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Article

The transition experiences of an international postgraduate student: Her narrative

Gwyneth James

University of Hertfordshire

ABSTRACT

In this article I focus on some of the educational transition experiences and consequent coping mechanisms of a former student of mine, Berenice. She was one of five Master's students who participated in my doctoral research where I used Narrative Inquiry to research their lived experiences. What I discovered was that despite some commonalities, all five had unique transition experiences with which they coped in various ways. Through this article it is my hope that something is glimpsed of this one student's transition by exploring the stories she told (here presented as co-constructed narrative extracts from her journal) over the academic year and the meanings she attributed to them.

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Introduction

Berenice is from Colombia and came to London for 12 months to study for a Master's degree, during which time she was in one of my EAP classes. Prior to this she had worked in Colombia for a number of years and I was curious to discover what characterised her (and others') transition both to the UK and to being a student again, and in particular how she coped with so many changes.

The data I collected over this one year consisted of interviews, emails, and conversations that 'just happen' (Trahar, 2006, p.122) which I then wrote up as narratives that highlighted learning experiences more broadly and transition more particularly using Narrative Inquiry as my methodology (see James, 2013 for a more detailed discussion on Narrative Inquiry).

Research on postgraduates' transition to the UK is scarce, possibly due to their being seen as 'experts' (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010, p.262) in that they have already successfully achieved an undergraduate degree so there seems to be an implicit assumption that their knowledge is simply continued rather than re-situated. This in turn implies that academic environments are universally understood. There is even less research on international students' transition experiences and how students coped with their transition, and this was part of my research focus.

My research conceptualised transition as a holistic and dynamic combination of psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Searle and Ward, 1990) and educational adjustment (Zhou and Todman, 2009) including culture shock (e.g. Pedersen, 1995) and how these all impact on identity and developing a sense of self. From the perspective of educational adjustment, all five fit the normative pattern in that they were all successful in achieving their Master's degrees and all struggled with the timespan, speed and intensity of their one-year courses, as did Berenice. But each had unique and different transition experiences despite these and other similarities.

In much Narrative Inquiry research it is common for the voice of the participant to be foregrounded as much as possible; here Berenice's voice is presented through her journal. These journal extracts will be integrated with transition elements specific to educational transition extrapolated from her narrative and located in literature, as well as my analysis and reflections.

Journal extracts

5th November. *Five weeks into my degree and I've seen hardly anything of London; instead I am living in the bubble of the university. My days revolve around the library and I've almost forgotten how to socialise.*

8th November. *I have very high standards and today I've been thinking about where they come from... Through all of my previous educational success an image was created of 'you can do it.' I got a scholarship to study my undergraduate degree back home as well as to study here in London because there's no way my family could have paid the fees for either university. I got the job of Research Assistant at my university after I graduated because some of the teachers said 'you have to work with me.' Which is great but the problem is that I now realise I have a huge academic ego and it's dying. Despite having been really worried about studying in English I still thought 'I can do it!' But the gap between what I was expecting of myself and what I can really do is much bigger. This internal pressure feels like such an obstacle at the moment...*

10th December. *I can't believe it's the end of my first term already. It's been fast, fast, fast! At one point I wanted to go back to Colombia as I didn't feel intelligent here. In my head I thought I understood that everything would be faster, but in reality I couldn't keep up with the demand. I was so looking forward to being a student again but by about the third week I had to accept that I was 'lower in English' than everyone else. That's obvious, I know, but it took me time to accept it. I definitely had a romantic view of becoming a student again based on my previous experience, but the confrontation with reality was rather different. The sheer quantity of the readings is unbelievable; it feels like I'm drowning in them.*

Berenice was the only one of my five research participants who mentioned her English language skills, saying on more than one occasion that she was ‘lower in English’ than everyone else and that in the first term she was ‘ashamed’ of her English. She was looking forward to being a student again, spending time learning and reading. But she said that it took ‘four hours to read three pages of text’ and realised that the gap between what she was expecting of herself and what she can really do is greater than she had anticipated. Her second language identity (see Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott and Brown, 2013) was therefore called into question.

The pressure to cope with the short timescale of a UK Master’s degree has been mentioned in much of the literature on postgraduates’ transitions both generally as well as that focused on international students (e.g. Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit, 2010; Brown and Holloway, 2008) and language has also partially been ‘blamed’ for the time delay (see Prescott and Hellsten, 2005). The speed of the course is something that all of my participants mentioned.

21st January. *I’ve started to talk more this term: I’m less ashamed of my English and not as worried about how ‘clever’ or ‘perfectly expressed’ my arguments are.*

2nd February. *Something which has really struck me is the concept of ‘Western people’ which I’ve heard a lot about here. When you are in Latin America, there are many people who think that we are part of the concept of ‘Western’ because we have the same institutions. But then you come here and you understand what Western really means and I don’t think we are that Western. If there is differentiation within Europe between West and East then Colombia/Latin America is definitely not Western! Anyway, I was skyping with my friend and she asked ‘so what are we? What concept do they use to talk about us?’ I said ‘first they have to talk about us! If they do talk about us, they’ll call us Latin American or South American. They’re never going to call us Western – that’s just our silly idea.’ Before our conversation I’d never questioned it; I’d never thought about it. But you need the confrontation to question something that you just assume as given...*

25th April. *It’s term three already! I’ve been thinking recently that I’ve changed so much since I arrived. In October I felt very restricted and ashamed about my English ability because I couldn’t be myself and express my ideas clearly. This shame increased my levels of stress and decreased my levels of self-esteem and I felt that my experiences were being affected by my inability to communicate effectively in English, in seminars I mean, not generally. I was expecting to be me in Spanish in English, but of course it wasn’t the same. Without language you can’t be yourself.*

Berenice here very aptly states that ‘without language you can’t be yourself’ and indeed along with ethnicity and gender, language is a key marker of identity (Giampapa, 2004). This in turn impacts on her second language identity as mentioned above.

10th May. *My friends and I were talking today about how we feel about the system of education here. I’m quite headstrong, and even when I had an idea of what I had to do, I was not that good to adapt myself to the university’s system. It’s not like my way is ‘bad’ and the UK’s is ‘good’ but that’s what it feels like sometimes.*

Another thing is that you need time to think; thoughts are not products of a machine but of your brain. At times we were running to read everything and having really superficial seminars because of the speed of the course. This year has felt like a production chain, always running to submit essays, do readings and so on. I mean, we’re talking about knowledge and I need time to think – who doesn’t?! I don’t like this thing of being treated like a machine: I’m not! I really like to think but I’m not enjoying thinking because I’m not thinking well.

At the end it’s really sad that you’re not enjoying learning anymore – all you want is that everything finishes – to me it doesn’t make sense. The idea of doing a Master’s programme is that you enjoy learning.

This entry links back to the speed of the course, but here Berenice connects this particular struggle with the clash between her ideal of being a student and the reality of it and aptly laments: ‘as a student you need time to think...thoughts are not products of a machine but of your brain...I’m not [a machine]...’ This clash with reality links back to issues around second language identity.

20th May. *What factors have influenced my transition to the UK and being a student again? Definitely my work in Colombia. I know when a piece of writing is good or not because of my previous professional experience, and that’s another cause of my frustration because I have the skills but didn’t feel able to develop them because of my language. I think language was the greatest hindrance to begin with. Another thing which helped was friends, especially Florian (my Swiss boyfriend) and my Norwegian friend. Initially I didn’t feel as good as other people because I’m from a ‘Third World’ country and my education is not as good. It’s not that others made me feel like this; it’s just my perception and I was feeling all the heaviness of presupposition. And perhaps that insecurity was super-increased by my language problem. But when I started interacting with Europeans it helped a lot, because my friends helped me realise that although we’re culturally different we’re still similar: humans with fears and expectations and...just humans.*

Berenice here illustrates a fascinating point made by Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) when they define educational transition. They discuss 'shifts' when moving from one educational context to another, and although the institution does not change, 'the mode of study and the meanings that underpin that study undergo a considerable shift because these are inextricably linked to the wider experiences of students...' (p.265). In writing essays, Berenice illustrates how she experienced one such 'considerable shift', despite her previous professional background. This influenced her transition positively, saying 'I [therefore] know when a piece of writing is good or not' but she also resisted conforming to UK conventions, initially at least (see her entry for the 10th May).

28th June. *At last – the exams are over! My visa doesn't expire until the end of January 2014 so until then I will stay in the UK; I'll travel around Europe and then look for a job. I have to wait and see how I did in my dissertation before I decide whether or not to apply for a PhD...*

So how did Berenice cope? She mentions her previous professional experience in a university context but simultaneously also the fact that she therefore 'had the skills but didn't feel able to develop them because of [her] language.' Her primary coping mechanism seems to have been her friends and this is borne out in other UK-based research by Montgomery and McDowell (2009) who highlight the area of social networks comprising international students to support each other. In Berenice's case she met and started dating her Swiss classmate, journal extracts of which I have not included, but which had a significant impact on her with regard to her identity and the 'Other', a sociological way of understanding identity when confronted with difference.

Implications

So what can be learned from a glimpse of just part of Berenice's narrative? Crucially, it is a reminder that everyone's transition experiences are different and unique (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010) and that what we as teachers see on the surface in the classroom is usually not what is being experienced internally. An obvious 'truth' perhaps but one which I have seen being continually suppressed; the idea that because postgraduates had all successfully completed undergraduate degrees they would take to further studies with ease, regardless of the fact that it would be in a different context to their

own. We frequently assume too much from our students because of their background: an erroneous assumption that all postgraduates are one homogeneous group regarding their understanding and mastery of academic literacy practices (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom and Zammit, 2009). Of course in some way they are 'experts' but despite many having been successful professionals in their own countries and despite being proficient in English, this success and proficiency does not equate with UK universities' arguably opaque conventions and requirements to 'succeed' and therefore in my role as academic staff I need to help build this implicit knowledge (Walter, 2010).

Despite the partial nature of narratives, they can – and do – still tell us much of the individual and their world. In glimpsing what it was like for Berenice, and notwithstanding that each student is unique, my hope is that I can now act on *actual* rather than *perceived* experiences that I had as a teacher. In classes and in snatched conversations with students it is all too easy to assume that this superficial observation tells even part of their story clearly. I am unaware of research on this area of actual and perceived experiences, whether with international or home students, and it would be worthwhile expanding on this in future to allow the voices of other students to be heard. I also realised through my research with Narrative Inquiry that such continual and reflective practice is vital to gain a deeper understanding of the students we teach. Without such reflection, even fleeting moments of reflection, we are perhaps inadvertently preventing both a greater degree of empathy with others as well as accommodating the colourful diversity in our classrooms.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

gwynethjamescb@hotmail.com

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