Windows into Cultural Understanding and the Formation of Authentic Being

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Introduction

This paper explores the voluntary sector as a site for the development of learner identity and "authentic being" (Barnett, 2004, p. 259) through learners' discoveries of windows into cultural and self-understanding during assessed community placement. The subjects of this study are 30 migrant and international students studying in their second year of Bachelor of Arts in an English as an Additional Language (BA EAL) on the course "Culture and New Zealand Society" (CNZS) at a tertiary institution, Unitec New Zealand. The qualitative data consists of grounded open-coded analyses of student reflections on a placement of at least 10 hours within a range of physically safe, but communicatively and culturally challenging, voluntary communities within Auckland. The course measures learners' discoveries about the thoughts and idioms of the Kiwis they met, as well as communicative and linguistic styles and 'culture' in its broadest sense. The learners are prepared for their community placement through a scaffolded pedagogy that draws attention to sociological, historical, socio-political, geographical, demographic and cultural facets of that ever-evolving abstract unknown that we will call 'New Zealand identity'. Their placement involves an element of noticing expected features, but also discovering aspects of 'Kiwness' for themselves and reflecting on these observations. The students gain windows into cultural understanding, which are, this paper contends, also windows into themselves as learners of language and culture, and as, variously, international students in a New Zealand, and global, environment, and as migrants.

Community placement offers English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners an opportunity for the formation of what Ronald Barnett calls "authentic being" (2004, p. 259), within a pedagogically controlled but still unknown community of practice. It is controlled in that the students have supervisors, the volunteer sector is likely to offer safety and the course 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 culture and their relation to it by practical application and risk-taking. The process of reflection allows them to reconstruct their experience using a range of strategies: reporting observations and their interpretations of what they notice; testing out strategies and theories introduced in class and commenting on their effectiveness; contrasting experienced observations with their own culture, and reflecting on how their experience has impacted on various facets of themselves.

Community Placement and Learning for an Unknown Future

Ronald Barnett asks what it is for university students to learn for an unknown future (2004, p. 247). He describes the destabilized student self, seeking the quantifiable and the knowable in a world that fashions knowledge as information, using information technology, and applies pedagogies that result in incompleteness; epistemologies which lead to insecurity and ontologies that limit students to vocational aspirations like "I want to be a doctor". This is a supercomplex world
characterised by the multiplication of relevant knowledge that paradoxically brings about the "ignorance explosion", anxiety, fragility and chaos (p. 250). The unknownness, 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 conception of a pedagogy for learning for this unknown future posits that self-engagement with life-world challenges makes for self-energising, self-confident learners whose sense of pedagogical being is enhanced. They are not merely filled with disciplinary wonder or given the chance to apply specific fixed theories, strategies and skills. Fashioned through such a pedagogy for being, 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 express their confidence through assertion of voice and learn through the process of having that voice contested. They develop what, in the context of language and culture acquisition, is autonomy, leading to self-directed learning – a concept similar to Barnett’s “willingness to go on by themselves” (p. 254) and developing “a self that is adequate to such an uncertain world” (p. 254). Put simply, and in an idiom that resonates in a Kiwi context, this is “the confidence to have a go” (p. 253).

In addition to providing a context for the application of generic skills, community placement provides learners with this confidence to have a go and to diarise it through reflective journalisation, a process invaluable to self-construction (Shiel & Jones, 2002) activating target competencies (Birch, 1999). De la Harpe and Radloff remark that “students who reflect on their learning are better able to understand themselves and the learning process and exercise control over their own learning” (2002, p. 1). Further, to apply Barnett’s descriptions of such a pedagogy, it entices learners into “new cognitive spaces”, invites them to “take up his or her own stances and helps form the courage to do so” provides them with a journey “of encountering strangeness, of wrestling with it, and of forming one’s own responses to it” (p. 257). This paper opens up the windows into cultural and self-awareness described by international and migrant students who encounter strangeness in the new cognitive spaces of community placement and form reflective responses in their journals.

This pedagogy, involving reflecting on the meaning of experienced culture by means of journalisation, contributes to the learners’ abilities to “go on by themselves” by developing metacognitive awareness. As Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) write (about learners’ constructions of language learning histories): “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” (p. 85). The ability to take control of future learning adds further value to community placement’s potential to prepare students, in miniature, for an unknown future.

**Literature Review**

Our study refers to four prime contexts but the impacts of many others are evident throughout. Our title, for instances, references Ng’s *Windows on a Chinese Past* (1993) even as it develops the central metaphor infusing our students’ reflections. In addition to foregrounding Barnett’s concept of learning for an unknown future, our study is informed by Norton’s conceptualisations of identity as a site of negotiated struggle, investment and cultural capital. It borrows some of its idiom from Lave and Wenger’s descriptions of imagined and real “communities of practice” (1991). These are sets of “relations among persons, activity and world”, existing over time and
related to other communities (p. 98). 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. It is appropriate to cite Cook here: “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 Bensen & Newman, 2005). There is evidence for identification of this nature in the reflective data discussed in this paper.

It is by realising the imagined communities and the developing self’s postion within them that the “formation of authentic being” (Barnett, 2004, p. 259) occurs via “the whole person acting in the world”. Our fourth context, which dovetails back around to both Barnett and Norton, is the idea that cultural autonomy and self-directedness can be fostered within the pedagogical and epistemological frameworks characterised by “unfamiliar freedom” (Dijkstra, 2000). Dijkstra comments that culture learning becomes independent and yields autonomous “results if meaningful contexts for ... unfamiliar freedom are created” (p. 258). The development of this autonomy and, in turn, self-directedness, produces language and culture learners who are more communicatively confident, more culturally literate and more self-aware. Thus, they can access communities of practice with the “improvised practice” they gain representing a potential curriculum (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 92-93). 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.

The concept of identity
Norton Peirce has been influential in arguing for the concept of the learner as having a complex social identity and that “the role of language is constitutive of and constituted by a learner’s social identity” (1995, p. 17). Through language, a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites and different points in time. She draws on Weedon’s (1987) poststructuralist and feminist concept of subjectivity, which has three defining characteristics: that the subject or individual social identity is multiple and contradictory; that it is a site of struggle and that it changes over time. Following West (1992, cited in Norton Peirce, 1995) she takes the position that identity references desire, for recognition, affiliation, security and safety. It is through access to material resources, such as those encountered during community placement, that these desires can be realised. For our students there is a desire for recognition and affiliation, belonging and attachment to community. Latterly, Joseph (2004) has further clarified the distinction between identity and self.

The concept of investment
Norton Peirce reconceptualises motivation in the field of second language learning. Drawing on Gardner (1985, cited in Norton Peirce, 1995), Norton acknowledges the notions of instrumental motivation, where a learner desires to learn a language for a utilitarian purpose, such as getting employment, and integrative motivation, in which the desire to learn is motivated by the wish to integrate successfully into the community.

She uses the term “investment” instead, considering that it more accurately captures the relationship of the language learner who has a complex social identity and multiple desires, to the social world. It presupposes that when language learners speak they not only exchange information with the target language speakers but constantly organise and reorganise a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. An investment in the target language is also then an investment in a learner’s own identity, which is constantly changing across time.
The concept of cultural capital
Norton Peirce also draws on Bourdieu’s economic metaphors and the idea of cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge and modes of thought that characterise different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. Understanding the cultural context of a language and the use of language is integral to the use of language. McKay and Wong (1996) extended Norton Peirce’s notion of investment in their study of adolescent immigrant Chinese students in the United States. As Norton Peirce did with adult immigrant women in Canada, McKay and Wong showed that the specific needs and desires of the adolescent learners “must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of the student’s lives and as determining their investments in learning the target language” (1996, p. 603). The relationship between ethnicity, identity and language learning is central in each researcher’s analysis. Accommodating the specific needs and desires of students in CNZS is fundamental to the pedagogy.

Building cultural autonomy and self re-creation
Assessing CNZS students’ cultural learning by means of community placement both builds “cultural autonomy”, the ability to understand and negotiate a particular culture, and contributes to an enhancement of the individual’s cultural capital and what Ullman (1997) calls “social identity”... “self re-creation”. “Cultural autonomy” is a term that applies the concept of autonomous learning to the context of cultural learning as well as to the range of linguistic, strategic and communicative contexts which lead to autonomy as an end in itself (Benson & Voller, 1997). Autonomous learning has been defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1979, pp. 3-4) and “a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action” (Little, 1991, p. 4)

Few studies of curricula exploring the cultural/linguistic nexus have foregrounded pedagogical approaches or assessment methods that promote independent learning (Dlaskea, 2000), let alone have the capacity to effect “authentic being” (Barnett, 2004, p.259). Concepts approaching “cultural autonomy” appear in two studies (Dlaskea 2000; Sercu 2002) and a collection of essays (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). Sercu contends that curricula integrated towards the scaffolded acquisition of intercultural communicative competence support “the competence to learn cultures autonomously” (p. 72). Dlaskea’s conception of culture-integrated language learning focuses “not on the objects of the target cultures, but on the experiences, the knowledge and the attitudes of the learners” (p. 249). It is grounded experientially and reflexively in the real world, as in work placements “with a special emphasis on independent learning strategies” (p. 252), many of which can lead to the self-directed learning Holec (1981, p. 27) and that many other writers view as the result of applied autonomy. Such grounding in strategic preparation for beyond-the-classroom experience, via placement and in reflection on community-based learning, can effect what she calls “The Independent Culture Learner” (p. 258).

“Authentic being” in “communities of practice”
The development of cultural autonomy, we believe, creates preconditions for effective language learning by determining or strengthening a learner’s self-recreation, which in turn promotes the formation of Barnett’s (2004, p.259) “authentic being”. Clearly, such a model lends itself to grounding in the notions of “community of practice” or “imagined community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 89; Morita 2004; Murphey, Chen & Chen, 2005), terms that we draw on in this paper. It also allows us to contextualise our learners’ challenges within the “multiple discourses” surrounding migrants and international students in New Zealand. To do so is to re-cite the work of McKay and Wong (1996) and to recognise that desire to challenge largely negative media-created discourses and popular conversations, about migrants and
international students, impels and motivates our students to make a good impression within their community placements as cultural ambassadors.

Methodology

Qualitative data used as the basis for this study derives from three sources. Firstly, reflective journals are written, during or just after students’ community placement experiences, based on notes written during the placement. These journals, averaging 350 words and organised chronologically in four instalments, are written in response to a series of cues, including their own reflections about what they would do next time. Learners also submit evidence portfolios, which include such documents as photographs, references from a supervisor during their community placement and any documents used and applied during the placement. In several cases, tutors made phone contact with supervisors. This evidence provides an empirical control over the learners’ self-reporting. The second source consists of evaluative memoranda posted in an intranet discussion forum in response to cues. 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 Powerpoint presentations on their community placement experiences.

The data from learners’ reflective journals, memoranda and presentations were open-coded, allowing a series of themes to emerge. These were then categorised so that similarities between student responses were clear. Twelve prevalent categories emerged, two of which, pertinent to the formation of Barnett’s (2004, p. 259) “authentic being”, are reported in this paper: “windows into cultural understanding” and “the formation of authentic being”.

Definition of community placement

Students are required to partake in and document 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. These criteria absorb the potential aspects of assessment in integrated culture and language learning suggested by Bryam, Esarte-Sarries, and Taylor (1991, p. 389): asking appropriate questions; giving a participant’s account; analysing cultural phenomena and encounters; carrying out comparisons, and reflecting on one’s own culture and cultural identity.

The assessment’s definition of community placement allows students flexibility, but disqualifies normal living situations such as homestaying 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 different approved community contexts, adding up to 10 hours.

Participants

Two classes of level 6 (BA EAL, year 2) learners comprising 30 students took part in the community placement assessment and allowed their reflective journals and memos and presentations to be used for research. The participants were both international or study abroad students (15), many of whom resemble the “expatriate
cosmopolitans" case studied by Block (2002), and New Zealand permanent resident migrants (15). There is an apparent gender imbalance: 22 females to 8 males. We did not seek data related to age, although we know that the youngest participant was 19 and the oldest 52. The students came from a wide range of native countries: Mainland China, including Hong Kong (16), Korea (5), Taiwan (2), Sweden (3), Romania (1), Samoa (1), Singapore (1), and Thailand (1).

Volunteer placements and social contexts
Students were encouraged to locate and set up their own volunteer placement within the above framework based on their own needs and desires. The course requirement was simply that the community placement provided a predominantly English-speaking site for observing, experiencing and reflecting on aspects of culture. The following paragraph surveys the students' choices of community placement sites and comments on the effectiveness of these placements in terms of the students' investment in learning and cultural capital gained.

Five students placed themselves in three different rest homes - three of them continued to work there as volunteers, a full six months after their placement task was completed. The Red Cross kindly placed four students in their shop, two in each semester. Three students undertook training in Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CABs), with two also acting as bi-lingual translators, while the other one acted as an observer and office helper. These three students are also continuing with their volunteer work, testament, we believe, 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. Similarly, a student who trained as a volunteer for the New Zealand Police has found a niche in intervening with the Korean community in Auckland, well beyond the 10 hours required for her assignment. Further, a student who volunteered for the New Zealand Foundation for the Blind continues to help them out. A third student who placed herself at a community kindergarten has decided to place her children there while she works. Another student has continued her voluntary work for New Zealand Ethnic Social Services, while a further learner maintains her ties with the National Heart Foundation, a placement she had chosen to find out about her relative's heart disease. The student who selected Te Puna Reo o Wairaka (Mount Albert Maori Pre-School Centre) as her placement enjoyed it so much that she went back for an additional week prior to returning to her native Sweden. Social contexts that learners continue involvement in, include two Christian communities, a trotting club, a soccer club and a Roadsafe programme. Five students attended placements in their workplace including Telecom.

A culture-integrated approach to language learning
The CNZS course, focuses on cultural identity in New Zealand society. Students cover the history of waves of immigrants to New Zealand and an analysis of major institutions of government, law, health and education. Key political issues, such as the Treaty of Waitangi, frame much of the input. Culture is framed in many ways, including the iconicity of 'kiwiana', perceptions of Kiwi humour and the identities portrayed in New Zealand films and media. The curriculum borrows Cotazzi and Jin's (1999) model of cultural mirrors. Students are encouraged to absorb this information, but most importantly to go out and experience some of the society and culture and be aware of how they interact with it. To apply Barnett, CNZS learners make their "interventions in a ... pre-structured world" (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 also 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. Díaska draws on Fennes & Hapgood (1997, cited in Díaska, 2000) to articulate a culture-integrated approach to 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.

We bear in mind Ibrahim’s (1999) warning:

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. (p. 366)

Community placement provides students with a context for expressing these needs and desires of being, building on their investment in their unknown but nevertheless high-stakes futures. We return to MacKay and Wong (1996) via Norton (2000); 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).

The role of the teacher

In her paper on integrating culture and language learning in institution-wide language programmes at universities in the United Kingdom, Díaska uses Fennes and Hapgood’s definition of the role of teacher as one of “intercultural facilitator” rather than a source of authoritative information (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997, cited in Díaska, 2000). She also quotes Serbu (1998, p. 256) who believes teachers in the intercultural classroom should be “social and intercultural interpreters rather than ambassadors.” Casting the native speaker tutor as ambassador lays an impossible burden on them to represent a definitive version of their native culture. Teachers, write Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) “are in a powerful position to help create such imagined communities and to stimulate or stifle them” (p. 84). It is the job of the teacher to encourage the 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).

Findings and Discussion

The formation of authentic being

Evidence of Norton’s (2000) concept of “cultural capital” as a means of enriching the individual’s sense of self-identity and Barnett’s (2004) “formation of authentic being” is evident throughout the reflective logs and memos. These bear out Norton’s notion that social identity, a site of struggle, changes over time, giving way to incompletely formed but authentic beings. One student, Jill, in an explicit articulation of the notion of multiple identity, conflates her self re-creation with an increasing sense of ease with New Zealand: “I have been to Rangitoto island twice and I am feeling that I am more appreciative of where I am and who I am”. Another student, Andrew describes the impact of his placement in terms of a process of maturation, of growing up: “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”.

Sumner (an international student with an eye on migration) reports an observation about her own shifting identity, based on a workshop she attended called “Issues of New Zealanders”: “It 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”. Identity maintenance, like language maintenance, is central to self-reconstruction. There is a similar authentic sense of evolving self in another student’s, Sam’s, reflection: “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; not merely their ability to pile up and replicate packaged knowledge.

The most recurrent theme is that, while cultural knowledge has been enlightening, it is cultural experience that has promoted an enhanced sense of self and greater insight into students’ own fluid identities. Beth’s remark is representative of other students: “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”.

Cultural awareness of artefacts and icons may be superficially rewarding as capital, but of more lasting value to cultural and self-awareness are the opportunities to apply classroom communication and cultural learning and to test language skills in an authentic environment and thereby participate in the process of forming authentic being. Gracie, 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, as Barnett (2004, p. 253) describes it, the “confidence to speak in public”. “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: Twenty students refer to it. 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: “I also have a confidence to interview and good communication skills with people ... I did well and had a good expression when communicating with people” (Margaret, placed at a Christian Community Centre). For some students, the learning was more particularised, both to the context and to their needs: “The language I use is quite specific but I really learnt and improved my
confidence every time ... I believe I cannot speak well if I did not do this job ... as well as learn new vocabulary" (Jill).

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. 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 of the CNZS students report that their experience of placement will be useful for their futures, more specifically 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 adds: "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". When a course assessment prepares learners for who they need to be for their futures, whatever that may be, it contributes towards the "ontological turn" Barnett (2004, p. 247) identifies as central to learning for an unknown future.

One additional benefit is the recognition that community placement exposes students to the range of international accented Englishes found in any real New Zealand workplace, not just "adapting to Kiwi accent and slang", one of the goals of three Swedish students. Every student made a comment about recognising the multicultural varieties of English in their placements. Sonja writes: "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". She describes a context in which she contributed to a discussion about the traits of different ethnicities in terms of attitude to work. Sonja's comment 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. CNZS motivates learners not merely to be able to communicate with Kiwis, or British, or Americans on a range of contentious and non-contentious topics, but to communicate in their own voice, with tolerance for other accents and other opinions, contributing to the "formation of authentic being".

The elements of challenge, risk and the unknown, inherent in community placement, not only boost students' linguistic, communicative and cultural literacies but also unmask human strengths in the students, offering them surprises about themselves. Beth, working in a rest home, realised her ability to handle an emergency: "At that moment I dialled 1-111 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".
Learners also learned that they make a difference through their interventions, no matter how small. 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”. Here is a comment from Malli: “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 …”. These reflections from CNZS students demonstrate a number of the dispositions that characterise Barnett’s “being-for-uncertainty”: “carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness” (2004, p. 258).

Windows into cultural understanding

Dlaska (2000, p. 258) comments that independent culture learning yields strong “results if meaningful contexts for … unfamiliar freedom are created”. The “unfamiliar freedom” found by the CNZS students yields learning surprises by providing a window into New Zealand’s culture. The metaphor of the window infuses the student reflections. Two students borrowed this metaphor from their 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 self who is now on the Kiwi side of the window is also articulated by 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, even temporary experience in a target community of practice impacted on Miwa’s ‘self re-creation’, allowing her to position herself in the ‘real’ society of ‘us’ Kiwis rather than beyond the window with ‘them’ outsiders.

The word ‘real’ is applied to the language used during community placement continuously, presumably in counterpoint to the counterfeit language of the classroom. Hwang diaries his encounter with Telecom’s Tony: “It was a real conversation with native speakers in New Zealand ... He spoke some swear words quietly, but we could hear what he said”. Even though the tutors of CNZS are New Zealanders, their European Kiwiness is not perceived as being as real as the Maori Kiwiness met in the community. Karmen describes her supervisor: “Lyn is a wonderful person; she is Maori which I think is very interesting to have the chance to talk to a real New Zealander”. 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”. A realisation about cultural acceptance met Jack 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".
The chance to pass through the window yields cultural learning surprises like these. As Norton (2000) has 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 express a range of surprises about, for instance, the trusting nature of New Zealanders, the diversity of human beliefs and values, and the value of volunteering, as both a locus for real experience and a window into cultural understanding. Barnett asks what it is for human beings to be encouraged, to be brought forth out of themselves. He names, amongst other abstractions, “humanity, empathy, care and encouragement” (2004, 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. Maili’s words are representative: “I strongly felt volunteering is one of the effective ways to participate or involve in NZ Society”.

This process is also evident in learners’ recognition of the diversity of humanity in New Zealand. Sumner learns “Everyone is different; everyone is entitled to their own opinion and beliefs ... I believe this point will benefit my future work and study”. Her explicit connection of her learning to her future suggests an awareness of the value of her placement for her life in New Zealand. She makes astute observations about the connections between culture, identity and power: “I noticed that culture affects identity and values hierarchy ... People have their own various sets of values and these differences are OK”. She applies her learning to her own context as an ongoing CAB volunteer: “I learned different people have different values in NZ in this multi-culture society, culture can affect people’s values ... I understand that when I face my client I know how to put my right judgement on the case”.

**Conclusion**

We have found through our research that the classroom study and community placement experience, with the requirement to reflect on their learning and experience, provides an environment and opportunities for our students to experience much that brings them out of themselves and calls them to Barnett’s (2004, p.259) “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)).

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”.

21
The process of diarisation in their reflective journals provides students with reasons and opportunities to clearly articulate for themselves and their tutors, their insights into aspects of New Zealand society and culture they experience 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” (Barnett, 2004, p. 259). Their reflection on these, often in discussion with classmates, and their insight into their own personal responses, clearly enable for them Barnett’s “new cognitive spaces” (p. 257).

This “unfamiliar freedom” (Dlaska, 2000) does create “windows” of opportunity for students to actually see their understandings, their attitudes and their selves change over time. They find a way into their imagined community 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. Many do find a sense of belonging to a community of practice in the context of their placement and some elect a fuller participation in that community, staying on as volunteers. This becoming part of the community, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) would maintain, leads to developing a sense of identity as a “master practitioner” as opposed to an “apprentice” (p. 53).

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 (1991) 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” (2004, 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 migrant and international EAL students’ cultural autonomy and self directness. They acquire a new confidence in themselves and develop the courage to face the changing circumstances of their lives; to make decisions which will carry them further into an uncertain future.

References


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