Reconceptualising student experiences: exploring embodiment and identity through differential higher education space

Fatema Khatun, Amanda French, Rob Smith
School of Education, Birmingham City University

Abstract

Despite the emergence of a body of literature about the student experience, how students of diverse backgrounds experience life and learning across the higher education (HE) sector remains under-researched. This article draws data from a small pilot study that explored this issue in Birmingham City University. The researchers, who comprised staff and students, deliberately worked against the grain of the emerging audit-centred university culture around a homogenised consumerist 'student experience'. The research team (consisting of staff and a MA student) used identity boxes to create a safe space for students to talk with staff and other students about themselves. Findings indicated that the use of artefacts enables the mediation of emerging student identities and so confirmed the value of this method as an embodied experience. A key finding suggested that making it easier for students from black and South Asian backgrounds to discuss and explore their personal sense of embodiment in this way can open up a 'differential HE space', bringing with it positive educational benefits for them as uncompromisingly self-determining students.

Introduction

This article presents data from a collaborative pilot study project and focuses particularly on the experiences of students commonly categorised as black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) in higher education institutions (HEIs). While BAME is an umbrella term that some commentators view as unhelpful because it groups a range of very diverse backgrounds, it is the label used by many HEIs in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Office for Students (2019) has published data that highlights the 10-20% gap in achievement of a first or upper-second class degree between white students and those from such backgrounds. The project opened up a space in which students were supported to share significant personal experiences and insights into their extra-higher education (HE) identities as students in a modern HEI located in a highly diverse city in the West Midlands of England. The researching staff and a then-MA student designed the project.

The project was conceived as a response to the retention and achievement figures of particular student groups within one faculty. It was a participatory research pilot project that included participants from a range of backgrounds and explored how their identities informed their experience of HE teaching and learning. The project sought to produce HE space that foregrounded student identity and biography as a way of exploring richer and more differentiated understandings of the student experience. A key motivation behind this focus was the contention that the marketisation of HE appears to have created a commodified notion of the 'student experience' which reifies existing social inequalities by presupposing a uniform, consumerist student identity. Addressing that issue, the project sought to take account of how HE variously affects students from different racial groups: privileging some and disadvantaging others.

The policy context

Research into the 'student experience', in our view, must be framed by an understanding of the impact of marketisation in HE. The marketisation of education as a policy focus finds its origins in the discourses of globalisation of the 1990s. For example, the notion of the 'knowledge economy' (Wright, 2016) that gained currency under the New Labour government was an expression of the need for the UK to compete within a rapidly developing global market (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2000). This underpinned New Labour's drive to expand the HE student population through massification, a strategy designed to meet national human capital needs (Bell and Stevenson, 2006). An important feature within this expansion was the widening participation (WP) initiative that promoted an ideal of inclusiveness in HE. By 2011/12, HE expansion had resulted in forty-nine per cent of young people entering university (Adams, 2013). As a result of WP, today there is a much more diverse HE student population, although this diversity is concentrated in modern HEIs (Tatlow, 2015).

Marketisation in HE connects to the central focus of this paper because it relies on measuring achievement and continuation across student populations for national educational measurement instruments such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In addition, marketisation has stimulated a commercialised discourse that problematises the way certain groups of students are talked about, giving rise to the use of new deficit labels – such as the 'non-traditional student' and the 'commuter student' (Holdsworth 2006) – which are connected implicitly to social class (Reay *et al.* (2010) and ethnicity (Adams, 2019).

While some literature (Nixon *et al.*, 2018) focuses on how marketisation treats students as a set of undifferentiated consumers, the researchers focus on the idea that marketisation interacts with students depending on how they are positioned within HE spaces. Puwar (2004) is interested in how and why white and middle-class students appear to be more natural occupants of HE spaces and concludes that it is literally their bodies which appear 'right', so bestowing on them the right to belong. Conversely, other 'problem' groups of students, such as those alluded to in the previous paragraph, are marked out as 'trespassers' and therefore appear out of place. Similarly, Ahmed (2012) argues that HE is imbued with the historical build-up of an all-pervasive cultural ambience that is powerful enough to discomfit those who find it unfamiliar and who are made 'different' through it. Specifically, Ahmed and Puwar both foreground the physicality of students' experience, whether negative or positive. Indeed, Ahmed (2019) compares HE institutions to old pieces of well-worn clothing which, over time, have taken on the shape of those who have worn them. She uses this analogy to explain why, for some students, fitting into university is a lot easier, as it is just like slipping on a pair of comfortable slippers.

The perception persists that HEIs need to adapt more and better to their increasingly diverse student populations (Bell and Stevenson 2006, p.16). The diversity of the student body at Birmingham City University encompasses multiple ethnicities (45% BAME in 2013-14 (BCU, 2015) compared to a national rate (HESA, 2018) of 29.4%), but also includes a range of socio-economic backgrounds, with over a third of entrants coming from the most income-deprived neighbourhoods (BCU, 2018). The research project aimed to explore the production of HE space and its responsiveness to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Theorising 'student experience'

Recent educational research has begun to acknowledge the materiality of bodies and the embodied nature of different students' experiences in education (Ozolins, 2013). This growing body of work seeks to overturn hegemonic understandings that anchor learning in the mind and reduce the body to an irrelevance. Sund *et al.* (2017) provide an overview of how theories of embodiment reject the hierarchy of mind and body articulated by Cartesian dualism and instead argue that we can think only in and through our bodies. This has significant implications with regard to the protected characteristics of gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and faith. Embodiment theories see the institutional meanings attached to different bodies as culturally and historically embedded rather than being simply the products of individual prejudice. Shilling (2007, pp.50-1) identifies how Eurocentric semiotic meanings attached to the bodies of black people are rooted in historical oppression and racism.

Dewey (1928, p.14) saw educational processes and practices as simultaneously 'transactional' and social, using the term 'embodied relationality'. By this, he meant that individuals and their environments always shape – and are shaped through – interactions with each other. This contrasts sharply with a positioning of "*students at the heart of the marketised HE sector*" (Tomlinson, 2017) framing them as customers, which tends to privilege a passive student-as-consumer identity. We argue that recognition must be made of knowledge as an encompassing embodied experience in students, which calls for the active role of staff in self-knowledge production.

Todd (2014) argues that contextual and relational factors affect students' sense of themselves as learners/students. Biography – and control of that biography – is crucial in the construction and maintenance of a positive student identity, especially for those students from backgrounds where there are no familial or historical narratives about going to university. We argue in this paper that the dynamic between student biography and HE experience is mediated through embodiment. The lack of 'belonging' (Thomas, 2012) that some students experience suggests that staff understanding of students' embodied being in HE space – relating to, for example, visual markers of skin colour, gender, sexuality, religious/cultural markers – may be crucial to the development of positive, differentiated, student identities.

For HE students, the student identity is also articulated through a new relationship with knowledge. A crucial aspect of HE spatiality is how personal representation connects with knowledges and self-knowledge. Ellsworth (2005, p.1) states:

> "*Knowledge, once it is defined, taught and used as a 'thing made,' is dead. It has been forced to give up that which 'really exists': its nature when it is a thing in the making, is continuously evolving through our understanding of the world and our own bodies' experience of and participation in that world.*"

Ellsworth here posits an embodied view of learning: interacting with knowledge is active and physical. She goes on to argue for the incorporation of embodiment into pedagogical theory. She writes about the importance of giving people access "*to the experience of the learning self… in the making*" (*ibid.*, p.151) – that begins to delineate what a differential HE space might be like for students positioned outside the norm of the 'normative' student. In the

context of this paper, we have chosen to focus on ethnicity and how it is embodied and positioned differently in HE.

Spatiality and embodiment

The student experience can also be theorised using the notion of spatiality. In *The Production of Space* (1991), Lefebvre offered a critique of the way capitalism produces and has impact upon space as it is experienced. As part of this, he contrasted 'abstract' space – space that is 'dominated' and often oppressive – with 'differential' space. Lefebvre saw abstract space as the urban spaces of state-regulated neo-capitalism, characterised by their commodified exchange value and their tendency to homogenisation (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 49-53). The expansion of HE real estate in the last decade, coterminous with HE massification, suggests that one result of marketisation is that HE space has taken on these qualities.

By contrast, 'differential space' is contradictory space produced when the differences that people bring with them and the meanings they share through these are foregrounded. Lefebvre characterises differential space as affective and reflexive. Differential space arises from the contradictions and the inherent possibilities that are constrained within abstract space. It privileges inclusiveness and use value, rather than the exchange value, of abstract space. It can be produced within abstract space and is often transitory, arising from the inherent vulnerabilities of abstract space (Leary-Owhin, 2015, p. 4).

This paper seeks to mobilise the concepts of embodiment and differential space to explore the HE experiences of three female students who took on the role of participant researchers from the pilot project: one from a Bengali background, one from a mixed heritage background – Pakistani/white English/African-Caribbean – and one from a mixed white South African/Norwegian background.

Methodology

The project sought to explore the research question: What does differential HE space look like? The project used an identity box method to reposition students as agentic meaning-makers of their student experience, framing them as producers of their own student identities. We established a research group of two staff and six student/participant researchers from different courses to pilot a project from a self-selected sample of white and BAME students across one faculty. We recruited the students via a faculty-wide email. Taking the methodological position of 'no intimacy with reciprocity' (Lather, 1991, p. 57) and utilising the trusting and supportive environment advocated by critical pedagogy (Freire,1995), the two staff researchers began the pilot by modelling the identity box idea to the student participants. After this initial meeting, student-researchers were asked to prepare independently an identity box to be shared with the whole group. We then asked all students to respond individually to a series of reflective prompts about how participating made them think and feel. In the next phase of the research, student researchers recruited more participants from their departments and repeated the activity.

The complete project data comprised photographs of ten identity boxes, ten recordings of participants' commentaries and seven written reflections. The data gathered and then shared at staff continuing professional development (CPD) events have contributed to a faculty-wide project to develop an inclusive and co-produced curriculum. In this article, we focus on data from three participants. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participants

Participant name (pseudonymised)	Comment
Jason	PG researcher: health
Arlene	Student nurse
Jackie	PG researcher: health
Carina	Masters student: education
Nazia	UG student teacher
Halima	Masters student: education
Lucas	Masters student: education
Bernard	Staff researcher: education
Jay	Staff researcher: education
Susan	Student speech and language therapist
Nasreen	Student social worker

Identity box as method

Originating in the work of Gauntlett (2007), an identity box involves participants in collecting at least five items that they feel sum them up as individuals. The use of the box connects with Pahl and Rownsell's (2011) artefactual critical literacy, which is an approach combining a focus on objects and the stories attached to them. These items might be symbolic of particular times or moments in participants' lives and could include books, poems or personal objects. We encouraged participants to view their choice as a process of curation of meanings about themselves that they were comfortable about sharing with others.

Staff modelling of the identity box activity produced a space in which participants felt comfortable about sharing (personal) knowledge. There was an acknowledgement by both staff and students that the identity box activity involved a 'performance of self' (Goffman, 1990) that often felt risky, intimate and personal. Bourdieusian theory on cultural capital suggests that there is a strong correlation between the culture of students' home lives and academic success in educational institutions. The effect of this can be to devalue the cultural background of some students and to condition them into defensive concealment of this knowledge when in educational spaces. The research team framed the identity box activity to produce a differential space that subverted this exclusionary HE space. Analysis proceeded with revisiting the photographs of the identity boxes, listening to the participants' commentaries several times and reading through their reflections. From this, we picked out 'glowing data' (MacLure, 2013) which resonated with the theoretical literature and our own sense of what was important about these differential spaces and differentiated forms of identity.

Findings

In this section, we present some data from three students and explore how the curation and sharing of identity and biography within an atmosphere of trust produced a differential space for students to talk about their experiences as university students.

i) Nazia

Figure 1. Contents of Nazia's identity box drawing on artefacts from childhood

Nazia, a student-teacher of mixed Pakistani/white English heritage, saw the framing of the research environment as being an act of 'sharing... in a mutually respectful circle of individuals'. Nazia's objects included: a small elephant (a pillbox); a Zippo lighter – engraved with *Peace, Love and Happiness*; gardening scissors; a childhood toy; a small self-decorated plant pot; and an art book. Below, we provide commentary for two of the objects.

> *"One is an elephant... from Tunisia… It's quite funny because people seem to want to buy me things with elephants on and over the years it's become my thing now. It was never intentionally meant to be a part of my identity. But over the years it's become one. My mother used to have elephants and that's been passed down to me."*

The passage communicates Nazia's consciousness of herself as a subject. Identity in this sense is something that is conferred by others on oneself (Foucault, 1982). The elephant symbolises the way others see her (perhaps connecting her to her Pakistani heritage?) as well as linking to her mother.

> *"The next thing is a Zippo… and on the back it's got engraved Peace, Love and Happiness. I've got that tattooed on my arm. It's something that I'm all about… Any time there's confrontation I… want to resolve it and make everybody feel positive."*

The lighter operates semiotically to communicate details of Nazia's emotional make-up and the importance she places on a particular set of abstract cultural ideas. The significance she attaches to these values is signalled by her explaining how the words engraved on the lighter are also tattooed on her arm: an attempt at a literal and lasting embodiment of spiritual and axiological orientation.

The use of the identity boxes as a device to aid students in the active construction of a HE student identity was evidenced in Nazia's reflections about being part of the project:

> *"I was faced with decisions about whether something was too personal… or an aspect of my past identity which I would rather move on from. This task in itself revealed more about myself to me regarding the contrast and similarities between my personal and professional identity, and then the range of characters I choose to portray to others in different situations."*

In this passage, there is a strong sense of her continuing and agentic identity construction. Nazia also stated:

> *"…having the concrete representations enabled me to talk more fluidly about myself, in particular, my values and beliefs, which I have found difficult in the past. As an NQT, this sort of information about students is crucial to develop meaningful relationships and connect with individuals."*

The axiological underpinning of professional identity and how that connects to home identity could be seen as a vital ingredient in any course preparing students for a professional role. The research process moved Nazia from reflection to learning as it involved her connecting past and present experiences to her emergent professional identity as a student primary school teacher. The identity box activity led Nazia to enact a re-contextualisation of her extra-HE identity as an integral part of her student identity *and* her emergent professional identity – in Nazia's case, as a primary teacher.
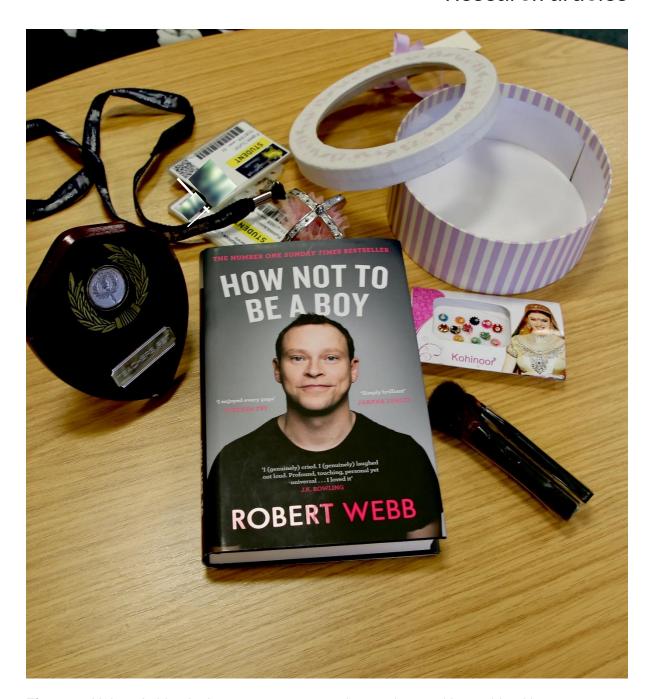
ii) Halema

Figure 2. Halema's identity box contents connecting student and home identities

Halema's box included: a set of identity badges from the university; a 'teacher's pet' shield; a book and a bindi (a coloured dot worn on the centre of the forehead). Halema's commentary revealed that, in contrast to the literature, she felt comfortable in HE spaces and that she linked this both to her personality and to her historical experiences in education. The inclusion of her student identity cards signalled that 'comfort'. She felt that her assertive character had influenced her experience of HE:

> *"I think it depends on how comfortable you are, I always dive into things headfirst. That's why I always find a sense of community or at least a positive aspect. But if you don't do that first time around, you can fall behind or sit on the fringes."*

In the passage above, Halema suggests that the routine of attending lectures can be a force for marginalisation as well as 'engagement'. As an ethnic minority student, she acknowledges how her position in HE space is fragile, requiring additional effort on her part to assert a sense of belonging.

Halema's sense of 'belonging' was strengthened by the sharing of the 'teacher's pet' shield awarded to her by her classmates at school, which indicates her slightly ironic acceptance of herself as a subject who interacts easily with teachers and is happy to be seen as such.

> *"Something that's a bit tongue in cheek. When I was in school I received a little plaque that says Teacher's Pet…. This wasn't given to me by the teachers. Someone nominates you so all my friends and peers knew I was a bit tongue in cheek. The teachers liked me well enough, but I was the little sneaky one ...get away with doing things that I really shouldn't be doing. So that was why I got the teacher's pet."*

The sneaky childhood antics resonate with Ahmed (2007, p.157) for, even before entering HE spaces, Halema had acquired the 'skin of the bodies that inhabit them' and for Halema, this could have been space in which 'non-white' others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation. Haleema, as a female student from a Bengali background, was able to rely on her assertiveness to enable her to produce a comfortable HE space in which she feels belonging – a state that Ahmed (2007) explains is not consciously felt.

Halema wears a hijab and is identifiable as a Muslim, but she also challenges stereotypes of Muslim women as being submissive (Abu-Ali and Reisen, 1999). She wears make-up and states she likes 'girlie things'. Like Nazia, she acknowledges others' perceptions of her and has incorporated those perceptions into her identity even when they might not ostensibly be affirming.

> *"This is a recent book* [see figure 2] *given to me by one of my friends. They always say I am quite masculine in my approach.* [Laughs] *They're like: you're quite a tomboy…. Our house was always full of boys. I had to be one of the boys in order to socialise and get along with them."*

Halema's use of the term 'tomboy' signals her awareness of gender-policing and her resistance to its effects. Her confident management of the gendered perceptions around being 'masculine' is further evidence of agility in negotiating identity construction.

iii) Karleen

Figure 3. Karleen's identity box contents, drawing on her cultural heritage

For the final example, we have included an excerpt from a discussion that arose spontaneously at the end of Karleen's talk. Karleen's box included a range of items deriving from her joint South African and Norwegian heritage. Like Halema, she included her student identity card. The revision guide represented her role as a private tutor to GCSE level students. Two objects symbolised the wildlife in her home country. The family photographs opened a conversation about her family life, both in South Africa and with her husband of ten years in England. The Bible was included as her upbringing was rooted in a strict Lutheran Christianity.

Karleen's (re)entry into education as a mature student from a South African background typically required her to interact with students much younger and with very different cultural reference points. Her age and her strong accent were distinguishing features. As a mature Masters student, Karleen's box allowed her to represent a picture of a background that catalysed a great deal of discussion.

Karleen:

"[My husband] *has brought such healing into my life. My ex-husband demeaned me for 23 years. I would never marry another South African man…. The problem with South African men … is that they are brought up with servants. They never do any work at all. Whereas* [my husband] *cooks, cleans and does the dishes. You'd never get a SA man doing that. 'That's a woman's job!'"*

Halema:

> *"You see that in Asian families as well. There's very strict roles. But having grown up here, my parents share. Quite often it's me and dad in the kitchen. Father-daughter bonding time... But my grandmother will say: your mum should be in here, not your dad. Whereas I have friends who say their brothers just leave a mess and they're expected to clean it up because they're girls. 'It's what you'll do after you're married.'"*

In terms of differential space, Karleen opened a space in which differences and similarities relating to gendered identities could be discussed and evaluated across cultural and age divides. Key in this exchange was how a Christian 'white' background disrupted stereotypical Islamophobic Western projections on to a generalised Muslim culture.

Discussion

The selection of comments above exemplifies how the embodied 'telling' about the objects in each identity box facilitated participants' experimental representation of themselves as becoming HE students. In Nazia's example, we see how the identity box allowed her to control how she wanted to represent a threshold academic identity for public and peer consumption. This connects with Pahl's thinking that representation is a process of becoming. It can be about the way-marking of identity and belonging that young people engage with as they articulate their sense of belonging in the world. This assembling of modes within texts and representations seeps outside the realm of the political into an embodied space of meaning-making that engages with the every day (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p.23).

In Halema's example, we see her awareness of the embodied aspect of her presence in HE space and of how she might be determined by the way others see her. Unlike in Nazia's example, for Halema, the identity box activity wasn't revelatory in the insights it offered into the construction of an HE student identity. Instead, there is a sense that Halema is practised in producing this kind of differential space. There is a playful and subversive subtlety in the way she mediates her gender and her cultural background.

Karleen's example illustrates the potential of sharing experiences across cultures and age differences through the identity box activity and how this has the potential to provide profound critical perspectives on reified conceptualisations of gender and race. Karleen's contribution also highlights the need for careful framing and management of the HE intimate space, during the methodology by staff and researchers in order to avoid profiling student identities.

The identity box activity also provides an example of students co-producing differential space, with both research and curricular implications. The examples above illustrate how embodiment interacts powerfully with identity formation in indirect and sometimes unexpected ways. We would argue that embodiment is an important component of HE differential space, especially for students from so-called 'BAME' backgrounds. In the examples above, differential space is distinct from the notion of an abstract, homogenising HE space, involving a "*new ritual of sharing*" (Richardson, 1997, p.79) that is collective, allowing for the articulation and conceptualisation of identity and a sense of belonging by the student participants on their own terms. There are implications arising out of this discussion for how HE spaces are experienced by *all* students.

Conclusion

The project shows how students can be involved as co-producers in research – particularly in research into 'student experience'. The project also offers insights into inclusion: specifically, the potential benefits of students' being involved in co-producing curriculum space (Neary 2014). Birmingham City University has a diverse student population, sixty-three per cent of which have been identified as so-called 'BAME' students. The purpose of the research project can be seen as the production of a space in which these 'new majorities' can identify and, importantly, name themselves and ultimately displace more traditional notions of student identity which arise out of a historically more homogeneous student body.

Our findings suggest that modern universities, with their diverse student cohorts, need to include students as co-producers of HE space. To do so should help to break down the traditional hierarchies that position curriculum and knowledge as separate and prior to pedagogy, thereby affirming the views of Neary *et al.* (2014) that pedagogy can reconfigure curriculum as a dynamic interaction between students as co-producers and the differentiated knowledges that they bring with them to university. Unlike Hubbard *et al.* (2017), this project did not involve students in the production of subject materials. Instead, it highlighted the potential value of bringing identity into HE curriculum space. The student-researchers in this project used the identity box activity to begin to articulate an awareness of their distinct student identities and their interaction as bodies of knowledge with non-HE related identities. This provided a starting point for finding a place where they could feel more comfortable within the wider curriculum and environs of HE.

The current neoliberalisation of HE is changing teacher/student relations in particular ways: positioning students as passive consumers and consolidating a racialised hierarchy within and across HEIs. Reductive national student evaluations like the NSS and institutional rankings like the TEF obscure the complexity of relations and interactions between students, their peers and staff. They present the disunified and individual experiences of students as an imaginary bloc that can be unproblematically understood and measured. However, for some potential students, including some black and Asian students, it fails to provide important information about the substantive experience of students *like them*. By not taking account of the distinctness of the minoritised experience in HE, it renders them and their needs invisible.

The project highlighted how students of different ages and different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds represent a significant and unavoidable challenge to modern universities. Post Brexit, there has been a heightened resurgence of nationalism and that has highlighted a greater urgency for HE in the UK to respond by challenging racist ideologies, economic exploitation and attitudes that once underpinned imperialism.

This research was undertaken after being reviewed and granted approval by the Faculty Ethics Committee.

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