

CULTURAL JOURNEYS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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CULTURAL JOURNEYS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Student Voices and
Narratives

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

Understanding culture is, as Geertz suggests, the interpretation of individuals' stories about their cultural interactions and activities. The story allows for a 'metasocial commentary' of the participants within 'a story they tell themselves about themselves' (Geertz, 1974, p. 448).

This interpretation of culture by Clifford Geertz frames for us the journey that the reader will take in reading this book. Culture frames our existence, our lives and our learning. In writing this book, we have drawn not only on our collective years of working in higher education but also on our own cultural identities, in terms of family background and cultural interactions throughout our lives. These experiences have informed our world view and have been the genesis for this book.

We have previously known and supported students from both a typical UK background and those who come to university from different cultures, whether that is from a UK base or indeed arriving in the United Kingdom from the country where they grew up. We have witnessed increasingly culturally diverse classrooms which bring challenges to communication amongst different student groups and between students and their lecturers. The importance of understanding communication patterns and how to communicate across different groups is given a lot of attention in the business world but as yet, there still appears to be insufficient

acknowledgement within higher education of the importance of differing communication patterns and the impact that this can have on the education process. Our observations of student interactions over the years led us to explore in more detail the impact of these differing communication patterns from the students' perspectives. We have framed these communications in a relationship discourse because that is the way that they appear to impact on cultural identity and on the learning processes.

We were inspired by the narratives of students in our previous research, which we have drawn on to frame the discussion in our first chapter, to delve further work into understanding the experiences, struggles and barriers that students face throughout their time in higher education. We believe that more attention should be given to the complex issues that arise around cultural communication in the classroom and around the impact of cultural interactions as part of the learning process. There is certainly more discussion to be had with regard to the existential and ontological aspects of the higher education process. This book sits firmly within the existential in terms of its parameters because of its focus on relationships and the link between relationships and learning in a cultural context. It is not a philosophical work, and we have not attempted to enter into a philosophical discussion or a discussion about multiculturalism, migrants and global cultural shifts; instead, we have focused on the students' experience of their higher education in a cultural context and via their own recounting of their cultural journeys.

Students wanted us to give voice to the conversations that we had as they felt passionately about being heard and sometimes felt they were silenced and ignored. It is this expression of passion in the desire to be heard, to have their stories told that formed the approach for this book. In using their words to retell their stories, sometimes, the grammar is incorrect or there

is a use of slang expression. We draw the reader's attention to this so that a clearer understanding of the aims and objectives of this work is achieved. The stories are sometimes challenging to read and sometimes make for uncomfortable reading. We have repeated these uncomfortable sections of students' narratives both for impact and to ensure that we have presented their stories in a way that is as true a representation as possible. Inevitably, we recognise that perceptions are just that and are situated in a particular time and place. The perceptions are important, however, in understanding the 'lived reality' of our higher education experience for students. The narratives therefore cannot be viewed as one dimensional and are framed by time and space and location on a number of levels.

We feel that the stories that have been repeated in this book are powerful and point to a need for change. A view that universities need to shift in their approach in aiding students to achieve their best in increasingly culturally diverse classrooms. Higher education is ideally placed to affect changes and shine a light on the lived reality through the voices of the participants in this book and their cultural journeys. The stories that have been retold here highlight the ways in the multitude of deeply held beliefs, values, behaviours, traditions and approaches to others inform the journey of each individual in this book. These complexities allow us to nether into their world in their words.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addition, we owe our very deepest debt of gratitude to our interviewees and our students without whom this work would not have been possible and who generously gave of their free time to tell us about their cultural journeys. We hope that the contents provide faithful representations of your cultural journeys and truly reflect your stories. Any errors or omissions may be laid fully at our door!

To our families for their loving help, kindness, support and advice on this journey and to our colleagues for talking through our ideas and to all those who patiently sat through our conference presentations and those whom we bored with our discussion of our views on cultural identity and students' higher education experiences. We would also like to thank Clare for her helpful comments on reading through our drafts and to all those colleagues who have offered words of encouragement along the way – thank you for bearing with us as it seemed to take a long time. A particular thank you goes to Kimberley at Emerald Publishing for her patience during various delays to our final draft.