

Community Placement: Windows into Cultural Understanding and Unfamiliar Freedom

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Abstract

This paper explores our students' experiences of community placement. Community placement is a safe and valuable way for advanced migrant and international learners of English to provide the "unfamiliar freedom" (Dlaska, 2000) necessary for learning for an unknown future (Barnett, 2004). Further, this happens within a context of the acquisition of cultural autonomy. The process of joining and becoming a part of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), however peripherally, opens windows into aspects of culture, revealing to view Kiwi turns of phrase, behaviours, communication styles and thought patterns. Our research data was collected from year two Bachelor of Arts in English as an Additional Language (BA EAL) learners, whose community placement provided opportunity for reflection on their experience. Their diaries revealed that community placement contributes to the process where "authentic being" (Barnett, 2004) starts to form. In these reflective recollections, comprising the data for this study, the students record 'windows into cultural understanding' and moments where they describe their placement's impact on their sense of self. Our study is backgrounded by the poststructuralist model (Norton, 2000) where identity involves "struggle". This contributes to fostering "authentic being" and prepares students culturally for whatever self they need for their future global and/or national identities.

Keywords: culture, community, autonomy, identity, reflection

Introduction

The original motivation for me was to plan ahead with my future career. As New Zealand work experience is demanded, I thought taking a volunteering job not only gives me an opportunity to participate in society and help other community members, but also affords me a window to observe New Zealand society, gain some experience in working in customer service area, and most importantly practice my English language ...

(Diana, community placement: a red cross shop)

Diana, a year two university student in Culture and New Zealand Society 1 (CNZS 1) at a tertiary institution in New Zealand, describes the “window to observe New Zealand society” that opened when she started her volunteer job at a red cross shop in Auckland. Diana is one of 40 migrant and international students studying in their second year of Bachelor of Arts in English as an Additional Language (BA EAL) across four intakes who agreed to participate in our study. The extract comes from her reflective journal, documents the students wrote shortly after finishing a period of community placement. These provide much of the data cited in this paper. Diana’s comment, providing the central metaphor for this study, is located within two key contexts: that of work experience and its necessity for her future self; and that of the importance of practising English within a meaningful community of practice. This paper maintains that tutors of English language and culture can usefully draw on the voluntary sector as a context for students to practise skills needed for their future selves. This development of learner identity fosters what Ronald Barnett calls authentic being (2004, p. 259) through learners’ opening of and looking through windows into cultural and self-understanding during community placement.

Issues of social and cultural influences on language learners are receiving more attention in current Second Language Acquisition research (e.g. Bryam, Esarte-Sarries, & Taylor, 1991; Fennes, & Hapgood, 1997; Cotazzi, & Jin, 1999; Dłaska, 2000; Norton, 2000; Norton, & Toohey, 2001; Sercu, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002; Palfreyman, & Smith, 2003; Joseph, 2004; Morita, 2004; Benson, & Nunan, 2005). Our study focuses on the experience of community placement, which offers EAL learners an opportunity to extend their language skills and cultural knowledge. This sets up a challenge for the formation of “authentic being” within a pedagogically controlled but still unknown community of practice. This also provides the “unfamiliar freedom” Dłaska (2000) identifies as necessary for real-life culture learning.

Community placements are controlled in that the students have supervisors. Further, the volunteer sector offers a safe environment and the course, described below, prepares them by providing a framework in which their own knowledge can be constructed and then reconstructed via experience and then reflection. The community placement represents a microcosm of the unknown wider society that is real New Zealand as opposed to the controlled environment of the classroom/institute. It provides a context for students to discover Kiwi culture, assess their relation to it and consider their investments in the language and culture learning experience. This consideration appears in the students’ journals. The process of reflection allows them to reconstruct their experience using a range of actions. The students report observations and their interpretations of what they notice; test strategies and theories and evaluate their effectiveness; contrast experienced observations with their own culture, and reflect on how their experience and investment have impacted on their changing selves.

Community placement offers a range of learning opportunities and experiences and the chance to develop some measure of cultural autonomy. This in turn may result in Barnett’s

“willingness to go on by themselves” (p. 254), a socially contexted description of the cultural autonomy our students describe. To cite Barnett once again, students find “a self that is adequate to such an uncertain world” (p. 254). To echo an idiom resonant in a Kiwi context within Barnett’s words, community placement gives them “a confidence to *have a go*” (p. 253).

We see this when learners journalise their experiences through reflective diarisation, a process participating in self-construction (Shiel, & Jones, 2003) and activating target language learning competencies (Birch, & Kemp, 1999). Further, “students who reflect on their learning are better able to understand themselves and the learning process and exercise control over their own learning” (de la Harpe, & Radloff, 2002, p. 1).

Literature Review

Learning for an Unknown Future

When Barnett asks what learning for an unknown future entails for university students (2004, p. 247), he describes the destabilized student self, seeking quantifiable knowledge in a world where learning involves processing information. Instead of describing a process where learners are formed via input, he unfolds pedagogies that result in incompleteness, epistemologies leading to insecurity and ontologies that limit students to childish vocational aspirations. He sets out a super complex world characterised by “ignorance explosion”, resulting in anxiety, fragility and chaos (p. 250). The unknown-ness, he explains, “derives from the complexity of multiplying descriptions of the world such that we cannot even describe the challenges that face us with any assuredness” (p. 259).

Barnett’s pedagogy of learning *for* this unknown future consists in self-engagement with life-world challenges. This, he maintains, forms a self-energising, self-confident learner, not merely one filled with disciplinary wonder or equipped with fixed theories, specific

strategies and applied skills. 'In-formed' through such pedagogy, students gain "an indwelling in themselves, a confidence in themselves, an investment in their own selves that enables them to go forth into a challenging world" (p. 253). They develop confidence, assert their voices and learn through having that voice contested.

To apply Barnett's pedagogy, it entices learners into "new cognitive spaces", where he or she can "take up his or her own stances and help form the courage to do so." Hence, as in community placement, they embark on a journey "of encountering strangeness, of wrestling with it, and of forming one's own responses to it" (Barrett, p. 257). This paper, building on our previous study (Andrew, & Kearney, 2006), opens up the windows into cultural and self-awareness described by international, migrant and refugee students who encounter strangeness in the new cognitive spaces of community placement and form reflective responses in their journals.

Reflection on experienced culture in a journal adds to learners' abilities to "go on by themselves" by developing metacognitive awareness. Murphey, Chen, and Chen, writing about learners' constructions of language learning histories, observe: "This metacognitive awareness allowed them to take more control of future learning, to own the learning process they were involved in more completely and to become more self-regulated and autonomous" (2005, p. 85). Taking control of future learning adds value to community placement's potential to prepare students for the unknown futures of Barnett's formulation - and of our learners.

Poststructural Formulations of Identity

Norton's conceptualisations of identity as a site of negotiated struggle, investment and cultural capital (1995, 2000) provide further context for this study. Norton Peirce influentially argued for learner being conceptualised as having a complex and sometimes contradictory

social identity. Within this conception, “the role of language is constitutive of and constituted by a learner’s social identity” (1995, p. 17). People use language to negotiate a sense of self within and across both sites and time. Norton builds on Weedon’s (1987) concept of “subjectivity” as having three characteristics. The first of these is the multiple and contradictory nature of the subject or individual social identity. Second, Norton emphasises that identity is a site of struggle changing over time. Third, she takes the position that identity references desire for recognition, affiliation, security and safety (1995). By accessing material resources, such as those encountered during community placement, these desires can be realised. This type of experience, Pavlenko (2002) argues, leads to “language socialisation”. This sort of interaction “is crucial for L2 learning.” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 286)

In addition to offering a framework for considering identity, Norton (2000) reconceives motivation in second language learning. Norton argues that the term “investment” captures the relationship of the language learner to the social world, acknowledging their complex social identity and multiple desires. It recognises that when language learners speak they not only exchange information with target language speakers, but constantly reorganise a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. An investment in the target language and its culture is a symbolic investment in a learner’s identity and an acknowledgement of its mutable nature (Pittaway, 2004, p. 204).

Unfamiliar Freedom

Our third context, which dovetails with Barnett and Norton, is that “cultural autonomy” (Sercu, 2002) and self-directedness can be fostered within pedagogical and epistemological frameworks characterised by “unfamiliar freedom” (Dlaska, 2000). We contend that learners develop autonomy leading to self-directed learning (Benson, 1996; Benson, & Voller, 1997; Sercu, 2002; Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003; Palfreyman, & Smith, 2003).

Dlaska comments that culture learning becomes independent and yields autonomous results “if meaningful contexts for ... unfamiliar freedom are created” (p. 258). This interaction with communities of practice produces language/culture learners who are communicatively confident via “improvised practice” (Lave, & Wenger, 1991, pp. 92-93), culturally literate and self-aware. Community placement provides “unfamiliar freedom” and contributes to “the formation of authentic being” which equips learners for present and future identities as international and national citizens.

“Authentic Being” in “Communities of Practice”

The fourth grounding of this study lies in the notions of “community of practice” or “imagined community” (Lave, & Wenger, 1991; Morita, 2004; Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005). These are sets of “relations among persons, activity and world”, existing over time and related to other communities (Lave, & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger focus on “the whole person acting in the world” (p. 49), something which community placement evokes in providing a context for “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 98) and accessing a culture of practice. As Cook writes, “students need to have successful experiences of language learning to spark a desire to identify with certain groups, to locate themselves in imagined communities and be seen as successful language users” (Cook, 1992, cited in Benson, & Newman, 2005). By participating in communities of practice learners gain a sense of themselves as social entities. This, we maintain enacts “formation of authentic being” (Barnett, 2004, p. 259).

Fusing the Groundings Together: The Course

The culture-integrated approach to language learning

CNZS 1 focuses on cultural identity. Students cover the history of migration to New Zealand, examine the reflections of national and individual identities in film and media and analyse the institutions of government, law, health and education. Socio-political issues, such as the Treaty of Waitangi and the nation's bi- or multi-culturalism, frame the input. The curriculum absorbs Cotazzi and Jin's (1999) model of cultural mirrors. Students see their world reflected in the input and experience some of the society and culture, building awareness of how they interact with it. To apply Barnett, CNZS learners make their "interventions in a ... pre-structured world" (2004, p. 257), engaging them as persons, constructing epistemologies and ontologies. They become not merely knowers affirming or even interrogating the teacher's quantified knowledge but participants, apprentices in "intercultural competence" (Lustig, & Koster, 1999).

Our model of pedagogy concurs with the culture-integrated approach to language learning proposed by Fennes and Hapgood (1997). Dlaska draws on them (2000) to articulate a set of goals for culture-integrated language teaching:

- to have an understanding of one's own culture, its values, lifestyles and patterns of behaviour, as well as those of other cultures
- to know the influence of cultural values on behaviour
- to become conscious of stereotypes and prejudices
- to accept and value cultural differences

Within these frameworks, Ibrahim's (1999, p. 366) warning is particularly apposite:

If learning is an engagement of one's identity, a fulfilment of personal needs and desires (of being) and an investment in what is yet to come, any proposed ESL pedagogy,

research or praxis that fails to culminate in these...is therefore bound to be unsuccessful, if not plainly damaging.

Community placement contextualises these needs and desires, building on learners' their investment in their unknown but nevertheless high-stakes futures. Here, our grounding moves past the insights of MacKay and Wong (1996) into migrant teenagers' multiple identities, via Norton (2000) and Block (2002), to Barnett's "pedagogical being" and students' "investment in their own selves that enables them to go forth in a challenging world" (2004, p. 253).

Community Placements

Students were encouraged to organise their own volunteer placement based on their own needs, desires and interests. The placements need to be at a predominantly English-speaking site for observing, experiencing and reflecting on aspects of culture. The locations ranged from rest homes (5 students), Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CABs, 5 students), opportunity shops (4 students), Christian communities (3 students) to the New Zealand Police, the Maritime Museum, the Heart Foundation and the Railway Campus. Eight of the students continued with their volunteer work. This is testament to the self-energising and self-propelling capacity of community placement and the strong desire of these learners to form English-speaking identities characterised by meaningful authentic being.

Students participate in and journalise 10 hours of community placement. This means they need to observe and participate in English-speaking contexts within a microcosm of New Zealand society. They need to notice and record linguistic, communicative and cultural observations. In particular, they detail types and registers of communication; any aspects of language, interaction or cultural behaviour which they regard as 'Kiwi', including specific lexical items and topics; instances of learning where they make a connection between

classroom teaching and real-world application, and any observations about New Zealand culture and society which contrast with their own culture.

Community placement allows students flexibility, but disqualifies normal living situations such as homestay or flatting. The requisite 10 hours may be either regular attendance of at an English-speaking volunteer agency, workplace or community event (e.g. clubs, church socials) or a combination of short placements in community contexts.

The Role of the Teacher

In Daska's paper on integrating culture and language learning in institution-wide language programmes at universities in the United Kingdom, she views the tutor as "intercultural facilitator" rather than authority (Fennes, & Hapgood, 1997, cited in Daska, 2000). She quotes Sercu (2002, p. 256): teachers in the intercultural classroom should be "social and intercultural interpreters rather than ambassadors." Teachers, write Murphey, Chen, and Chen (2005) "are in a powerful positions to help create such imagined communities and to stimulate or stifle them" (p. 84). Tutors, then, encourage learners to experience these communities for themselves and reconstruct their own meanings via reflection, using "a language of self, of being" (Barnett, 2004, p. 254). When the students write their journals, we emphasise that they are writing *for themselves*.

Participants

Four classes of BA EAL year two learners, comprising 40 students, agreed to participate in our community placement research. These learners allowed their reflective journals, memos, and presentations to be used by the researchers after their courses had been completed. The participants included international or study abroad students (20). New Zealand permanent resident migrants (including 2 refugees) made up the other 50%. There is

an apparent gender imbalance: 28 females to 12 males. We did not seek data related to age, although we know that the youngest participant was 19 and the oldest 52. The students come from a wide range of native countries: Mainland China (22), Hong Kong (2), Taiwan (2), Korea (4), Sweden (3), Germany (2), Romania (1), Samoa (1), Singapore (1), Thailand (1) and Ethiopia (1).

Methodology

Research Questions

Our broad research question involves exploring the types of *capital* gained by students partaking in community service. Within this focus, we are interested in a number of other issues: what appropriate interventions teachers can make to facilitate learning through experience beyond the classroom; what the connections between community placement and the gaining of cultural autonomy are; what connections between the socio-cognitive aspects of language learning and belonging to a community of practice may exist, and the ways in which students' experiences, while genuine, may be discourse-bound.

Data Collection

Our qualitative data derives from three sources. Firstly reflective journals were written during or just after students' community placement experiences. These journals, organised in four instalments, are written in response to a series of cues including their own reflections for future learning. Specifically, learners are asked to reflect on their experience of social and cultural aspects of their placement. They also focus on the English they hear spoken around them and its 'Kiwiness'. The second source consists of free-form evaluative memoranda posted in an intranet discussion forum. Here, learners are asked to evaluate the most useful aspects of their cultural learning during the course, and to identify desires for future cultural

learning. Thirdly, we drew from transcripts of learners' assessed power point presentations of their community placement experiences.

The researchers acknowledge the limitations of a methodology deriving from self-reported data, although we do have observational data in the form of supervisorial reports or letters for most of the learners. Because of the incompleteness of the record, we did not use it explicitly to triangulate our findings, but do cross-reference where it is appropriate. We acknowledge that students may have felt constrained in their journals or bound by the discourse they use to reconstruct their experience. A paper on this constraint is in process (Kearney, 2006). Nevertheless, this research produced rich data, containing insights into students' language and culture learning experiences, and charting the development of evolving identities. No real names, of course, appear in this paper.

Data Analysis

The data from learners' reflective journals, memoranda and presentations were open-coded, allowing a series of themes allowed to emerge (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990). These were then categorised by each researcher and the categorisations compared. This comparison provided a control check as well as allowing clear similarities between student responses to emerge. Twelve prevalent categories emerged, two of which, pertinent to the formation of authentic being, are reported in this paper: 'windows into cultural understanding' and 'the formation of authentic being'. We realise that this methodology may not seem to privilege all aspects of the students' texts equally. We do, for instance, have a collection of negative comments, which are the subject of a further paper.

Findings

Cultural Capital and the Formation of Authentic Being

Throughout the data, there are instances of cultural capital enriching the individual's self-identity and bringing about formation of authentic being through placement in communities of practice. Metaphors of *richness* and *treasure* are commonplace among Asian respondents (8 cases). One example comes from Beth: "I strongly believe that I have not only *enriched* my knowledge of NZ culture and experiences, but also be aware of the cultural activities", while Sandra emphasises that her skills have *enhanced* and Pete refers to his *treasure box*. Diana, whose insights at the start of this paper, uses the words "*rewarding yet challenging*". These are common metaphors of cultural capital in our data.

Students frequently report *how much* they have learned (12 responses), *how much 'closer'* to Kiwi culture they are (12 citings) or *'how far'* they have come (4 comments). Win writes: "I have been in green New Zealand for three years ... Now I can see how far I have come," as if community placement provided a lens for seeing the social reality behind the green stereotype. An authentic sense of evolving self occurs in Sam's reflection on her placement in the Heart Foundation: "I challenged myself with something different. It taught me to be more organised with my life. Life is too short to worry about exams, stress and family. It taught me to be slow and steady. I need to mix with others and overcome my shyness". Community placement impacts on the learner's being; it is not merely a site for the collection of knowledge.

The data discussed in this section supports Norton's notion that social identity changes over time, testifying to the at-least-partial-partial formation of 'authentic' beings. Students like Win have come far, but there is further to go. Dana, working in Auckland Mission, for instance, writes: "community placement made New Zealand become closer and more real to me" and Qing, a translator in a film company, comments: "I have gained more English

language skills, cultural knowledge, and more work confidence”. There is the feeling of an improved person, but not a maximised one.

The building up of identity through confidence may be a common theme (22 cases), but there is also explicit reference to the multiplicity of identity (8 classified references).

Identities may be in flux, in evolution, through a process of gaining; they may also be emerging anew from interactive cultural experience. Andrew, placed in a foods warehouse, describes the impact of his placement in terms of a process of maturation: “When I first came to NZ, I didn’t know anything – I was like a new born baby and having this job helped me to understand and realize things that contribute to the culture of a country ... a stepping stone in my discovery of NZ culture and society”. He describes in capital gain in terms of growing up and stepping across into the Kiwi world.

Another interesting example is Jordana, who joined a Christian community. She articulates “multiple identity” in her conflation of her self re-creation with an increasing locational ease: “I have been to Rangitoto Island twice and I am feeling that I am more appreciative of where I am and who I am”. A Kiwi self seems to be emerging from the foreigner self through a shared appreciation of the wonders of the landscape.

Increased self-knowledge through investment in community placement is another mode of classifying capital. Sonja records: “Through involving myself in this work, the acquisition of NZ society and culture becomes vivid”. It is the process of involvement, investment, which leads to a more vivid understanding. In a similar vein, Gloria observes her shifting identity as the result on deep interest in a workshop “Issues of New Zealanders”. She is an international student intent on migration and very aware of identity shifts that occur in the process of migration: “[the workshop] indicates that ethnicity is a choice of identity and be aware of what you lost of identity and how to stop losing more. Therefore, how I can identify my identity and how to keep it become critical issues for my life”. The self-knowledge she gains

is specific. It shows her that identity maintenance, like language maintenance, is central to a migrant's self-reconstruction.

The most recurrent thread (30 cases) is overarching theme that cultural experience promotes a generally enhanced sense of self. The data affords insight into students' fluid identities. Beth's remark is representative:

I strongly believe that I have not only enriched my knowledge of NZ culture and experiences, but also be aware of the cultural activities, which cover visual arts, festivals, some of which are celebrations of national cultures ... Being a volunteer gives me a chance to contribute to NZ society ... I have learned some typical Kiwi lifestyle, some Kiwi slang and pronunciation. More importantly, it's a wonderful opportunity of broadening my perspective of NZ culture and society

Knowledge of artefacts and icons may be rewarding as capital, but more valuable to cultural and self-awareness are chances to apply communication strategies in an authentic environment. In doing this, students participate in the processes of forming authentic being, learning for an unknown future. Diana, a volunteer at a red cross shop, writes:

Being a shop assistant is such a challenging yet rewarding thing for me. I gained a great deal of local society and culture knowledge in the process of working. For instance, how to communicate and interact with customers effectively not only challenges me to maximize my English language performance, but also requires me to demonstrate my cross-cultural understanding in the work context.

The opportunity to learn cultural knowledge is important, but more capital is gained from the application of skills via practice leading to the "confidence to speak in public" Barnett describes (2004, p. 253). "These conversations enhance my ability of spoken language a lot", writes Sandra, placed in a Citizen's Advice Bureau. Beth declares: "Volunteering boosts one's confidence". Increased confidence is a major theme in the data (22 comments).

Mirelle comments: “My community placement gave me lots of confidence”, while Jean adds: “I could see the progress of reading aloud skills and the more I read the more confident I became ... working in a relaxed and friendly environment definitely can help with advancing my language fluency and my understanding of New Zealand colloquial language”.

Application of classroom skills in a *real* context improves a learner’s feeling that they *can* communicate in English.

Clearly, proving oneself in a real context promotes independent learning, bears out investment by adding quantifiable cultural capital and allows students a context for expression of their own authentic beings. Increased confidence is connected with knowledge of oneself and one’s own capacities. They are learning for whatever future they are on the brink of. Sam, working with the National Heart Foundation, is particularly appreciative: “community placements have boosted my confidence and have taught me to be more attentive with instructions, flexible, organised, co-operative and being more responsible with myself and the tasks provided”.

Twelve writers state that their placement will be useful for their futures, for their work. Dave wrote that he: “Gained a lot of NZ magic (*sic*) of dealing with tourists or students ... I also practised a lot of formal English speaking and be more confidence in talking with native speakers”. Pete concurs: “I think this knowledge is very useful to my future work ... Before, when I speak English to people I always thinking in Chinese and rehearse the English meaning in my mind before I tell people. By doing this job, my listening and speaking skills have improved a lot”. Assessments preparing learners for who they need to be for their futures, whatever that may be, it contribute towards the “ontological turn” Barnett identifies as vital to learning for an unknown future (2004, p. 247).

Unfamiliar Freedom

Blaska's (2000, p. 258) comment that independent culture learning yields strong "results if meaningful contexts for ... unfamiliar freedom are created" is central to our findings. It forces students to empower themselves with speech. Topaz, for instance, writes that community placement "made me become brave, I had to open my mouth and ask people if I could work in their workplace". Students do not only speak but also listen, as Emma listened to the old man who came into the red cross shop: "One man came in and I asked him how everything was, etc, and he started talking with a very hard Kiwi accent, about that he just came back from *the wopwops* and that he was now looking for some *gummies* because it was about to rain ...". Emma's unfamiliar freedom allowed her to access first hand the Kiwi pronunciation and idioms we had taught disconnectedly in class.

The unfamiliar freedoms that students found during community placement allowed them to focus and apply classroom learning. Sonja realised that English in New Zealand is an international language and forced herself to listen to accents: "It gave me more opportunities to speak and to listen to English and honestly it did improve my English skills. Now I can understand the accents from different countries where people are from: Philippines, India, and Korea. The most important thing is I can contact with local people and speak English. And it does improve my English a lot". Sonja describes a context where she had to contribute to a discussion (about the traits of different ethnicities in terms of attitude to work). Sonja's comment, like Topaz's above, articulates Barnett's identification of "the confidence to speak in public" despite the expectation of contestation (2004, p. 253) as a feature of pedagogical being.

The elements of challenge risk and the unknown inherent in community placement not only boost students' linguistic, communicative and cultural literacies but also unveil inner strengths for the students, offering them 'surprises' about themselves. Beth, volunteering in a

rest home, was forced to handle an emergency: “at that moment I dialled 111 immediately, my workmate Lara and I stayed with the man, reassured and made him comfortable until Care Supervisor came ...”. Lynda, a volunteer in a red cross shop, built up a relationship with a migrant woman from China, whose cultural pride might not ordinarily take her to a red cross shop and who showed no confidence in English: “Today she came in with a friend from China and looked so happy. I served her and she talked to me. That was nice to see, that she starts to pick up English, because it is not easy”. Her conclusion to this anecdote is revealing: “It is not only to serve customers in this shop; mostly it is being a psychologist. People often just come to talk and to buy something small”.

Volunteers learned they *can* make even minor differences through their agency. Both Dan and Malli worked in rest home: “Every time when they were wearing a smile, I felt that it was just only a tiny work to me, but can make them happy”. She describes the intervention in more detail elsewhere: “when I was serving morning tea, I tried to build a good relationship with them, so I began to ask some questions such as ‘How are you today?’, ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ or ‘Please have a seat and a nice cup of tea’, I realised that they are happy when I am talking and serving with them ...”. Dana, a Chinese volunteer in Auckland’s City Mission, was befriended by a Maori woman and she describes the conversation as ‘life-changing’: “she told this to a complete stranger who served her a cup of coffee-me”.

Windows into Cultural Understanding

The “unfamiliar freedom” found by the CNZS students both provides ontological surprises and a window into New Zealand’s culture. The metaphor of the window established at the start of this paper infuses the student reflections. Two students borrowed this metaphor from her supervisor: “She pointed out that doing voluntary work opens up a window to

observe and learn New Zealand culture and society”. Beth reiterates that community placement “opens up a window to observe” in her memo. Moira reflects:

I have tried to take part in [Kiwi] social activities. However, I couldn't understand them at all. I felt that I am standing out of the door, I can see through windows, I can hear their sounds, I can copy their actions but I don't know why they do that ... now I do not worry about this. I have learnt their culture, although not completely. I talk with them much more confidently and state my opinion.

This vision of a dual self, existing on non-Kiwi and Kiwi sides of the window, is also articulated by Korean Miwa, who uses the reflective memo as a site of self re-appraisal, “a good opportunity to look back on myself”. She reflects, “I have just been living in my own culture, not try to integrate the culture that I am living ... The positive outcome for me doing this paper is that I am trying to recognise real New Zealand culture and society. It is not from an outsider's view, but it's a view from a New Zealander, me”. Clearly, presence in a target community of practice impacted on Miwa's 'self re-creation', facilitating her positioning herself in the 'real' society of 'us' Kiwis rather than beyond the window with 'those' outsiders.

Students frequently (10 cases) describe the learning that happens in the community as 'real'. Li describes her placement at the CAB as a “real event”. Being involved, she writes, “in a community by a real practice is a way of knowing more things about New Zealand, which we may not know in class”. Hwang's placement at Telecom brought him into contact with Kiwi workplace English: “It was a real conversation with native speakers in New Zealand ... He spoke some swear words quietly, but we could hear what he said”. Karmen describes her supervisor at the red cross shop as “a wonderful person; she is Maori which I think is very interesting to have the chance to talk to a real New Zealander”. Jack spoke to Kiwis at Alexandra Park Raceway, arguably the most 'real' of the community placement

locations selected: “Importantly, I realised that Kiwis actually want our Asian to learn or understand their culture; in other words, it’s more than welcome to take a part in their culture”. His journalised realisation articulates not only a window into cultural understanding, but also a bridge towards it. Ivor recorded building such a bridge in a conversation with a Maori co-worker: “I could feel his happiness about my knowledge of Maori because it is not common that an international student especially a Chinese student knows so much about Maori. I realized that understanding a culture could help me to integrate into a society easily”. We return Norton (2000) who observed of her migrant women, “By recording their surprises in the data collection process, learners become more aware of differences between cultural practices in their native countries and cultural practices in their new society” (p. 152).

CNZS students record surprises both about themselves and about their changing perceptions of New Zealand and New Zealanders. The data reveals five comments about the trusting nature of New Zealanders; five more about the diversity of human beliefs and values and 15 about the value of volunteering as both a locus for real experience and a window into cultural understanding. In asking what it is for human beings to be encouraged, to be brought forth out of themselves, Barnett names “humanity, empathy, care and encouragement” (p. 258). These values emerge in the students’ articulation of their experience. Karmen, working in a thrift shop, was “Surprised they trusted us with cash machines”, while Robyn, working in a childcare centre reflects: “It feels like I am part of the staff now because the people who work there are counting on me and trust me”. These learners experience acceptance into a community of practice, and this process contributes to both a deeper understanding of their humanity, and hence to “authentic being”. Many students articulate surprise at the value of community placement via volunteering. Malli’s words are representative: “I strongly felt volunteering is one of the effective ways to participate or involve (*sic*) in NZ Society”.

Conclusions

Reflection on learning and experience provides an environment and opportunity for students to experience much that brings them out of themselves and calls them to “authentic being.” This involves accessing communities of practice via legitimate peripheral participation which impacts on identity formation because identity, knowing and social membership entail one another (Lave, & Wenger, 1991, pp. 49-50; p. 98; p. 53).

The scaffolded classroom work and the role of tutors as “social and intercultural interpreters” (Sercu, 1998, p. 256) provides encouragement to students to face the uncertainty of searching out and offering themselves for, and operating within, a community placement. The secure framework of the course context, where students offer assistance and encouragement to each other, works well in the process of learning for an uncertain future, as they wait for acceptance or refusal for their community placement. Cultural autonomy may result. As one student, Jack, wrote: “The lecturers were right – culture cannot fully be learned in the classroom”.

The process of diarisation in their reflective journals provides students with reason and opportunity to clearly articulate for themselves and their tutors, their insights into aspects of NZ society and culture they experienced in their placement. Their recording of windows into cultural understanding mirrors a process of self-understanding due to participation and points to the evolution of “authentic being”. Their reflection on these, often in discussion with classmates, and their insight into their own personal response clearly enable for them Barnett’s “new cognitive spaces.”

This “unfamiliar freedom” (Dlaska, 2000) does create ‘windows’ of opportunity for students to actually see their own understandings, attitudes and their own selves change over time as they negotiate a way through their multiple identities (Norton, 2000) as students of culture, language learners, migrants/international students, and in some cases parents, as they

find a way into their imagined community. Our students express their desires for recognition, affiliation, belonging and attachment to community and many do find a sense of belonging to a community of practice in the context of their placement. Some even elect a fuller participation in their community, staying on as volunteers. This becoming part of the community Lave and Wenger (1991) would maintain, leads to developing a sense of identity as a “master practitioner” as opposed to an “apprentice” (p. 53 and *passim*).

Language has been central to this process of cultural understanding and development of self. Learners have not only exchanged information with tutors, colleagues and supervisors in their placement, but organised and reorganised a sense of who they are and how they relate to their social and cultural environment (Norton, 2000). The articulation of self that occurs both during the placement and after in the process of verbal recollection and written reflection echoes both Lave and Wenger’s stress on talk as a medium for identity transformation, Norton’s use of diarisation as a locus for the construction of migrant identity, and Barnett’s “confidence to speak” (p. 253). This is central to what he calls “investment in their own selves” (p. 253), a statement which echoes Norton.

Finding their own inner skills and abilities to understand and negotiate the cultural context of their placement enhances their “cultural autonomy” and self directedness. They acquire a new confidence in themselves and learn courage to face the changing circumstances of their lives, to make decisions which will carry them further into an uncertain future.

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