Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students' Perceptions of Successful Classroom Practices in a UK Graduate Program

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In this paper, I present the findings of a longitudinal study into the perceptions of linguistically and culturally diverse practicing teachers in a graduate program in the United Kingdom (UK) with regard to pedagogic practices deemed successful in helping them negotiate access to an academic community of practice. It is argued that an approach which seeks out these students' views, and the ways these change over time, enables new, more comprehensive, and more critical understandings of the relationship between notions of cultural and linguistic diversity, learning, and pedagogy which can inform both practice and theory for the WAC movement.

In the UK, as in many countries, while linguistic and cultural diversity have been commonplace in higher educational settings for a considerable time, the pedagogical implications for this have only recently started to be debated. In large part this been prompted by the dramatic and exponential growth of international student numbers, particularly from South East Asia (UKCOSA, n.d.). This has meant that linguistically and culturally diverse students have a more visible presence in many classes and may even, in some programs, be a majority of the student body (McNamara and Harris, 1997). As Singh and Doherty (2004) note, in particular, the increasing internationalization of classrooms in higher education has begun to raise concerns among educators as to how to cope with the needs and demands of these disparate student bodies.

Problematizing Current Models of Support for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students in the UK

Support for linguistically and culturally diverse students typically takes two forms in universities in the UK. Firstly, to help learners reach the language proficiency levels deemed necessary for study in higher education in the UK and to familiarize them with the academic written protocols, pre-sessional courses, before they formally enrol, are run by special units within the university (usually referred to as English language centres). Students may also elect to make use of in-sessional support provided by these units, such as one to one tutorials or study skills classes once they have started study in their academic departments (called "faculties" in the UK).

Secondly, to assist faculty in their work with these students, special workshops run by staff development units are increasingly commonplace. These courses seek to raise awareness of the ways in which international students' socio-cultural and linguistic background, which they are assumed to transfer to the new university setting, will lead them to hold different linguistic and other behavioral norms from those promoted in a western academic community. Armed with this knowledge, faculty

members are then invited to reflect on pedagogic strategies to help assimilate and accommodate these students.

One of the most common ways in which cultural and linguistic differences are addressed in these workshops is, following the approach developed by cultural anthropologists such as Hofstede (1984), to identify central tendencies of a given culture to help "position" and "predict" the potential areas of communication breakdown. Employing this attempt to dichotomize cultures, Cortazzi and Jin (1997, p. 78) highlight differences in academic expectations between the UK and many south-east Asian contexts such as individual orientation versus collective consciousness, active involvement versus passive participation, creativity/ originality versus mastery/ transmission, and critical evaluation versus assumed acceptance.

In this paper, I will argue that these approaches for working with international students are limited and problematic on two counts. First, because they are based on overly simplistic conceptualizations of international students as defined by pre formed linguistic and cultural dispositions. Second, because they are informed by theories of learning which fail to give adequate prominence to a view of learning as a situated and dynamic response experiences in the new setting.

With regard to the dichotomizing cultural comparison approach outlined above, there is a danger of over generalization and reductionism in the ways in which culture is seen to define individual actions. On one level, this is because it promotes an under theorized monolithic view of culture which fails to acknowledge the richness and diversity within cultures (see for example Zamel, 1997; Kumaravadelivelu, 2003). On another level, the approach denies the role of agency in determining the multifarious ways in which individuals can choose to realize and engage with culture. As Guest (2002) points out, we need to acknowledge that linguistically and culturally diverse students' decisions and actions are not merely a reflection of culture—something we readily accept when accounting for the actions of individuals in our own culture. If we fail to do so, we lay ourselves open to charges of cultural stereotyping and may even confound rather than facilitate the development of practices to support these learners.

Overemphasizing learning as an individual cognitive process of meaning construction related to pre-existing socio-culturally determined norms is also problematic as it denies a view of learning as social, situated and formed through on-going interactions with significant others (Kirshner and Whitson,1997). Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that successful learning has more to do with the acquisition of the social practices of a given community than it does with the acquisition of discreet skills and facts (Lave and Wenger, 1991). These social practices refer not only to linguistic practices such as the use of certain genres and lexis but also to many other practices and values that distinguish communities from one another (Johns, 1997).

Wenger (1998) suggests that gaining membership of a community of practice requires that individuals move from marginal through to peripheral to fuller membership. Thus, as Thesen (1997, p. 487) notes, learners are likely to find themselves in a state of "unsteady transition" as they move from one community of practice to another. This will take them through a process of relinquishing or "unlearning" unhelpful agentive responses acquired in previous learning settings. More importantly, given the situated nature of learning, it takes them through a process of how to successful "learn" or take up new agentive positions within the new community.

To sum up, I suggest that the assumption that the learning dispositions of linguistically and culturally diverse students are culturally determined, fixed and transferred wholesale from one setting to another is highly problematic. Rather, following Sfard (1998), I argue that learning dispositions are best described as situated responses to the act of participation in a particular learning community and as dynamically constructed and transformed through on-going engagement. It follows from this,

as Zamel (1997) has observed, that attempts to make faculty sensitive to the linguistic and cultural background of their students, while well-intentioned, are of only limited value in seeking in assisting linguistically and culturally diverse learners with the process of socialization into a new community of practice. Of more value is to critically evaluate the pedagogic opportunities provided by the community and to consider to what extent they facilitate legitimate peripheral participation in the community of practice.

Research Priorities for Rethinking Pedagogies for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners

On the basis of the discussion above, an important starting point for identifying appropriate pedagogic strategies for working with linguistically and culturally diverse students who are typically positioned as "silent recipients" of educational processes (Neito,1999, p. 192) is to prioritize research which aims to seek out their voices with regard to the ways in which they negotiate their understanding of the learning opportunities afforded by the community. Focusing on these learners' perceptions of the "constraints and affordances" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 45) of the pedagogical practices promoted in a higher educational setting as the study reported on here seeks to do, enables, as Thesen (1997) argues, potentially unexpected and more critical understandings of both learning and pedagogy to emerge.

Not surprisingly, this is a stance increasingly advocated in the literature on student learning in higher education both in general and with regard to WAC programs in particular. Hawthorne (1998, p. 58) for example, in her study of learners' perceptions of the value of academic writing support at a university in the US, argues that studies of students' perceptions are essential since: "to create a better educational experience for students, we need to hear from students about what happens to them within, because of and in spite of our writing programs".

In the same paper, echoing earlier comments by Becker (1992), Hawthorne (1998) also highlights a need for more longitudinal studies of learners' perceptions to capture the unpredictability of learning with regard to writing. This view also finds support amongst researchers seeking to capture what Bloomer (2001,p. 429) calls the "temporal connectivity" of learning and is an important stance to take where learning is viewed as the dynamic process of gaining access to a community of practice.

Background to the Study

The research reported here focuses on the views of fourteen linguistically and culturally diverse graduate students with regard to classroom practices which are perceived to facilitate or constrain their learning during a one year Masters in TESOL program at a university in the UK. This program is comprised of three terms of study. The first two focus on the delivery of a range of modules which are assessed through written assignments of varying lengths. These are taught by a number of different full-time and part-time faculty members who employ a variety of teaching approaches, including lectures, seminars, task-based learning approaches, practical workshops and student presentations. The third term is devoted to the completion of a dissertation through research.

Additional support for learning during the program is provided in a number of ways:

1. Regular access to one-on-one tutorials to discuss their progress and concerns with a personal mentor (a member of faculty).
2. Regular weekly program meetings during the first two terms to provide a forum for students to discuss general issues arising in their studies, to familiarize them with program-specific writing

protocols and to provide an opportunity to offer additional feedback on the program over and above the end-of-term evaluation questionnaires they were invited to complete.

3. The organization of learners into formal study support groups to help establish a culture of collaboration.

In addition to the above, all international students are encouraged to take a five-week study skills course provided by the English Language Centre and are able to obtain one-on-one support for assignment writing on a weekly or bi-weekly basis from a tutor provided by the same unit.

The international students participants for this study were drawn from a range of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Four were from mainland China, five from Taiwan, one from Japan, one from Thailand, one from Malaysia (of Indian ethnic background), one from Saudi Arabia (originally from Nigeria) and one from South Korea. Other members of the MEd in TESOL classroom community included eight students from the UK, six of whom were of white UK background and two of whom were from ethnic minority groups (Bangladeshi and Sikh). All students were qualified and experienced primary secondary or post-secondary teachers.

For the majority of the participants, this was the first time they had studied in a degree program out of their countries of origin, although five participants had studied in the UK for short periods of time: two on three month teacher training programs at other universities, two on year-long language programs immediately prior to joining the MEd in TESOL, and one had completed a masters degree in business at the same university in the previous academic year. In addition, eleven of the fourteen participants had joined the pre-sessional academic and language support program provided by the English Language Centre at the university for one month immediately preceding their entry onto the MEd in TESOL.

My Dual Role as Researcher and Faculty

Before going on to describe the design of the study below, it is important to stress from the outset that as I am an instructor on this program, the research was on my own working context and its practices. Moreover, all of the participants had at some time during the program elected to take modules run by me. As Cohen et al. (2000) acknowledge, all approaches to research come with costs and benefits. While I acknowledge that my position as a faculty member in this program might have meant that participants found themselves compromised to some extent in sharing insights with me, I believe that my role as informed insider was valid and beneficial in this particular research project. First, since the primary means of data collection was a series of semi-structured interviews, I felt my position as an insider better enabled me to build the sense of trust and rapport employing these entails. Based on my previous experience of using interviews as a means of data collection with international students, I have found that limited proficiency in the second or foreign language together with a lack of familiarity with the interviewer make it difficult for participants to feel comfortable in sharing their views with researchers who are outside the community and lack experience of working with these kinds of students. Secondly, as Holliday (2002) observes teacher researchers are well- placed to undertake research as they are better able to see interactions, complexities, and dynamic processes from a more holistic perspective, leading to a deeper understanding and greater insights about a particular issue.

To ameliorate the effects of my dual role as faculty member and researcher, I endeavored to follow established ethical protocols for undertaking qualitative research of this nature. Thus, informed voluntary consent was obtained from all participants before the research got underway, and they were given the right to withdraw at any stage and for whatever reason. In addition they were assured

of and received privacy and confidentiality at all stages of the research. I also sought to maintain a questioning stance with regard to my pre-conceived assumptions and to be alert to my subjective biases.

Design of the Study

The research study sought to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do participants perceive their instructors' practices as impacting their learning at the beginning of the program, and how far do their perceptions change during the year?
2. In what ways do participants perceive instructors' practices as facilitating or constraining their learning at the start of the program and how do their perceptions change during the year?

To collect data, I undertook a number of semi-structured interviews which were carried out with each participant at three points during the year. A baseline interview was carried out two weeks after the start of the program, a further interview at the start of the second term, and a third interview at the start of the third term. I transcribed each individual interview and summarized salient points. In the subsequent interview, these points were re-presented to participants for checking and clarification. They also served as a springboard for discussing perceptual shifts. In the first interview, I focused on establishing their previous learning experiences and previous experiences of intercultural learning as well as their expectations of the new learning setting. In the following interviews, I focused on how expectations and assumptions about learning, teaching, and culture were seen to be shifting in response to their on-going engagement with the new learning community. I also sought to identify what participants attributed these changes to. Thus it was hoped that a sense of the developing interface between learning and pedagogic practices could be traced.

In addition, to create a sense of shared context and to serve as a platform for discussion, I undertook observations of a variety of classes in different modules throughout the first two terms. Participants also permitted me to have access to the reflective learning portfolios they developed throughout the year as an assessment requirement for one of the modules. Several also responded to my invitation to share email discussions about their learning. Finally, towards the end of the third term, I undertook focus group interviews with small group of participants to cross check themes I identified as emerging from my analysis of the various data sources and to seek additional clarification of points of interest.

Results and Discussion

Before proceeding to outline and discuss key findings of the study, it is important to make two points. First, I need to acknowledge that an individual participant's perceptions of pedagogical practices were seen to be related to their distinctive learning trajectories as they progress through the program, reflecting the unique ways in which they managed and constructed their identities within this community with reference to their previous experiences, other concurrent experiences, and their imagined futures. Nevertheless, it was also the case that a general picture of trends and tendencies among the participants could be identified as emerging from the data, and my discussion of the results will focus on this. Secondly, for the sake of brevity, in this paper I will only employ data from individual and focus group interviews to support my interpretations.

The findings of the study suggest that these advanced students are active and strategic both in the ways they orientate themselves towards the practices promoted in this learning community and in

their on-going attempts to become part of the community. The results also shed light on the students' shifting perceptions of helpful classroom practice as they progressed through the course.

Learners are active and strategic in orientating themselves to the practices promoted in the new learning community.

The results of the study challenge essentialist and over-generalized views of linguistically and culturally diverse learners learning dispositions. Baseline interviews revealed how individuals from similar cultural backgrounds held different views and attitudes towards learning as well as different expectations of the MEd in TESOL program. These differences related to their previous experiences of studying in western universities, their early personal experiences as learners, and in several cases, to their previous experiences of marginalization within their own cultural setting.

Moreover, in these interviews, participants seldom alluded to cultural norms as explanations for the ways they engaged with learning practices during the program. For example, with regard to initial difficulties all fourteen participants claimed to have with engaging in whole class discussions, only one attributed this to culture saying: "Sometimes it's because I remember how in my context we think we should keep silent and think twice before speaking ... I keep that in mind." More typically, initial difficulties were attributed to personal failings or the failings of others, such as lecturers or other students. For example, nine participants highlighted how their lack of contribution was due to personal qualities; ten, because they lacked knowledge, eight. because they had nothing to say, nine, because they lacked interest in the topic; twelve, because they felt their language was poor, and seven. because they did not want to lose face or, as one said: "I can't think quickly enough". Six participants also stated that it was because they didn't like the lecturer and the same number claimed their lack of contribution was because students with a better command of English took all the turns. As one said, "Native speakers take our opportunities away."

In addition, eight of the participants felt that some of their early difficulties were at least as, if not more, attributable to the mismatches they encountered between their expectations and assumptions about what studying at a western university would be like and the reality of the situation they found themselves in. In early interviews, five participants commented on how they assumed that as post graduate learners and as adults, they would be expected to be independent and autonomous. This assumption prevented them initially from taking up and utilizing formal support mechanisms built into the program. For example, it was noticed that while learners were unanimously favorably disposed to the principle of tutorial support, six participants made very limited use of this at the start of the program. It became clear in later interviews that this was because initially they were unsure as to how they should engage with this support. Some felt that seeking support would suggest that they were "weak" or "problem" students. As one student explained: "I didn't expect much support— for me doing a masters is very independent."

It is also apparent from interviews undertaken at the start of the program that from the outset, participants were actively engaged in the process of orientating themselves to the new learning community and in trying to identify community practices. They were strategic in their attempts to deal with these. For example, while the vast majority of participants (12) claimed to be more used to lecture formats and didactic teaching approaches in their previous studies, all participants expressed a preference for small group learning within a few weeks of starting their studies. Small groups were construed in terms of the small classes which were a feature of some modules or, more frequently, as opportunities for pair and group learning within large classes. They seemed to recognize that working in small groups was an important way to enable them to actively contribute in this learning setting and that this was highly valued. For example, as one participant stated: "Students in my

country don't need to speak but here students need to express their opinions—group work can help me with this." Another commented: "In my country you learn by listening but in this country you emphasize learning by doing ... it's the way to be successful so I changed to wanting to have tasks and that means group work."

It is interesting to note from these extracts from the data that in choosing to use the term "in my country" at this stage of the program, these participants saw their broad national cultural identities and their previous learning dispositions as serving as useful reference point in their attempts to make sense of how they were seeking to strategically realign themselves with the requirements and perceived expectations of the new learning community. The flexibility and adaptability exhibited in the responses resonates with findings about a number of studies of South East Asian students in particular (see Biggs ,1999, p. 130, for a summary of these).

Discussions with participants also showed them to be highly attuned to the "peculiarities" of a particular community of practice and "what joining takes" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 13). For example, when asked about how far previous experience of studying in other Western educational settings gave students an advantage in this setting, almost all participants (12 in total) argued that any initial advantage was short-lived, as practices were often very localized and specific to a particular academic community. As one participant said of her previous experience: "It's not the same atmosphere here as there ... I don't have any advantage in this course." Another went so far as to claim: "My past experiences are a waste of time. They can't help me here."

From the above it is apparent that from the outset, these post-graduate students could be seen to be actively engaged in seeking to gain a purchase in the new learning community. As part of this process of adjustment, results suggest that where pre-formed dispositions were perceived to be unhelpful, these were readily relinquished. On the one hand, this process comprised the "unlearning" of agentive positions students had assumed in other learning communities but also the readjustment of their presuppositions of what learning in this new setting would be like. On the other hand, it comprised a strategic attempt to acquire the agency necessary to maximize their possibility for success in the new community.

Pedagogic practices seen to facilitate learners' attempts to gain legitimate peripheral participation in the new learning community.

The results provide a number of useful insights into the pedagogical activities participants perceived to be helpful in scaffolding their attempts to negotiate their understanding of community membership and practices at the start of the program. They also show how these perceptions shifted over time in response to their ability to renegotiate their understandings and seek out new positions within the community.

In the early stages of the program, group work and a well-structured learning environment were unanimously regarded as important ways in which these students could be helped to gain access to this community of practice. All participants commented on how, in the early stages of the program, they preferred to work in small groups as this gave them an opportunity to contribute. As one commented: "It makes me feel I'm a participant not an observer." Six participants also suggested that their preference for small group work was closely related to the fact that this often entailed tasks requiring them to process new knowledge which they perceived to be a core value of the practice community. As one remarked: "Here we focus on applying knowledge not just on getting it."

Ten participants also observed initial preferences for working in groups which comprised other international students, due to the perceived disparities in their language proficiency relative to those

students who spoke English as a first language. As one participant remarked about her preference for working in groups with other international students: "They are like me. I don't have to care about my grammar or anything—they won't laugh at me."

Results also provided insights into how students felt they could best be encouraged to take part in whole class discussions. In particular, they mentioned how lecturers' ways of encouraging contributions had a negative or positive effect on them at this stage. Seven participants felt that directive questioning was very unhelpful and meant that they lost face. As one said: "I prefer to listen not to be forced to speak." Four felt that directive questioning was necessary to ensure they were included but that lecturers needed to understand that while they appreciated this, it did not always mean they would be able to answer. For example, one said: "You can ask me a question, but please understand that I may not be able to answer."

The second identifiable general preference at the early stage of the program was for a well-structured learning environment. While one participant said he felt this was because this was what he was used to in his previous learning setting, the majority focused more on how this helped them deal with the demands of the new learning community. Things they valued in the program as a whole were study groups (mentioned by eight participants), the opportunity to write a formative non-assessed assignment (mentioned by ten participants), and the program meeting (mentioned by seven participants). With regard to the lectures, ten participants claimed to value those for which instructors required pre-reading and pre-class tasks and six mentioned that they valued mini assignments to help prepare them for the final assessed assignment. They also valued well-organized classes. For example, one participant said about an instructor: "I liked her class ... she has a plan and she follows it.." In contrast, another said: "Lecturers don't always do what they say they will at the beginning of class and some of them go back and forth which is problematic for me." Eight participants also mentioned the importance of handouts. A typical comment was: "We want it written down. It gives us a chance to digest."

In addition to the above, twelve participants remarked how they felt both the formative and other assignments were major ways in which they felt they learned what was required of them. Although they found this a demanding process, the fact that they had to produce on average six or seven written assignments was perceived to greatly assist their learning. This reflects the findings of Hawthorne's (1998, p. 58) study where she found that learners cited "the cumulative effect of a writing intensive curriculum" as a major contributor to their growth as learners and writers.

Changing views of pedagogic practices as learners progressed through the program

As learners progressed through the program, a symbiotic, dynamic, and transformative relationship between the positions that participants negotiated within the community and their perceptions of helpful pedagogic practices was seen to emerge. Thus, it was through their engagement in pedagogic practices in the early part of the program that they found ways of taking up initial positions in the community. In doing so, they acquired the forms of agency which in turn enabled them to renegotiate new positions in the community. This then led them to reappraise earlier views on what were seen to be supportive or unsupportive pedagogic practices and in so doing, in some cases, to try to reconfigure these to better meet their needs.

For example, it seemed that in scaffolding their early entry into the community, group work helped many participants to acquire the self confidence in their language proficiency and knowledge-base which in turn enabled them to feel more comfortable in and come to appreciate the benefits of whole class learning opportunities more as time went on. By the middle of the second term, seven of the

participants reflected that they no longer found group work so helpful or necessary in supporting their learning. Five participants also talked of new-found benefits in whole-class discussions. As one said: "I find now that it is possible for me to get interaction opportunities within a lecturing format." Another talked of the value of questioning to her as she looked back on Term Two: "I've realized over time that questioning illuminates and stimulates your thoughts."

The participants' views on tutorial support also changed significantly with time. In particular, four of the six participants who professed initial difficulty in seeking out tutorial support had, by the start of the second term, started to actively request this support. Several became quite vociferous in their demands that support mechanisms be increased. As one participant who had initially been reluctant to sign up for tutorials commented, "I found things so different that I realized that I did need support and that I needed as much as I could get." Another participant said, "I didn't expect much but found I needed it."

Ten of the fourteen participants also changed their views on what kind of support they felt they needed from their lecturers. They attributed their changing needs to what one participant described as better understanding "how to play the game" which was seen to involve two major abilities: acquiring the self-directedness that the program sought to promote, and mastering the academic genres and register, with a greater understanding of critical writing. With regard to the latter, one participant described his shifting understanding of "good" academic writing in the following way: "I've moved from a view of academic writing as read and write to read think and write." He added though that he felt he still needed some support, it was a different kind of support from that he had required earlier in the program. This view was echoed by six other participants. With regard to tutorial support in particular, in term two, all of these ten participants felt less of a need to seek out help to address difficulties they had with academic protocols, but felt they still needed and appreciated the chance to discuss aspects of subject knowledge with a tutor. As one participant said: "I still need support. I always need support. But now it's different. Now I know how it (academic writing) works but I still need help with my ideas. I have my ideas but I need the teacher (sic) to help me decide or confirm whether it's a good idea, to raise questions, and to suggest some more reading."

Bloomer's (2001: 442) foregrounding and backgrounding metaphor is helpful in seeking to describe this process of shift and to emphasize that needs will fluctuate over time in response to students' "changing relationality and interpretation of experience." That is to say, that while at some stages of learning, certain needs will be prioritized, at other times, other needs will come to the fore. It is important to realize too, that this will not necessarily be a linear and tidy process. As one student commented: "How much support I need changes all the time. In Term Two I needed less support ... now, I am starting to write my dissertation, I find I need more support again!" Thus, as Bloomer (p. 443) argues, it seems important to be aware that learning is transformed in ways that are "subtle, irregular, unpredictable and multi rather than uni-dimensional."

Implications and Conclusions.

In focusing on linguistically and culturally diverse students' experiences of learning in higher education in a western university setting, this study has sought to enable the often marginalized and silenced members of our classes to gain a voice in the debate about pedagogy for widening participation. The findings present a picture of students as active in strategically realigning themselves and investing in the practices of the new community as well as readily relinquishing unhelpful dispositions developed in previous learning settings. They also suggest that participants identify certain learning opportunities as particularly helpful in scaffolding their on-going attempts

to gain purchase in this new community of practice. More generally, pedagogic practices are perceived to exert a considerable influence on their success throughout their studies.

The results raise some important questions with regard to the validity of current attempts to support faculty in working with linguistically and culturally diverse students outlined in the introduction to this paper. In particular, they challenge the common essentialist approaches to understanding these students' experiences purely in terms of linguistic and cultural background. Not only do these fail to account for individual agency but also encourage faculty to persist with a view of these students' difficulties as due to inherent cultural and linguistic deficits, thus downplaying the need for faculty to consider the ways in which their own practices may contribute to these students' success or failure.

It is important to stress, that while the findings reported here may well prove to be of broad relevance to discussions of appropriate practices for linguistically and culturally diverse learners in higher education, it is necessary to corroborate these finding by undertaking similar studies in other faculty and in other institutional settings, particularly among more novice (undergraduate) students. As Morita (2004) observes, academic socialization entails learning how to join a number of communities simultaneously including the general academic community, disciplinary community, institutional community, but also localized classroom learning communities. Thus while the results reported on here may be indicative of the general perceptions of linguistically and culturally diverse students concerning successful pedagogic practices to facilitate their socialization into an academic community, it is important to also understand that these results need to be seen as situated responses to their attempts to join a particular community in a particular department and may not be generalizable. Further studies will also help establish how far the fact that the participants were all experienced teachers adept at reflecting on educational experiences and engaged in studying educational theory, impacted on the results obtained.

These potential limitations of the study do not, however, detract from the value of the study, namely, the importance of focusing on learners' accounts of their experiences as an important way of providing the "thick" descriptions necessary to effect local change. Indeed, my colleagues and I have found the insights gained from this study a valuable platform for introducing new initiatives into our own practice. A significant point of learning for us has been to understand the need to see communities of practice as co-constructed, emergent, and responsive. That is to say, in deepening our understanding of the ways in which these students manage the parameters set by the community of practice, the findings have led us to consider how the community itself might be transformed and be more responsive to the needs of these learners. This is an important area for future research.

As Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) argue, a community of practice should not be defined as "a set of dictates for proper practice" but should provide the scope for flexibility and be seen to unfold and evolve in the on-going interactions between participants. I would suggest this view of learning community is not one which is currently embraced in higher education, but is one which can greatly enhance the chances for the development of more equitable pedagogy. As a result of undertaking the study in the particular community I work in, insights gained into these students' experiences have led us to critically reflect on this issue and to acknowledge that an appropriate pedagogy for our program needs us to recognize the right of all participants to contribute to the on-going process of how this community is defined. That is, as Duff (2002, p. 290) argues, the study has helped us to conceive of a community of practice as cohesive, one in which all members of the community are seen to engage in the negotiation of identities and subject matter together in "respectful and equitable ways." Such an approach, I suggest, is an important way of seeking to meet the challenges posed by widening participation in higher education both in the UK and beyond.

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