CHAPTER 3

MAKING SENSE OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENT LIFE TRANSITIONS AS ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS

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Introduction

Substantial research exists on the first-year student experience in the United Kingdom. As Palmer, O’Kane and Owens suggest, the research shows that this aspect of student life is now viewed as a high-priority research area, ‘not least because of the significant consequences of student attrition and failure upon university reputations and finances’ (2009:37). A significant amount of quantitative data, in the form of questionnaires and surveys, has provided insights into important and emerging issues of student retention, assessment and feedback on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The methodology underpinning much of this research, however, offers limited understandings of how and in what ways students actually live, breathe and embody the first-year experience. Even where questionnaire design offers a free form response, such research tends to reflect and reinforce ‘top down’ policy and institutional concerns of quality assurance and accountability. The ways that students *experience* the student experience are, in effect, circumscribed by the inclination of contemporary universities to categorise students as learners, citizens, colleagues, consumers and partners (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007:679).

This paper builds on social anthropological expertise and insight to illustrate the extent to which the methodology at the heart of a research project can inform pedagogic theory. Specifically, we highlight the ways in which an ethnographic approach to understandings of the first-year student experience offers fresh theoretical and empirical insights into student transitions. This chapter reflects on the initial research findings of the Student Experience Project in terms of empirical research data. The Student Experience Project represents an important example of GENIE’s pedagogic project work at the University of Leicester. GENIE (Genetics Education Networking

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

for Innovation and Excellence) is a genetics education Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) located within the Department of Genetics at the University. The project currently involves two cohorts of undergraduate students located within the School of Biological Sciences. The students have been provided with portable, hand-held video cameras, which they use to submit video diaries to the research team. The video diary data is complemented by the involvement of the same students in focus groups.

Ethnography and the first-year student experience

Ethnography may have its epistemological roots in sociology and especially social anthropology (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), but professionals in a variety of educational settings are now using it as a research method. The recent emergence of an international peer-reviewed journal, *Ethnography and Education*, reflects the extent to which ethnography is now viewed as a valid basis for pedagogic inquiry.

With funding and time constraints in mind, questions arise as to whether this methodology is suited to studies in and of education. Anthropologists in particular are adept at defending their disciplinary territory by critiquing the contemporary use of what is variously termed as 'fast-food,' 'drive-by' or 'para-' ethnography (Holmes & Marcus, 2006). A particular strength of the Student Experience Project, however, is that it abides by a traditional anthropological principle, which suggests that good quality research can only be achieved by spending a significant amount of time with people in the 'field' (Marcus, 2007). In this sense, the project surpasses conventional expectations within anthropology of conducting research for perhaps a year or eighteen months. Indeed, it is hoped that students involved in the project will commit to providing insights into the various social, academic and transitional experiences of their lives for the duration of the three to four years spent at university.

The regular submission of video diaries by students, in turn, offers three particular strengths in our attempts to enhance our understanding of the first-year student experience. Firstly, this approach offers insights into the student experience *from the perspective of students*. This emphasis on a student rather than a managerial-side focus on experiences and transitions (Palmer, O'Kane & Owens, 2009:39) is increasingly valued by researchers such as Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005). This approach is also valued by some students on the project. As one female student put it at the start of the project, 'It's really cool that we can actually send in these videos and it's like us being heard 'cos first years at university are normally never listened to.' The use of video cameras, therefore, allows students to reflect on the student experience on their own terms and in ways that are not compromised by managers and policy-makers and their concerns over, 'the attrition problem' (Palmer *et al.*, 2009:39).

Secondly, by creating through the time and times spent in the key social and symbolic spaces of 'home' and 'university' (Holdsworth, 2006) the students offer nuanced insights into the various and ongoing transitions in their lives *as they are actually happening*. We are able to capture the often emotive feelings and perceptions of students in the 'here and now' of thinking about revision, of waiting for a demanding

first semester to end, of being at home during holidays, and so forth. This use of video cameras offers insights into the student experience that are not easily captured by research methods located in a specific time and place. An attempt through interviews to ask students to reflect on the passing of their first year at university, for example, is compromised by significant methodological flaws. In the field of oral history it is well established that memory is constructed and distorted by concerns of the moment (Portelli, 2006). The use of video diary data also illustrates the extent to which students experience different and often contradictory thoughts and feelings at different points in a given academic year. This raises further questions about the validity of 'single response' data, which we suggest offers only partial insight into the shifting complexities of student worldviews.

Finally, the use of portable video cameras provides a basis to transcend the assumption that, 'because students are *at* university they sit inside or are located *within* the university boundaries' (Palmer *et al.*, 2009:40). This assumption about social and spatial boundaries, we argue, circumscribes the ability of researchers to fully explore questions and issues of transition, belonging and retention. By providing the students with portable video cameras, the Student Experience Project gains access and insight into the multiple sites, spaces and sources of being and belonging in their lives. Through this visual ethnography in and of movement (Pink, 2007) we are able to understand how students build, re-build and sustain attachments to people, places and other sources of being and identity in ways that are not simply defined by their connections to university and university life. In this sense, the video footage has provided rich data of students at 'home,' visiting their 'home' friends at other universities, being in concerts and nightclubs, attending student church events in other cities and taking part in voluntary schemes.

To summarise, the ethnographic framing of this research offers three particular strengths. Firstly, it offers an understanding of the first-year experience from the perspective of students and not policy makers and managers whose priority is to *manage* the student experience and related attrition problems. Secondly, there is a *temporal* dimension to the project, which enables us to explore student experiences, emotions and transitions as they are actually happening instead of relying on memory or a single response from students through questionnaires. Finally, there is a *spatial* dimension to the project, which transcends assumptions that student life is exclusively defined by the social and symbolic boundaries of university and campus life. We will now briefly address the methodology of the project in more detail.

Methodology in practice

During the 2007-08 and 2008-09 academic years, two cohorts of first-year undergraduate students were recruited to the project. This section concentrates on the involvement of the first cohort. For the most part, it is their research data that informs the findings and insights of this paper.

Twenty students signed up for the project at the beginning of the 2007-08 academic year. The students enrolled in the project undertook various degree programmes within

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

the School of Biological Sciences. There was a fairly even split of eleven males and nine females. Four of the students were 'home' students and originated from Leicester. An international Chinese student also enrolled on the project. The remaining fifteen participants followed the still traditional route in the UK of moving to another city to engage with a displaced student experience. The actual names of students involved in the project are not used in this paper.

The students were provided with their own video cameras. They were asked to submit a weekly video diary of at least five minutes to the research team. They were also given complete control over the range of topics and themes that could be discussed in their weekly video diaries. It was hoped that this would encourage students to think about and focus on issues and experiences at the heart of their lives. The same students also participated in four focus group sessions across the 2007-08 academic year. The aim of the focus groups was to provide the research team with a basis to build on important emerging themes in the project and to allow participants to discuss these concerns with fellow students.

Student participation in the project has varied. By the end of the academic year, six students were no longer committed to the project. Notably, these six students were male. They may have lost motivation to take part in the project, or simply been initially attracted to the lure of access to a free video camera. That all six students were male, however, reflects other researchers' experiences of working with young people. In his study, Hecht (1998:11) found that young women tended to reveal their 'inner selves' and day-to-day concerns more than young men. The lack of ongoing involvement of male students in the project may similarly reflect under-studied aspects of masculinity and gendered identities in the student experience.

The fourteen students who stayed with the project provided some invaluable and often intimate insights into their evolving lives at university (and beyond). They did not necessarily submit diaries on a weekly basis, however. The project team realised that this was too much to expect of students, especially in the ebb and flow of workloads, winter colds and work deadlines. One student suggested that being part of the project was one of the highlights of her first-year experience. As we illustrate later, commitment and insights of such students have provided us with a fresh basis to think about and theorise student transitions.

Fragmented transitions

What do academics, educationalists and other professionals mean when they talk about student transitions? Student transitions are often viewed as involving movement from one state of being, place or social context to another. Transitions, in other words, are conceptualised as a linear process. Holdsworth argues, however, that transitions 'do not necessarily follow a smooth and uni-directional path' (2006:499). The ways that students adapt to social and academic life at university may instead follow a more fragmented process (Holdsworth, 2006:499). In this vein, adapting to life at university may involve ongoing adjustments and re-adjustments to different aspects and elements of change. A uni-directional model of transitions also denies the extent

to which students engage with and experience these adjustments and re-adjustments to university life in different ways. It can be argued that these differences reflect the increased diversity of the student population in the UK (Palmer *et al.*, 2009:40) and the fact that students engage with the first-year experience on highly individualised and personalised terms.

The findings of the Student Experience Project concur with Holdsworth's understandings of student transitions. For students involved in the project, adapting to life at university is far from a smooth, linear or uni-directional process. During the first weeks of university, students occupy an ambiguous social and symbolic space between the established relations and attachments of 'home' and the new environment of campus life (Palmer *et al.*, 2009). In this in-between state, some students tend to miss and reminisce of the relations associated with 'home.' Consider how Rebecca feels after five weeks at university:

All the excitement's gone. You get really excited about Uni. Fresher's Week was amazing and it just feels like you're on a massive come down now of how amazing everything was and now it's just like gone. Boring. Bored of it. You want to go home. You miss your mum. You miss your friends. It's like you have friends here but they're not like real friends yet. You don't feel that you can open up and tell them everything. I'm just starting to miss things from home. I just wanna give my mum a hug, go down the park with my dog. I want to sleep in my own bed, go out with my friends to my local pub, where everyone knows me. I don't like not knowing people. It's really unsettling. I mean I know lots of people here but it's not the same as knowing everyone back home.

Establishing and/or accepting friendships with fellow students play a vital role in addressing or at least diluting these feelings of homesickness. It is these relationships that enable students to at least begin to feel a sense of belonging in their new social and academic surroundings (Eder & McCabe, 2004). For some students, this transition or 'turning point' (Palmer *et al.*, 2009) within the first-year experience may occur quite quickly. Sophie explains the importance of her new friends in ways that differ from Rebecca's initial experience of her first few weeks at university:

I'm really glad that all the people I've met on my course have been really cool. Like obviously because you've got to club together really quick because we all live away from home and stuff and we all go through similar things. You realise that once you share something, like something important or something you're worried about, with one of the people you're friends with, you realise actually how close you can get to people with the first two weeks of being in a little group.

Sophie's suggestion that 'all' students live away from home and therefore experience similar emotions and transitions is reinforced by an ongoing tendency of many first-year students in the UK to live in university accommodation. In one particular focus group, students felt that 'living in halls' was an essential aspect of the first-year experience, not least as it provided people with a basis to make friends who would in turn move into private accommodation with you during the second year.

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

Sophie's understanding of the first-year experience nevertheless denies the existence of 'home students' who may live with their parents and have a very different starting point to how and in what ways they adapt to university life. As a home student, Mukesh's experiences of establishing new friendships is very different to, and yet entangled with, Sophie's generic view of all students living away from home and going through similar things. During the first semester, Mukesh was unable to make friends with his peers on campus. He directly attributes this to his status as a home student. As he explains, 'There is definitely a divide because I'm at home and everyone's here.' Mukesh's use of the term 'everyone's here' offers a discursive insight into his very real sense of feeling excluded by non-home students on the 'here' of campus.

What is also clear, however, is that Mukesh's experience of life as a young adult is not only defined by his status as a first-year student. As a 'home student', Mukesh has different reference points through which to build attachments to his home town of Leicester. This, in turn, has implications for how and in what way he values the supposed need to adapt to life and friendships at university. For example, although Mukesh recognised that he was engaging with different teaching styles at university, he viewed his experiences of college and university as entangled aspects of the same learning experience. The perceived lack of transition in this process is partly explained by the fact that Mukesh attended a college that is within walking distance of the University. Mukesh's physical journey to his new place of study followed the exact same route and routine as his previous journey of two years between his parent's home and college. At the same time, Mukesh can also count on sites of belonging and friendship that exist beyond the social and institutional boundaries of his university. Many of Mukesh's 'old' school and college friends, for example, live in Leicester and he sees these friends on a regular basis. As Holdsworth (2006:516) suggests, these home-based networks may offset the need to build friendships on campus.

The experiences and perceptions of Rebecca, Sophie and Mukesh highlight the important but varied role of friendships in facilitating a sense of belonging in their evolving lives. For Rebecca and Mukesh, in particular, the *social* transition from home to university is not a smooth, linear or uni-directional process. Whilst Sophie may embrace new friendships, Rebecca is less inclined to let go of the trusting and long-established social networks of home. Mukesh, meanwhile, may feel excluded to some extent from university friendships but is able to maintain other social and symbolic sites of belonging in the form of his Leicester-based friends. All three students, meanwhile, experience the building or otherwise of friendships on their own terms in ways that are specific to their own individual life stories. In the next section, we extend Holdsworth's analysis of student transitions by highlighting the need to distinguish between and yet recognise how and in what ways social *and* academic transitions are complex, entangled elements of the first-year experience.

Social and academic transitions as entangled processes

Social and academic transitions are often viewed as distinct and separate processes. A study of the first-year experience by Wilcox *et al.* (2005), for example, distinguishes

between the social and academic ‘worlds’ of students. Through this juxtaposition of worlds, Wilcox *et al.* (2005:720) illustrate how the ‘social side’ of university facilitates and enhances the ‘academic side’ of the first-year experience. This representation of university life as two sides of the same experiential coin reinforces an assumption that student transitions are linear and uni-directional processes. In this particular case, the friendships made at university are seen to provide students with a basis to move forward in terms of the academic side of their first-year experience.

The case of the home student Mukesh complicates this understanding of the ‘social world’ of students and a further assumption that the social side of the university experience is exclusively located within the boundaries of higher education institutions. Building on Holdsworth’s notion of fragmented transitions, we also suggest that social and academic transitions represent multi-layered and entangled aspects of university life. On these terms it is too simplistic to think of social and academic transitions as distinct, separate and mutually supportive elements of the first-year experience. Students experience these transitions in complex ways. This is especially the case for first-year students in their first semester, as they adapt and adjust to a variety of new, often competing demands and routines in their life. As he prepares to go home for the Christmas holidays, John reflects on his first semester at university as follows:

I’m quite looking forward to going home actually. I didn’t think I would but this last term has just sapped everything out of me. I didn’t expect to have been going to bed after midnight every single night, getting up for 9 o’clock, then not eating much, lots of drinking and staying up late again, not eating much, eating rubbish when I do eat. Just sapped the energy out of me. Constantly working, always feel under pressure but suppose it’s all good.

In John’s case, his socialising (and drinking) at university complicates his ability or otherwise to attend early morning lectures. By the end of the first semester he feels drained and is certainly in no position to separate his social and academic experiences, let alone treat them as distinct, bounded and mutually supportive worlds. John’s understanding of his first-year experience is not unique. Several students on the project spoke of similarly feeling drained by a whole range of new and competing demands on their life. In the first few weeks alone, a student may not simply be adapting to new teaching and learning styles or a new social environment. She or he may be simultaneously learning to wash clothes, manage finances, look for private accommodation for the second year, take exams, deal with deadlines, engage with new feelings of freedom and independence and the challenges of living in institutionally-managed accommodation for the first time in their lives.

We suggest that the competing demands and entangled nature of social and academic transitions compromises the ability of students to simply move forward in a smooth linear process in and through their lives at university. Take the example of Sam. Sam settled quickly into university life, with friendships in her halls of residence playing an important part in this experience. As she put it:

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

At first I didn't really like it because I got quite homesick and I was poorly for the first week. But everyone I live with is really nice and I get along with everybody. I felt that at the start that I didn't really click with anybody, like really well. But now I'm starting to get along with them much more.

Towards the end of the first semester Sam was settled in her life at university. With the Christmas holidays approaching, however, she felt that she was going to have to engage with a further process of change and re-adaptation. As she explained at the time, 'I've settled in and I think it's going to be a big adjustment going back home and then when we come back in January it's going to be an adjustment as well'. After spending four weeks at home with her parents, Sam felt that she would have to re-build her relationships with her new university friends. This concern was exacerbated by the fact that an important set of examinations was scheduled for the students' return in January. These examinations provide the students with their first significant experience of engaging with and managing revision strategies and workloads at the University.

Sam's concerns proved to be very real. She now explains her experiences of returning to her halls of residence after the Christmas holidays:

Well, when I moved back into Uni I was pleased to see everyone and all of that. Went to dinner and saw them a little bit but I had an exam the next day. It was a 2 o'clock exam so I had to make sure I did revision for it. Basically the first week I was revising all the time, staying up late and revising and that's how my holiday went as well. I was just doing a lot of revision, 'cos I wanted to do well. So I was in my room most of the time and not seeing people as much and it was difficult to hold the relationships that I'd left Uni with in December and go back to it and not be able to talk to people. Everyone's in the same situation, though they had one or two exams and I had five.

Sam's experiences illustrate the extent to which the arrival of the Christmas holidays disrupts the flow of friendships, which in turn feeds into the extent to which she feels settled or otherwise at the beginning of her second semester at university. These experiences are further complicated by the potentially important examinations that take place soon after students return from the Christmas holidays.

Other students shared these experiences. Jessica explains her experience of revising for these examinations:

I think it's really weird like coming back from Christmas and having exams. You're just by yourself, doing revision and then it's kind of like, oh friends, again. For me anyway, it's kind of like, oh, these people kind of exist again. Like not to say they didn't exist before but like they only kind of pop back in your mind after exams really ... I kind of think I picked up most of the friendships I made after exams and stuff, I think. I guess it's a bit difficult as well because I guess when you're back home for so long you kind of just get used to how things are back home and the friends that you've known forever and then to come back and be friends with people you've only known a couple of weeks is a bit strange but I guess you just try and carry on, just building friendships.

Jessica seems more ambivalent than Sam in terms of the value she attaches to her new university friendships. By speaking of these new friends as people she has known ‘for a couple of weeks,’ instead of a full semester, Jessica alludes that trusting relationships with other students are not necessarily built over a matter of days or even weeks. As the social anthropologist Carsten (1994) reminds us, the ways in people establish a sense of ‘social relatedness’ with others is often a long, drawn out process of being, sharing and becoming. Students may leave university having made ‘friends for life’ but these friendships are the product of three to four years of often intense shared experiences. In Jessica’s case she has known her friends ‘back home’ for approximately seven years of her life.

The experiences of Sam and Jessica highlight how social and academic transitions are entangled aspects of the everyday life of students. In this sense, these transitions are not simply distinct and mutually supportive aspects of the first-year experience. Social transitions may complicate how students engage with academic transitions and *vice versa*. In this particular case, the need to revise for an important set of examinations compromises the ways in which some students re-adjust to their social life back on campus. Comparing Sam’s understanding of friendships during the first two weeks at university with her experiences after Christmas offers further insight into the extent that student transitions are neither fixed nor stable. The data presented here by Sam from different video diaries supports an argument that questionnaires and one-off semi-structured interviews may offer only a partial insight into students’ complex and contradictory reflections of the student experience and their evolving identities as young people.

Concluding remarks

The methodology at the heart of the Student Experience Project facilitates important insights into first-year student life. By providing students with video cameras we gain nuanced insights into the personal and individualised experiences and journeys of these young people. The students’ reflections and insights encourage a fresh approach to how we as researchers can think about and theorise student transitions. Specifically, the Student Experience Project offers a unique *temporal* dimension to understandings of transitions in ways that cannot be achieved through the ‘single response’ data of questionnaires or one-off semi-structured interviews. The use of portable video cameras also offers a *spatial* dimension to our work, which transcends the institutional, social and academic boundaries of campus life.

More specifically, this chapter concurs with Holdsworth’s (2006) notion of fragmented transitions. The students involved in the project do not experience social and academic transitions as a smooth, linear, uni-directional process. Rebecca, Sophie and Mukesh, for example, have different perceptions and experiences of building friendships at university. Whilst these friendships may be important in facilitating a sense of belonging at university, Mukesh’s story highlights the extent to which the social groupings of non-home students may encourage a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion for young people. With his locally based social networks to rely upon,

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

Mukesh is fortunate to feel a sense of belonging in Leicester that is not exclusively defined by his status as an undergraduate student or by institutional boundaries. In this sense, we can appreciate how 'home' remains an important but varied social and symbolic space in the lives of students involved in the project.

The insights gained from the Student Experience Project allow us to build on Holdsworth's theory of fragmented transitions and understandings of the distinction between social and academic transitions. Social and academic transitions, we suggest, are entangled aspects of a student's everyday life. As John's story illustrates, the very experience of engaging with these blurred, competing aspects of campus life can leave students feeling drained or exhausted by the end of their first semester at university. For some students involved in the project, the need to revise over and straight after the Christmas holidays compromises their ability to re-adjust and re-adapt to friendship networks in the second semester. The spatial, temporal and student-led reflections of the project thus provide us with a basis to understand how and in what ways social transitions may complicate the ability of students to engage and move forward with academic transitions and *vice versa*. These findings illustrate the extent to which a longitudinal, ethnographic research method is able to inform pedagogic theory and research of the first-year experience in ways that may be of benefit to educationalists, policy-makers and the lives of future students.

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