

NARRATIVES OF OPENNESS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN A BRITISH ECUMENICAL UNIVERSITY AND ITS CITY

Bignold, W. *

Abstract

Liverpool Hope University prides itself on being a strong community which values students and staff from different places, locally, nationally and internationally. This paper tells the stories of international students and alumni, a significant part of the community, and explores their lived experiences. It does this through narrative accounts written by the students and in doing so gives them a voice which enables us to experience the openness they feel towards them, or a closed attitude, from those they meet in the University and its city.

Keywords: Student voice, openness, community, narrative, lived-experience

Introduction

There are over seven billion people in the world today, living in 194 countries and speaking over 6,500 languages. With recent developments in technology we are more interconnected than ever before; the world is huge, but the world is tiny. In our increasingly globalised world it is important to understand other cultures and values, to be open to others (Bignold & Rai, 2015). Being open to others is about being open to different ways of thinking, of being, of doing. A university can plan how it will be open to others; it can set this as a strategic goal or a marketing strap-line. It can set out to measure its openness and declare this as a key performance indicator. It can plan its curriculum and its learning and teaching strategy to maximise its openness in its taught sessions and its enrichment activities, but even if planned

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to the finest detail these can be meaningless or unopen opportunities – closed. It is the personal relationships that really matter; this is where we are truly open to others, in the everyday encounters we have with those we work with, those whom we teach or support, those whom we serve. It is in the humanity of personal interactions that we render ourselves open, ready to accept, to welcome, to respect, to honour, to love.

In sharing narratives of openness this paper draws its inspiration from Corinthians 1, 13:4-5 which tells us “*Love is patient and kind: love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist in its own way; it is not irritable or resentful*”. An openness to others might be seen in the daily encounters with professors, but equally with gardeners, with cleaners, with security staff, with librarians and with those from our neighbourhood communities that have the most impact on our students. It is the little things that quietly signal our openness to others, our shared humanity, our willingness to be part of the world; often we may not even notice our signals but someone else does, a student from another country, a peer from another institution, a visitor from an allied profession. Their status is not important and neither is ours; it is the look in our eyes, the openness, the warmth which they see and which causes them to smile, to feel at home, to feel valued, to feel safe in this new place, to feel a part of the human race. In a world of turmoil, of distrust, of anxiety and sometimes of terror, that warm feeling of belonging, of acceptance, of love is so important; it is a basic human need. Until this is met a student is unable to relax into his/her lessons and be ready to learn.

This paper explores the stories of international students and alumni and considers their experiences of a UK Christian university as they arrive there and their experiences in the city surrounding it. In particular, it considers whether or not they experienced an ‘openness’ to them. It tells some of their stories in an attempt to identify what it is that makes a university and its home city open, welcoming, a place to feel at home, a place to be oneself, a place to learn. International students are a student cohort who are might be described as marginalised, a minority group in an unfamiliar context. It is particularly important that groups such as this are listened to and are given a voice. The stories here then are written by the students themselves as a means of sharing their lived-experiences. This paper draws on a narrative research project at Liverpool Hope University and discusses the importance of such a methodology as a means of hearing real stories from real people. It then examines themes

within the stories which illustrate an openness; a particular focus is given to the openness of Liverpool and Liverpudlians as the students' new community and neighbours.

A university cannot plan to be open to others at any level of real meaning because being open is not something which can be implemented or measured, but it can invest in its people and its community and achieve this ideal through them. It is not just about those on campus, in the lecture theatres, the halls of residence, the gardens or the sport-halls; it is equally about those in the wider community, the neighbourhood, the shopping arcades, the places of worship and the city. Liverpool Hope University is the only ecumenical university in Europe. Founded on gospel values and still driven by them today, it prides itself on being a collegial community and this aspiration is written into its strategic plan. It is reviewed regularly and progress towards this goal is measured and evaluated but it is in the relationships between the individual members of the University community where it is real, where its values are lived out. Those outside of the immediate campus community, those who live in the city, are equally important; to the international student who arrives in a new place, to study and live, the openness of the city they come to is of great importance too. Liverpool is a port city; it has welcomed travellers for hundreds of years and continues to do so today.

Methodology

International students are sometimes overlooked as individuals and as groups by universities who are driven by the needs of home students as they form the dominant 'consumer' group. Higher education is increasingly based on a consumerist model (Coate & Rathnayake, 2013); this is true for internationalised higher education as well as that aimed at the home market and international student mobility continues to increase rapidly (Ryan, 2013). This emphasises a business model of education rather than a model of education based on relationships. Coate & Rathnayake argue that this emphasis on students as consumers has removed the moral basis for relationships with international students. If we do not build these relationships then this is a student cohort whose voices are less likely to be heard. Indeed Marginson (2013) identifies them as a group already marginalised as they are regarded by their host communities, both inside the universities and outside as "strangers", "outsiders", "social isolates" with "linguistic deficit". These are negative connotations which can lead to a shutting off, being closed to them rather than open.

Universities now rush to hear the student voice (indeed their openness to it is judged by the government in their QAA inspections), but this is often a young voice from the UK. While this domestic voice is important, for both the individual who is speaking and the group he or she belongs to, it can sometimes drown out the minority voice. This paper seeks to provide a platform, or a megaphone, for those who are not always heard so loudly. In this study international students and alumni were invited to simply tell their stories, their journeys essentially, from home to Liverpool and then through their time at Liverpool Hope. Twenty three people participated in the project, from fourteen different countries including Afghanistan, America, China, France, Germany, Ghana, Kurdistan, India, Nepal and Nigeria. They included undergraduate students, study abroad students, postgraduate students and alumni from all three categories. Their narratives were collected and presented as an anthology of stories.

Despite universities' commitments to student feedback in all areas of activity the student voice is not always sufficiently heard (Brennan, 2010). There is a focus on induction questionnaires, mid-course evaluations, end-of-course evaluations, accommodation surveys, forum debates even, but these tend to be driven by the university not the student. They are often related to strategies to improve a ranking or position in a league table. Brennan acknowledges that many students feel frustrated by the usual student feedback mechanism:

Notwithstanding the industry has developed around student feedback, the questions asked and the analyses undertaken may sometimes 'miss the point' as far as many students are concerned. The annual national student survey seems to report mostly high levels of student satisfaction with their courses. But this simple point seems often to be missed in the near obsessive concern with rankings and league tables. (Brennan, 2010, p.194)

Narrative accounts written by students enable us to see beyond questionnaire responses or forum minutes. A narrative methodology was used in this research project because of the authenticity of narrated accounts. In these narratives it is the student's own voice and not the researcher's hearing of it or analysis of it. Indeed one student wrote

Yes, no one is better than ourselves to tell our stories and to remember them.
(Undergraduate alumni from China)

There has been a growth in narrative research in the social sciences, and particularly in Education, over the last twenty years, as a means to capture individual or group experiences (Sparkes, 2002). Narrative enquiry gathers and presents data through the process of communication. It is based on the premise that each party involved in the communication is acting and interacting rationally in an attempt to build mutual understanding with others (Habermas, 1984). When gathering data the researcher receives texts or oral accounts which are situated in time and place, as told by the participant. The researcher makes judgements about the validity of the data using an agreed methodological introspection. In sharing their lived experiences the participants reconstruct their experiences based on their understandings of the time and place in which they occurred, influenced by their understandings of the time and place in which they now live, the past and the present connected (Bignold & Su, 2013). In autobiographical narrative the participant becomes the narrator and reconceptualises his/her lived experiences, making them accessible to others, enabling others to understand the lived experience. The value of the narrative is in the authenticity of the story itself and the opportunity it gives for that experience to be taken to a wider audience. Therefore the narrative accounts have not been deconstructed and measured, that would be meaningless. Instead a thematic analysis of these narrative accounts has been undertaken to identify acts of openness and to understand the impact it has on the student.

Being Open to Others: The University

As university students it is unsurprising that they wrote about supportive, welcoming staff who eased them through unfamiliar situations on arrival. Student ambassadors waiting to greet them at the airport in those initial moments of anxiety of arriving somewhere new, who gave them a welcoming hug and took the luggage trolley and bought them a coffee to drink in the taxi to campus, was one example. In these early days orientation courses and induction programmes feel welcoming, but it is the support manager who gives up her Saturday to take them to the city centre on the bus and shows them round with her son so they get their bearings who sticks in one student's mind. A student writes of "dedicated and committed" reception staff; it is not only tutors who are key to student experience. All members of the university community, regardless of their role or seniority, can have a positive impact, listening to their needs, supporting them and looking for solutions when problems occur, as this extract illustrates:

I had broken my shinbone, lost some bone and it required a long series of procedures to get me back on my feet... It was obvious I couldn't continue, I had

to stop University – I had to quit. But wait... After a series of conversations the Student Support and Well-being department were ready and prepared to support me to finish my programme if I was willing to continue. (Postgraduate student from Ghana)

Welcoming international students into the university community and being open to their cultures and traditions, valuing them enough to give them a platform to share them with the community can make a long lasting impression on a student:

In Liverpool Hope University we had every opportunity, to begin with the festival that is held in March of every year and it's called the Culture Carnival. In fact it is a very good opportunity for all international students to exhibit their culture, traditions and foods. It was an honour for me to represent my country's culture and foods for the first time in Liverpool Hope University. I also showed a keen interest in holding a stall to show my country's great culture and traditions to all students, since they got a different image of Afghanistan and that is the image of war, so it was an opportunity for me to show that there is more about Afghanistan and an Afghan apart from war. We have a great nation, great culture and a history of 5,000 years. I wanted to show everyone that since a long time ago we have been the victims of war and terrorism. Everyone in Afghanistan, from children to elderly people, men and women, are thirsty for peace and love. (Postgraduate alumni from Afghanistan)

This extract illustrates the impact such an event can have on someone's sense of self-worth and the pride he has in his country; he feels valued.

A common theme which students wrote about was their tutors who they found to be motivating, encouraging and supportive. One student told how her tutor in an MA Education class had given her confidence in her new situation by asking her about education in Kurdistan, her homeland, and her experiences of teaching there. This illustrates an attitude of equality from the tutor who created an atmosphere where students felt valued, equal to each other and their tutor, sharing their professional experiences and knowledge with each other. Of course, this could be seen as academics who are just being professional but it is not just in the classroom or the lecture hall that students felt welcome. There were examples of personal interactions of lasting impact outside of these places as this Theology student recounts:

My tutor gave me a shock! The class finished at 9.00pm one day. As I was making my way for the door he called out to me. I was thinking now that I would miss my bus but waited to speak to him all the same. When he was done he strapped his bag on and said "It's cold, I'll take you." In that breezy cold of December he drove me through the streets of Liverpool right to the gate of my Aigburth residence. That was kindness and thoughtfulness that could only come from a humble British reverend. (Postgraduate alumni from Nigeria)

Such acts of openness were not specific to Christian members of the University; of course someone's religion is not always obvious to others, but I would hope that a Christian university which encourages gospel values in all its staff and students regardless of their religion sees a great number of such interactions in its community.

Being Open to Others: Student Peers

Within the University community another common theme within the narratives was that of peer support or openness. For many international students one aim of studying in the UK is to meet British people and make new friends. This is regularly given as a motivator by Study Abroad students in particular who come to the UK for one semester (Bignold, 2014). An openness of the student body to welcome in new peers and to make them feel at home can help an international student to settle more quickly:

The welcome my fellow internationals and I were given could not have been warmer and more cordial. Getting to know other students in halls could not have been more amicable. A "mate" here or an "Ask me whenever you need me" there was surely meant. (Study Abroad alumni from Germany)

Feeling like a family is important when you have travelled half way round the worlds and left your own family and friends behind. The human need to feel loved and to belong does not diminish, if anything it gets stronger and a peer group can provide a temporary fix at least. When you are away from home in an unfamiliar place you often crave familiarity; food can take on deep significance as it can provide that link with home, a favourite meal can be reassuring. Students wrote about living with their peers, both home students and other internationals. Cooking together and for each other was a popular theme; the importance of sharing food as a means of bonding; taking it in turns to cook traditional dishes and to serve

one another. The simple gesture of serving food does much to signal one's openness, one's willingness to serve others.

I met three nice ladies in the flat who eventually became very good friends. Ping from Singapore and two Brits; Bernadette and Rebecca. My new friends assisted me so well and were so helpful. It was a good time to study each other's culture as well. We cooked for each other and shared our favourite dishes. I laughed to see them eating my rice and beans. (Postgraduate student from Ghana)

Of course sharing in each other's culture, being interested in it, valuing those who are different, who come from different places, different lives, as equals can be hugely empowering to those we welcome but also to those who are welcoming them as we ourselves are part of something bigger, that does not revolve only around us. For UK students like Bernadette and Rebecca, such opportunities as that described above can be of great importance in their own growth and development as members of a global society (Killick, 2015).

One student wrote about his pleasure when his British peers voted him as president of the Cricket society in his first year. He came from a cricketing nation and had been passionate about cricket his entire life. His peers and fellow players recognised this commitment to the sport, his talent and knowledge and put him first before themselves; a different example to the one above but another example of how acts of openness can create a sense of well-being in others.

In the collection of narratives submitted one student did not experience an openness amongst his peers and his pain in this can be felt in these few words:

I arrived at my University accommodation and was met by my resident tutor with a smiling face.. I arrived on a Saturday and the next day was a boring and lonely Sunday for me as I had no one to talk to... Monday morning came still with no friends or company. (Postgraduate Alumni from Nigeria)

Not everyone is open to others and the impact of feeling lonely for an international student can be deeply demotivating; fortunately the situation for this student changed once he was in his class.

Being Open to Others: The City

This paper has not sought to measure the openness of a university or its city to international students or to measure the impact of openness on this student cohort. Instead it has simply sought to give voice to the lived experiences of openness by international students, an often marginalised group in higher education, despite their economic value in a consumer-based model. The narratives shared here have given evidence that staff and students of an English ecumenical university are open to those from other countries as they arrive in a new location seeking to feel at home.

As the evidence has shown, this openness often manifests itself in small acts of kindness which make the receiver feel welcomed, valued, loved, human.

Common themes which can be drawn out about the wider community and those encountered in the city were about the kindness of people whom students came into contact with in their daily lives. Public transport workers were the main focus of the narratives interestingly. One student described how, when she first arrived in Liverpool late on a dark winter's night and could not locate the house she had rented a "friendly" taxi driver her round and round until they did find it at no extra charge. A similar experience is shared here:

I first arrived in Liverpool at Lime Street Station, two large suitcases in hand and a weary demeanour after twenty four hour worth of travelling. Unfortunately the Central Line was close so I enlisted the help of the Transport Police in order to find the appropriate bus to Aigburth Park. Though no one could tell me off the top of their heads, one officer was kind enough to take one of my bags and wheel it around downtown Liverpool while he asked almost every bus driver he could find. After about an hour of walking he located the bus and put me on it. (Study Abroad alumni from America)

It is in our practical dilemmas when we can feel most vulnerable, lost in an unfamiliar city in the dark, struggling to make sense of local transport on a cold, wet day. At these times students come into contact with those working in these environments, bus drivers, taxi drivers, police officers, often at the start of a long day or the end of a busy shift. It is these embers of our communities who can have the most impact on an international student by making time to help them in a friendly way. Yes, it is part of their job, they are being professional, but the narratives gave many accounts of professionals who had gone beyond

what might be expected of them and showed human kindness in small acts of great significance.

I learned to appreciate what was around me: The kindness of a stranger taking time out of their busy day to show me how to read the bus schedule. A police officer going above the call of duty to make sure I wasn't stranded in Lime Street Station. A bus driver who didn't laugh at the silly Americans who got on a bus going the opposite direction to their destination and became their unofficial tour guide. (Study Abroad student from America)

Interestingly, as well as experiencing such generosity and warmth three of the narratives included observations of such openness to other people. This reinforced the warmth of character of Liverpudlians and such witness appeared to have as much impact as if the student had experience the act of kindness himself. This is illustrated in this longer extract:

Bus line 86C takes me back to Hope Park. We approach a bus stop but nobody is waiting at it. Instead a man is jogging towards it, trying to wave down the bus. Our driver has not seen him and we are going too fast for him to reach the stop in time – he will miss the bus. Maybe he is in a hurry or maybe the next bus would still get him to his destination in time. Things a fellow passenger on the bus has not been thinking about. He goes up to the driver, says a few words while pointing at the pavement. The driver brings his vehicle to a quick halt and opens its doors to the jogger.

I spent five months in Liverpool. I went on countless trips to cities in the UK. I met people from countries all over the world. Yes this seemingly minor event has stayed in my mind as a prominent memory. Waving down a bus was new to me when I came to England, but that is not the point. Stopping the bus for someone unknown – that is the point. The fellow passenger could have been lost in his own thoughts. He could have ignored the other man. Instead he told the bus driver to stop for a stranger on the pavement. It was a selfless, considerate act of solidarity. I do not remember the face of this man. I do not even recall his rough age. However, he is to me the epitome of Liverpudlian values. (Study Abroad alumni from Germany)

Students wrote about the openness they experienced from teachers in placement schools over staff room coffee, shop-workers who called them “love” or “sweetheart” as they passed

through a busy supermarket checkout; those few seconds of seemingly insignificant banter being deeply significant to those far from home. One wrote of a waitress in a cafe who did not charge for a second or third cope of tea on a wet day February afternoon; another simple act of friendliness which Liverpool is famous for, at least amongst those who live there:

I was surely stunned, perhaps even a little intimidated by the friendliness and familiarity I met with. The first two weeks showed that the Scouse mentality involves openness, friendliness and support. (Postgraduate alumni from Denmark)

Not a common theme, but interesting none the less, were two examples of openness from the participants themselves; one is given here:

I am part of a monthly organised Contact the Elderly charity tea event for the senior citizens in the community at Hope Park. I have been consistently supporting this wonderful event from its very first tea party till the present. Contact the Elderly has been a great way to create a bridge between the young generation and the senior citizens of the community for interaction and cherished talk about the changes now and then. (Postgraduate student from Nepal).

Wanting to be part of the community or to give something back, whatever the motivation for making such a commitment as this, the example reminds us that being open to others goes across generations, cultures and faiths. It is not the preserve of one group over another, but is illustrative instead of a person's commitment to humanity.

Discussion

Some international students choose a Christian university not because they are Christians themselves but because of the strength of true community in such institutions and its underpinning values which reassures them of being welcomed and valued because they are the values of the Gospel (Bignold, 2014). Public institutions should be open and welcoming to all citizens, particularly institutions of education, and church foundations, which Liverpool Hope is, in particular (Pillay, 2010). Feeling welcomed was a recurring theme in the narratives, the importance of belonging and feeling at home by being part of the community. This extract sums this up:

This was a followed by a routine of going to the University's library, using the University gym and some Wednesdays volunteering in serving foods for the poor and homeless people through Chaplaincy. My university felt like my home away

from home. Imagine how hard it would be for an individual like me who comes from a country which has been the victim of war and whose citizens are identified by the war. (Postgraduate alumni from Afghanistan)

The narrative extracts shared here have provided evidence of openness to international students amongst university staff, student peers and the local community:

Thanks Liverpool for showing me a world of beauty and kindness. (Study Abroad alumni from North America.)

The positive impact that these acts of openness can have on international students has been made clear by the participants' recounting of various acts of "kindness" they have experienced. There are recurring themes in the narratives, ways in which the different acts of openness made the students feel. These include removing anxiety at times of stress, such as being lost in a new city, being helped when in a difficult situation, such as having an accident and being friendly and taking an interest in the newcomer. The themes are not particular to staff, peers or community but all three groups appear in more than one narrative. It is the City which is written about with most frequency, or the people within the community.

Always asking if you need help, listening to us, acting for us and being there for us. I thought this extreme show of kindness was just for the moment but as time passes I realize it is actually the culture of Liverpoolians to be hospitable, loving and caring; expressed in their communication with others, such as sweeties, my love, honey and all sorts of kind gestures. To say the least, never in all the countries I have visited, even some parts of the United Kingdom have I seen such gestures. Many times I got lost trying to locate a place and I have people leaving their own destination to help with mine and afterwards asking if I am alright before leaving. A virtue that I have not seen anywhere else in the world. Caring for people's satisfaction is their passion and lifestyle with no strings attached. (Postgraduate alumni from Nigeria)

When selecting a university, the course syllabus and the academic reputation are key factors (Bignold) as may be any faith-based dimension, but so too is the reputation of the city it is located in. Aarts (2011) acknowledges the importance of location to a university.

I am not suggesting that Liverpool is unique within the UK in its openness to those from outside of it, as I am not suggesting that Liverpool Hope is unique amongst universities. However I do think there is something significant about being the only ecumenical university in Europe which attracts staff, and some students, to its shared Christian values and traditions. Similarly, there is something special about Liverpool, examples of it have been given here. Perhaps it is because it is a port city, or a city that built its wealth on the slave trade and is still coming to terms with that part of its history. Perhaps it is the economic hardships it faced at the end of the twentieth century or the ongoing influence of the Beatles that constantly remind its citizens that “All you need is love”! Whatever it is, Liverpool has it and its international students appreciate it:

You may be black, white, Asian or American, but if you identify as a Liverpudlian, the whole city will hold you up when you are down. I cannot say I have ever met another city that lives in everlasting solidarity with those who come to it, who are part of it... By blood and/or by choice the occupants of this city are welcoming and ready to stand tall to anyone who tries to belittle their own, even those who are just visiting. (Postgraduate alumni from North America)

Of course those students who were motivated to take part in the project were motivated by their positive experiences. It may be that others, who had a negative experience, who felt a lack of openness chose not to take part because they felt less of a connection or commitment to the University or the City.

Openness is good for the individual student who experiences it. It impacts positively on her/his sense of self-worth and belonging as the extracts here show, similarly an absence of openness can impact negatively and create feelings of loneliness, but it goes beyond this and the individual who has experienced it. Staff, peers and community members who are open to others and the students who respond to this are furthering the community in the University and the City. The openness to international students in particular, as evidenced here, creates a community that is serious about world issues and globally alert. It enables those of us in the community who are living ‘easy’ lives, removed from conflict, poverty, religious persecution, for example, to share some of the pain of people who have left such environments behind. It enables us to share the joys of those who have left loving families, rich cultural traditions and fulfilling professions behind too. It enables each of us to be a little more educated about the world we live in.

Conclusions

This paper has not sought to measure the openness of a university or its city to international students or to measure the impact of openness on them. Instead it has sought simply to give voice to the lived-experiences of international students, an often marginalised group, despite their economic worth, in a consumerist model of higher education. The narratives shared here have given evidence that staff, students and the wider community of an English ecumenical university where the research was conducted, are open to others. As the evidence has shown, this openness often manifests itself in small acts of kindness which can make an international student feel welcomed, listened to, valued, loved, human:

Liverpool has been a nice place to live and study in. I love the way people smile at strangers. (Postgraduate student from Nigeria)

This paper has listened to the stories of the international students, it has heard their experiences of openness and the feelings it has created in them. Perhaps the greatest impact is on those of us who are open and who have the pleasure of hosting international students in our community though. How else can we understand the experiences of those living in other communities of our interconnected world? We should look beyond ourselves in order that we may grow and serve the wider world more fully, but that is a focus for another set of narratives...

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