

An ethnographic approach to studying the student experience: The student perspective through free form video diaries. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This is a longitudinal project, in its third year, involving free-form video diaries by undergraduate students, reflecting on aspects of their experience that are significant to them. Sixty four students, from three cohorts, have been given video cameras and they return regular (weekly) short videos covering whatever is important to them. Focus group sessions enable discussion of specific issues. We have coded video data so that we, and others, will be able to draw on it. The data provides insight, from the student perspective, into many issues including friendships, induction, assessment, modes of study, teamwork etc. As an example, we will present some of our findings in relation to academic and social transitions experienced by students throughout their first year. However, a key question is how can we make this rich resource of video data available so that it can inform a wider range of studies across the international higher education community?

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The video diary student experience project

Substantial research data exists related to the student experience. Questionnaires and surveys have provided insights into important and emerging issues (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009). These include areas such as student retention, assessment, feedback and employability. However, even where questionnaire design offers free-form response, responses tend not to reflect the ways in which students actually live and breathe their university experience. In order to address this, we have established a student experience project involving the collection of free-form video diaries, allowing students to express whatever is important to them.

Over the course of the academic years 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/2010, three cohorts of first-year undergraduates were recruited. The students are taking various degree courses under the broader disciplinary remit of Biological Sciences. A total of 64 undergraduates have been recruited from the three cohorts. Whilst recruitment involved a process of self-selection, there was a balanced mix of male (33) and female (31) students. The majority of the students are British nationals, however 6 hold non-UK national status. The students have continued to contribute to the project throughout their course, so the first cohort are now in their third and final year of their course.

The students have been provided with small, hand-held video cameras and asked to submit a minimum of a 5 minute video diary on a weekly basis. The video diaries, they were informed, could focus on any topic, theme or concern that they felt was important to their lives and their student experience. Students involved in the project have also been involved in focus groups, which take place three times a year. With video diaries often focusing on individual reflection, the project team felt that the focus groups would provide students with a basis to discuss and share their concerns and perceptions of the student experience with fellow project members. Student workloads have meant that many of the video diaries are in reality submitted once every two weeks. Some students do submit 5 to 10 minute diaries. However, others are happy to spend 20 minutes in front of the camera.

The students determine who and what is included in the visual logging of their student experience. The video diaries, in this sense, capture the various emotions, experiences and insights that students are feeling at *particular* moments in *particular* personal and social spaces. In being able to reflect on their complete experiences, not only involving things happening at University but also at their family homes and in their relationships, the students are able to project a sense of identity that is not limited by their social status as students. The project represents a unique example of a student-led multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1998) and thus transcends the methodological limitations of conducting research into the student experience in institutional settings.

The diaries, in this sense, facilitate an understanding of what it means to be a young adult in ways that cannot be ascertained through the use of “single response” questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These latter methods, we suggest, are also prone to imposing particular assumptions on students about *their* student experience. Indeed, Moffatt’s understanding of the “formal, adult-sounding ways” of the interviewer (Moffatt, 1989, p. xv) alludes to the problems of a research method that is circumscribed by promptings, however flexible they may be, of specific research agendas. The use of portable, hand-held video cameras provides students with a basis to establish their own, reflective research agendas. We are using an ethnographic approach in which we are attempting to keep intervention in

data gathering to a minimum. However, we are carrying out action research in which the information given to us by students is enabling us to intervene in institutional policies and support systems so as to improve the quality of the student experience for subsequent cohorts.

This rich resource of data is giving us insight, from the student perspective, into many areas of student life, both academic and social, and potentially could give novel inputs into projects focussed on many areas of the student experience. To date, we have paid particular attention to the complex transitions that occur when students enter higher education.

Fragmented transitions throughout the first year

The research methods at the heart of the project have played a central role in inspiring an understanding of student transitions that centres on the relationship between family, home and the student experience. The longitudinal emphasis of the project has provided continual insights into student life in ways that cannot be achieved through the application of research methods involving information gathering at specific times and places. The regular submission of video diaries over long periods of time by the *same* individuals has highlighted the extent to which students engage with shifting, sometimes contradictory, insights and emotions throughout a given academic year. We have explored how and on what terms students make sense of university life throughout their first year.

The first few weeks at university represent a time of great social and emotional upheaval for many incoming first-year students (Eder & McCabe, 2004; Palmer et al., 2009; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The majority of students starting the video diary project, indeed the majority of students at the University of Leicester, are leaving home for the first time.

For many students on the project, the process of adapting to new surroundings was dominated by a perceived need to engage with a key symbol of university life: “living in halls.” More than three quarters of the students lived in catered or self-catering university accommodation, reflecting Holdsworth’s (2006, p. 500) assertion that students continue to engage with historically-constituted stereotypes of what it means to be a “typical student.” Indeed, several students explicitly recognised that living in “halls” was a necessary part of the first-year university experience because, as one student put it, “*that’s where 1st years are.*” Determined to be included in this transitional process, another student suggested, “*I think living in halls is part of the uni experience that I didn’t want to miss out on.*” Sam felt that moving into “halls” enabled her to properly “*do the university experience*” even though her university accommodation was in the same residential area of the city as her family home.

Alongside this feeling of independence and the development of new friendships, moving away from home also brings challenges in terms of the practical aspects of day to day living—shopping, washing and sometimes cooking—and the video diaries have given us insight into practical ways that we can help with this. These include providing better laundry facilities in halls of residence, better market research about provisions etc. available in university shops.

The transition of teaching, studying and learning styles from school or college to University is also something mentioned by most students in their diaries. Key aspects being the reduced contact and larger classes that were now involved. A valuable source of help with this has

been the student “buddy” system with students from years two and three forming mutual support groups with the first year students.

Findings relate to the ways in which students adapt to life at University, not just during the first weeks but on a longer-term basis. The process of transition when starting university is often viewed as being a linear process. However, Holdsworth (2006), when considering residential transitions of students refers to them as being “individualised, reflective and fragmented” (p. 499). It is clear from our study that the transition and the whole university experience is fragmented, involving not just initial adjustments to university life but also repeated re-adjustments to home life during vacations and then a new cycle of re-adjustments experienced at the start of each new term and, indeed, academic year.

Transitions are continual. For example, the students on our study had Semester exams after the Christmas break, and this adds huge pressures to the adjustments that the students have to make. They return to home wanting to spend time with family and friends from home but they have to revise. Then when they return to University, they can’t focus on re-establishing the newly formed relationships from last term because exams start. This is often compounded by the need of some students to work during the vacations to financially support their studies. Not all of these assessments need to be so closely organised and, with the evidence of our project, we are working with the University offices to make exam periods as flexible as possible. During the first year, some students start to work to gain relevant experience, thinking about employment after university. This also adds pressures and we are now being able to work with student support services to optimise timing and appropriateness of practical career advice for first year students.

This outlines just some of the ways in which the outcomes of the project are giving us information to optimise the help and support that we can give students throughout the first year. There is clear, often poignant, evidence that students experience a variety of simultaneous social and academic transitions that can impinge on their learning experience.

Response to changes in the demands on higher education need to be informed by the student perspective to enable partnerships in learning to develop. We have a large unique source of data that can help studies of the first year experience and beyond.

Outcomes of the Conference Session

There was a real appreciation at the conference of the power of video, particularly free-form video diaries. The discussion following the presentation focussed on how the wealth of data could be shared in an accessible way with higher education communities internationally, so that it could inform not only projects relating to transition but also other projects relating to the student experience.

It was generally agreed that student confidentiality was one prime concern—it was essential that no video footage found its way to any web-site because this medium could quickly spread, and even with false names could lead to future embarrassment for the students. It was commented that the openness of the students was a particular strength of the project. One participant suggested using the audio tracks from the video as the form of shared data, however, it was agreed that this would lose the richness of the communication from the students. An alternative suggestion was to use actors to make additional videos; watching the appropriate videos and then re-creating them using the students’ words. This is a good idea

but would be very costly and time consuming. However, this might be a possibility to extend the range of video used in public presentations. Concluding comments were that sharing would best come from individual collaborations and personal contacts. Therefore, in order to optimise this, it is essential that dissemination of the project's existence and the methodologies used in analysing the data should be as wide as possible.

The outcomes of the project to date, in relation to transition in all of its dimensions—personal and academic—were raised at other presentations as being one good exemplar of finding out what really is important from the student perspective. It was acknowledged that the videos were a good tool for highlighting the areas of focus for institutional change. Although there may be variations across the world in the organisation of the academic year and the demography of the student body, it seems that the general issues and challenges are common and the video diaries will provide a source of evidence of these. They are also a powerful tool for students' own personal reflections, and the impact of students having this record of their own transition and growth throughout the higher education experience was discussed. We will be investigating further the possibility of using video diaries in this way more broadly across the whole cohort of students.

Where Next- Reflections on Transitions and the Student Experience?

Discussions following the session did give some invaluable insights into ways in which we can progress the video diary project and these are outlined above. On the broad topic of transition it is clear that throughout the first year it is complex, not only for the students but also for staff; they need to adjust to the changing needs of students and to the experiences and skills that students have when they enter higher education so that they can help them through their journey to define, continually redefine, and reach goals. The realisation that these goals will be individual is also important. Academic transitions are of course key and, throughout the conference, it became clear that more emphasis should be placed on team development of curricula. Teams should perhaps involve not only teaching support staff and academics teaching first year students, but also staff involved in subsequent years and teachers from colleges involved in teaching prior to entry, and not forgetting students themselves!

Transitions are fragmented and occur throughout the higher education experience. In parallel with work, to study and facilitate the student experience throughout the first year in higher education, it is essential to look carefully at transitions throughout, of course remembering that the staff experience is key to the experience of the students.

In relation to our own work, these are exciting directions in which to use the video diary data and the growth of the project will be undoubtedly helped by the network of expertise and crucial work being carried out in the field and showcased by the conference.

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