Wenger (1991) recognise the impact of learning as social participation in shared practice on one's competence (Fuller et al., 2005, p.66), but they do not elaborate. In the context of this study, Nora developed two aspects of intercultural communication competence (ICC): becoming more open-minded and being empathic towards others.

Nora's situation endorses Williams (2005) who suggested that students who study abroad have enhanced intercultural communication skills (i.e. open-mindedness, empathy) owing to their exposure to different cultures. This change is significant for all international students because the ICC enables individuals to live and work effectively with those from different cultural backgrounds. ICC facilitates

intercultural adaptation because developing an intercultural mind-set extends students' possibilities and their view of the world (Masgoret, 2006). Wenger (1998) has argued that diversity is a matter of homogeneity which makes engagement in practice possible and productive. However, his argument about diversity is that a community of practice includes young and old, conservative and liberal members. They see each other daily; they work together; they talk with each other, they exchange opinion and information together, and they affect each other's understanding. He does not elaborate further to discuss diversity in terms of old-timers and newcomers who come from different cultural backgrounds and the influence of their intercultural interaction on their competence. In the context of this study, the data indicated that Nora developed essential aspects of intercultural communication competence because of her membership in the master's community and mutual engagement with international colleagues. Yet, for the Libyan students in this study the engagement did not seem to extend to people within their own country, which will be explained in relation to the emergent theme 'The Consequences of the Civil War and Ongoing Conflict'.

Complementary contribution

The majority of the participants indicated that they learnt through social interaction and participation in shared practice with international students (mid-newcomers) and tutors (dominant old-timers) in a situated context. For example, Laila, who was struggling with the "Designing Websites" module that required specialist knowledge of language programs, reported that working in group with mid-newcomers was significant:

The international students, with whom I worked, already had expertise, so I learnt a lot from them. Group work is helpful because a student might give an idea that you might not pick up in the lecture and in turn you might have an idea that others do not share. Thus, we complete each other. (Laila, Computing and Engineering, interview 2)

Laila's comment illustrates the advantages of learning as social participation in shared practice with international colleagues within her master's community. Her view confirms that of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Colley, James, Tedder and Dimen (2003) that learning as process of social participation enabling newcomers to learn from more experienced colleagues. Laila emphasised the value of group work activity, which was "complementary contributions" (Wenger, 1998, p.76) because all members within her group complemented each other's competence, and learnt from each other rather than each member trying to know everything by him or herself. This is in line with Wenger (1998, p.152) "our competence gains its value through its very partiality [...] It is a certain way of being part of a whole through mutual engagement".

Learning does not only depend on the ability of an individual, but it depends on the abilities of others in a community of practice (Hammersley, 2005, p.6). Arguably, mutual engagement involves both a student's competence and the competence of others in order to contribute to the knowledge of other members within the community. Therefore, even for a group coming, as Libyans do from conflicted background in all its complexity, the fact that Laila could say working with the other students 'we complete each other' was significant. She was

actually talking about international students rather than the whole group, but it was very powerful statement. Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas of old-timers are not involved and the newcomers are perhaps developing an independent community of practice. She continued:

We spent most breaks together and involved in discussions. We learn together and we become friends. We visit each other in occasions and we are always in touch. (Laila, Computing and Engineering, interview 2)

Laila perceived informal meetings within the group and interaction on regular basis (i.e. mutual engagement) were part of her learning as well as being sustained and social. Askill-Williams and Lawson (2005) point out classroom activities such as discussion increase students' motivation; however, there is limited evidence in the previous literature so far about communicative practices that assist international students to adjust and adapt to a new academic environment. Lave and Wenger (1991) make clear that learners learn by building social relations with others through their 'co-participation' in shared practices (Fuller, 2007, p.19). For Laila, the attainment of a level of informality helped her to build a relationship with her colleagues. This confirms Wenger's (1998) view that mutual engagement is the basis for building the relationships essential for a community of practice.

When people from different cultural backgrounds negotiate meaning of their practices with each other, mutual engagement can be achieved (Berry, 2005). It was clear that mutual engagement between Laila and her international colleagues was beneficial to learning for all of them as members of the same master's community because the daily routine of interaction with her peers assisted Laila to construct knowledge and to develop relationships. Encouraging students to develop their learning through collaboration and interaction supports their academic success and equips them for lifelong learning (Skalicky and Brown, 2009). This might be because cooperative learning provides a supportive learning environment and scaffolded learning for newcomers and is a developmental process. However, it is noteworthy that Laila did not only learn through social participation and mutual engagement with her international colleagues, she also learnt individually and independently.

The Consequences of the Civil War and Ongoing Conflict

Avoidance of Contact and Limited Integration

The majority of Libyan students indicated that the interaction between them and their Libyan colleagues was limited because they were on opposing sides politically and tribally during the civil war. Despite a shared experience of conflict, differences emerged from those who were in opposition. Sara, for example, reported:

When I interacted with my Libyan colleagues who were anti-Gaddafi, we started fighting. Therefore, I prefer not to speak to them. (Sara, Education, interview 2)

Sara's comment illustrates that she was pro-Gaddafi and, therefore, she isolated herself from those who had different affiliations in order to avoid confrontation. Prior to the conflict, tribal and political differences were not overtly significant,

rather groups of Libyan students tended simply to divide on a gender basis for cultural reasons. Sara appreciated mutual engagement and interaction with home and international colleagues rather than the Libyans within her master's community:

I prefer to join the international students or British students rather than other Libyans. I don't want problems. I sat with my classmates from Britain, China, Poland, and Spain in the library in the break times. We study together, we always discuss together. (Sara, Education, interview 3)

Nora revealed her own personal tragedy:

Sadly, the situation that I now saw depressed me; nothing new in Libya. The situation was worse than before. 'How nice to remember that palmy days!' My brother was killed because of the retaliation (cry and silence). (Nora, Education, interview 3)

Nora expressed her sadness and disappointment because despite the conflict and loss, she did not observe any progress since the fall of the old regime. It felt like her brother had died in vain. She even now inclined towards Gaddafi's rule for security and safety reasons. Her comments revealed the extent of loss and trauma in a situation where there is widespread use of weapons. However, even, in the UK, Nora was fearful of her compatriots. Her previous experience had adversely affected her socialisation with Libyan colleagues within the master's community:

When you told me that you were Libyan, I was fearful of you and you must have been scared of me, weren't you, weren't you? I prefer not to interact with any Libyans. (Nora, Education, interview 3)

Only Omar said that:

I have two Libyan colleagues and, if I have any inquiry, I ask them. I feel they are able to understand me speaking in Arabic better than others. I never ever ask them about their political affiliation. I do not want to deepen my relationship with them. I do not have confidence in them. (Omar, Computing and Engineering, interview 2)

Omar maintained a relationship with Libyan colleagues to some extent because he was diplomatic and subtle. For him, it was better to seek assistance from Libyans because they had a lot in common, such as the same language, a similar background and a shared education system. However, his comment revealed that his relationship with his Libyan colleagues was very superficial, and it did not reach a level of integration and mutual engagement owing to lack of trust. During the conflict, Libyans were divided by their allegiances, and this created a climate of distrust between individuals. Clearly, this political divisiveness is something that is interesting and significant, though not necessarily unique. Libya as a country is new to political divisiveness and with its tribal loyalties, political ideology contributes to the current volatility of Libyan society. The findings of this study were different from the findings of previous studies about the experiences of international students such as (Lee, 2009; Maundeni, 2001; Fontaine et al., 2010; Pitts, 2009).

Conclusion

The presence of Libyan students as a case from civil war and ongoing conflict in multicultural classroom and their social interaction in shared activity with international colleagues is significant in terms of their learning and the acquisition of intercultural communication competence. Furthermore, since there was little integration and mutual engagement between Libyan students and their fellow Libyans owing to the consequences of the civil war and ongoing conflict, this made them seek others with whom to interact.

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