Exploring transition to postgraduate study: shifting identities in interaction with communities, practice and participation

Jane Tobbell\(^a\); Victoria O'Donnell\(^b\); Maria Zammit\(^c\)

\(^a\) University of Huddersfield, UK \(^b\) University of Glasgow, UK \(^c\) Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

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Exploring transition to postgraduate study: shifting identities in interaction with communities, practice and participation

Jane Tobbella, Victoria O’Donnellb and Maria Zammitc

a University of Huddersfield, UK; b University of Glasgow, UK; c Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

There has been relatively little research to date that has explored the transition to postgraduate study. This paper reports findings from a project (funded by the UK’s Higher Education Academy) that sought to address this gap. The research project was ethnographic and explored university practice and student participation in five UK universities. A significant emergent feature of the research was that a multiplicity of identities construct student experience and contribute to student transition. This finding provides support for learning theory that argues for inextricable links between learning and wider social identities. Moreover, the process of negotiating an academic identity in light of wider experience and university practices emerged as a key factor in understanding transition together with the imperative for independent study, which was a particularly powerful practice that necessitated complex identity negotiations in order to enable full participation in the university community of practice.

Introduction

In contrast to other types of educational transition, the transition to postgraduate study has not benefited from a wide and diverse literature. We have argued elsewhere (Tobbell et al., 2008) that this may represent an assumption that the nature of the transition is less challenging as it may be assumed that there is little to overcome in moving from undergraduate to postgraduate study because, essentially, the environment does not change. Previous research has argued that transition to higher education involves identity shifts concomitant with increasing participation in the valued practices of the

*Corresponding author. Department of Behavioural Sciences, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK. Email: j.tobbell@hud.ac.uk

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institutions (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007) and the educational transition literature, more generally, has argued that shifting institutions demands that students’ existing knowledge may be resituated in the new context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). That little attention has been paid to postgraduate students may result in their construction, albeit in an implicit way, as ‘expert’ students. As a result the need for a systematic understanding of their transition has been alleviated as their status would not engender transition issues identified in other educational research. That is, such students are already full participants in universities by virtue of their undergraduate success and there is no re-situation of knowledge but, rather, a continuity. Some research has sought to understand the postgraduate experience. As long ago as 1994, Hockey carried out a study with PhD supervisors and students and found the supervisory role to be a very challenging one for staff and students alike, requiring the negotiation of multiple tasks and identities. He recommended a systematic approach to the training of supervisors to meet the academic and pastoral demands of students. Barnacle (2005) suggests that doctoral studies have been challenged by the commodification of knowledge, where the learning is valued more by its application in the world than by its power to transform learner identities. Donnelly (2008), in her study of lecturers engaging in postgraduate career development study, notes that the environment in which learning and performance is situated must be able to stimulate continuous improvement. She argues that there is a need for positive guidance in a learning community to enable the sustenance of learners when study becomes challenging. Fry et al. (2007) review an innovative learning technology programme designed to shift postgraduate teaching methods to enable deeper and more independent learning in students. The programme recognises the need for staff to work with students to create an environment that encourages more personal responsibility for learning.

Such research, then, suggests that engaging in postgraduate study represents challenges for both staff and students. The doctoral supervisory role of staff is a complex one and is played out in a different context to that of undergraduate study. The demand for different pedagogic approaches to postgraduate education is implicit in Fry et al.’s (2007) work and so contributes to an argument that postgraduate study represents an identifiable transition and, as such, requires specific attention.

Further, Barnacle (2005) notes the transformative potential of study and implicit in Fry et al.’s work is the notion that students will undergo identity shifts in response to environmental shifts. This notion represents an important theoretical and practical detail from a pedagogic point of view. The data that emerged from this research project provided evidence that in managing their transition, student focus is not limited to their university work but rather the work of transition permeates all aspects of their lives. Moreover, the negotiations between university and wider life are not one-way but rather are multi-linear and interactive. However, it seemed that university practices did not account for such complexity and, as such, student identities were negotiated and renegotiated in environments that were not necessarily facilitative to transition in their design or implementation.

Recent conceptualisations of learning have foregrounded the importance of identity in understanding learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and the process
and nature of such identity shifts provide further impetus for research focus on transition to postgraduate work. Both Wenger (1998) and Butler (1993) have argued that identity is produced (the process) and described (the nature), both in terms of what is said and what is not said, and it could be argued that the silence surrounding postgraduate transition may have served to construct postgraduates in particular ways with concomitant influence in student and staff identities. One result may be the representation of the ‘expert’ student who does not experience transition issues identified in other educational transitions and so does not require the same level and type of pedagogic support carried out in undergraduate courses. As such, there would seem to be a necessity to explore postgraduates’ experiences of study empirically in order to properly understand the nature of their transition and the organisational practices that construct it.

This paper discusses findings that emerged from an ethnographic study of transition to postgraduate study carried out in five UK universities over a one-year period. The data represent a direct challenge to implicit assumptions that postgraduate students (either doctoral or masters candidates) are not required to negotiate new and challenging environments in order to succeed. Our research suggests that, in fact, success at this level of study necessitates fundamental shifts in learning identity and attendant challenges in negotiating these shifts in light of commitments and life events exterior to the study environment.

Learning as negotiated identity

There is now a range of evidence and theory that argues for a reconceptualisation of learning from the traditional internalisation of transmitted messages to that of a social process, distributed over context, behaviour and personal beliefs and meanings (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Colley et al., 2003; Crossan et al., 2003; Rogers 2006). As a result it is incumbent upon educators and researchers to understand the complexity presented by this model in order to properly structure curricula and context to maximise student participation. Lawy et al. (2004) have pointed out that at present, policy and practices do not allow for the inherent connection between formalised learning contexts and the complexity of student lives exterior to those contexts. In their research of the post-16 curriculum in the UK, they use interview data to demonstrate how young people do not necessarily accept knowledge as it is presented in formal institutions but rather state ‘[Knowledge]…was created in a process of learning, and was the product of a complex relation between the formal curriculum and contingent social economic and cultural dispositions and influences’ (p. 22). Given this, they argue that students require structures to enable them to integrate the theoretical and technical knowledge delivered into their personal experiences. It may be that a student’s ability to integrate such knowledge represents a form of success in the education system. In addition, such findings echo the argument above that in transition to postgraduate study, student knowledge is re-situated in light of environmental and personal shifts.
Goos’ (2005) research explored the developing pedagogical identities of novice mathematics teachers as users of technology. She notes how the novices’ pedagogical identities shifted through time as they negotiated different teaching environments in the context of their own actions and personal beliefs. Fry et al.’s (2007) work suggests that pedagogical styles can contribute to engendering enabling shifts in postgraduate study and argues for the importance of staff and institutional actions in constructing learning identity. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) have proposed the notion of a ‘learning career’ to account for the often erratic and unpredictable nature of learning identity. In a five-year longitudinal study with young people, they demonstrate how life events contribute to constantly evolving personal meanings that ensure that educational decisions are not necessarily the result of active choice or personal agency but, rather, are a reflection of the interaction of context, values and beliefs that could be understood as identity. Thus, the lives of students external to the university context becomes a necessary point of research. Crossan et al. (2003) position learning as the ‘subjective experience’ (p. 62) of change and reason that identity transformation is a concomitant feature of all learning. Such arguments demand that learning and teaching are considered in light of students’ subjective life experiences. Cieslik’s (2006) participants were adult learners on a basic skills course and his data suggest that how and why somebody engages in learning is a reflection of experiences distributed across the life course. He notes that learning careers are ‘navigations’ through the range of life roles and events, such as becoming and being a parent or acting as the family ‘breadwinner’. He notes the temporal nature of learning identity as it evolves in the face of events and reflections on those events. This provides further strength to the argument that a consideration of postgraduate students’ wider life experiences are a legitimate focus in understanding their participation in learning and transition trajectories.

Wenger’s (1998) work has foregrounded identity in understanding individual participation, or learning, in a range of contexts or communities of practice. He states:

Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity, it is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming—to become a certain person or, conversely to avoid becoming a certain person. (p. 215)

He argues that the acquisition of knowledge and skills is carried out in ‘the service of identity’ and that all learning becomes meaningful in light of individual identity. Such understandings of learning are at odds with what Lave (1997) has identified as a ‘…Western theoretical tradition…institutionalised in Western schooling’ (p. 19) that the transmission of knowledge and skills, or teaching, is a precursor to the internalisation of learning or culture. She argues that this assumes an unproblematic process in learning, that information is received and encoded in the same way as it is delivered. Clearly, given the arguments above, all knowledge and skills are encoded in light of complex interactions, which emerge from and contribute to personal identity. As such, awareness of postgraduate students’ histories, current experiences and aspirations is part of understanding the transition process.
Much of the literature reviewed above has presented participants’ narratives of being learners. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) present the story of Amanda Ball and situate her learning decisions and experiences in her romantic relationship, living conditions and future aspirations. Crossan et al. (2003) present the narratives of Jane and Davie, which situate them in their wider life experiences, and Lawy et al. (2004) offer case studies that provide insight into individuals’ formal education as it is situated within their lives outside school or college. This suggests that in order for us to understand an individual’s participation in learning, information about and understanding of that individual’s wider experience is a necessity—this is what Lave (1997) has termed the ‘learning curriculum’ (p. 29). The present research, then, whilst focused on exploring transition to postgraduate study, sought to elicit data from participants regarding their wider lives, which included, but was not limited to, their experiences with the university.

**Identity, practice and educational transition**

Educational transition can be understood, in simple terms, as the shift from one educational environment (primary school to secondary school, school to university, the shifting of study between universities) to a different one. In such shifts students must negotiate the multiplicity of discontinuities that construct the new community and mark it as different from their former community. However, it is more than this. Educational transition can also be conceptualised in more complex terms as a shift from one study environment to another one (the shift between school assessments to public assessments, the shift from undergraduate study to postgraduate study, the shift between the study of natural science to social science) in the context of the life course. In such transitions the participating institution may not change but the mode of study and the meanings that underpin that study undergo a considerable shift because these are inextricably linked to the wider experiences of students, which inevitably undergo changes as they form family units, buy houses and progress in their careers. Our previous research has highlighted the discontinuities experienced by access students (that is students undertaking a pre-university preparatory course) shifting to undergraduate study within the same university (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007) and the personal experiences that accompanied these changes. Such students underwent a range of changes, from the location of their teaching to their right to use university services, and concomitantly experienced shifts in their wider identities in terms of their self-identification from merely studying to being a student.

Kaplan and Brown (2007) describe the transition of nurse practitioners in their authority to prescribe different types of drugs. They note the long process of this transition and comment upon the personal shifts required of the nurse practitioners, in that to manage the transition they needed to acquire feelings of autonomy from doctors in order to feel confident in prescribing controlled drugs. It is suggested that this transition demands that the nurses ‘let go’ of old practices in order to be able to adopt the new ones. The process was not as simple as nurses one day handing out prescriptions, but rather it involved the group in viewing themselves in a different
way, as decision makers in the care of patients, with authority to heal. This was not merely a professional identity but made part of their own personal life views.

Transition, then, can be understood in terms of shifts in practice, within or between communities coupled with identity transformation and the ‘work’ of transition becomes the negotiation of those practices in light of past and present membership of other communities and present identity. Wenger (1998) has used the notion of ‘boundary’ to understand shifts between practices. A boundary is formed when an individual must learn, or participate in, practices that are either new to their community of practice (as in the case of the nurse practitioners above) or that represent a new community of practice (as in the case of the access students in transition). But these shifts cannot be separated, either theoretically or practically, from wider identity.

The identity of the individual, which can be understood in terms of participation in a range of communities of practice, further complicates such transitions. Participation in practices is not a straightforward process. Tobbell’s (2003, 2007) research highlighted how children in transition from primary to secondary school experienced diverse feelings surrounding the assumptions of behaviour in the different institutions, some resenting the maternal approach of primary school, constructing it as interfering, whilst others felt secondary school made assumptions of adult behaviour, which engendered feelings of too much responsibility for which they felt unprepared. Their identities as secondary school students were embedded in wider personal understandings of capability and maturity. Moreover, some students held seemingly contradictory feelings, liking the increased choice of curriculum afforded by the larger school but disliking the size of the school, which demanded challenging personal and geographical negotiations. Transition identities, then, are not linear and ‘clean’. Rather they are the work of internalising and enacting change in the face of contradictory emotion and experience.

In making an educational transition, students encounter a variety of boundaries in the form of practice. It may be that such practices are not explicit. Note the argument above from Wenger and Butler, which suggests silence can be as powerful as action in the construction of identity. Full participants in a community of practice operate on the basis of historical and shared meanings of which they have a detailed understanding, but the meanings of which may not be obvious to outsiders or new participants (Wenger, 1998). Students in transition are, by definition, peripheral participants in the new community (even if it is within the same institution) (O’Donnell et al., 2009) and they can simultaneously be included, by virtue of mere presence, whilst excluded as a result of the impenetrability of the practices which surround them. Wenger comments:

> Practice can be guarded just as it can be made available; membership can seem a daunting prospect just as it can constitute a welcoming invitation; a community of practice can be a fortress just as it can be an open door. (p. 120)

Participation in practice is mediated by individual identity and the process of identity shift in the face of practice constitutes transition. Exploring students’ experiences of university practices and the process by which those practices are encountered,
learned and understood (or not) was therefore an important aspect of the research discussed here.

Understanding practice and participation in transition to postgraduate study

The preceding arguments provide a useful framework for transition research. Given the emphasis on identity and the conceptualisation of identity as participation in a range of communities of practice (CoP) both personal and academic and their attendant practices, the goal of transition research is to understand the nature of practices in the CoP to which the students are making the transition, together with the access new participants have to those practices in the form of the new CoP’s welcome and the individuals’ engagement in those practices that will underpin identity trajectories and, so, learning. The aim of this project as a whole was to do just this in the area of transition to postgraduate study. The aims of this paper emerged from the data as it revealed itself. That is the importance of subjective student experience and attendant identity negotiation in understanding learning and participation, conceptualised here as transition. Specifically the aims of this work are:

- to explore subjective student experience in transition to postgraduate study;
- to explore and understand the ‘learning curriculum’ of postgraduate students in transition; and
- to explore the interaction of student personal and academic lives in negotiating postgraduate identities

Methods

We have argued (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2005) that, given the importance of practice and the subjective experience of that practice in transition, the most appropriate methodology for exploring the phenomenon is ethnographic because such a methodological approach ensures an engagement with micro and macro levels of student and staff lives and the institutional context which those lives inhabit. Moreover student and institutional contexts were studied simultaneously. In addition, given that participants are influenced by practices to which they may not have immediate access, to understand transition it is necessary to go beyond the personal experiences of the participants in order to understand the structures and mechanisms that may not be explicitly articulated by participants, yet are key in constructing the transition environment. As such, the research included data from diverse sources. In addition, the data needed to reflect the temporal nature of transition. By definition, participation shifts over time and this demands longitudinal data to reflect student understandings and institutional practices.

To achieve this we undertook a range of data collection methods:

- one-to-one interviews with students—at the beginning and end of the academic year;
- focus groups—including student participants at different stages in their study, carried out eight months into the academic year;
• longitudinal email diaries kept by students—over the academic year;
• classroom observations—at two different time points, mid November and January;
• document analysis—university and degree handbooks, module handbooks, module handouts; and
• one-to-one interviews with staff—carried out a different points over the academic year.

The data collection methods were designed to enable the collection of personal experience and reflections of experience over time in the case of one-to-one interviews and email diaries. As part of these methods, students were specifically asked to refer to events that were influencing their studies in their lives outside the university as well as to explore university experiences that had enabled or disabled learning according to their own experience. The focus group enabled the inclusion of a larger number of postgraduate students, who in conversation with each other, were given opportunity to describe and comment upon their experiences and, importantly, these were carried out eight months into the academic year to allow the opportunity for reflection in the light of present experience. The observational data and document analysis gave researchers the opportunity to ‘experience’ the students’ environments and to access practice that might not be articulated by participants. In this paper the focus is on subjective student experience and, as such, the data emphasis is on the student ‘talk’ in the form of interviews, focus groups and email diaries. However, some reference is made to observational data to elucidate student experience and staff perceptions of educational approach to postgraduate teaching.

The participants in this research were staff and postgraduates (representing taught masters programmes, research masters programmes and doctoral programmes) from five UK universities. In all 44 students and six members of staff were involved in the face-to-face data collection and 180 students and six members of staff in the observational data collection.

Data analysis

The data collection resulted in a wealth of data and, by necessity, the data in this paper represent a fraction of the amount collected. We have highlighted above that there is little existing, published work on transition to postgraduate study, as a result our aim here is to represent breadth of subjective, student experience in light of institutional practice and specifically in response to the data that emerged and informed our emerging understanding that whilst research and theory might isolate identity as compartmentalised (social identity, learning identity, racial identity [Chavous et al., 2008] etc.), this is unhelpful in understanding student transition because, in reality, all aspects of experience interact to construct and contribute to identity trajectories and participation in postgraduate study. To illustrate this we have identified two major themes that demonstrate student negotiation of life and study and the nature of their membership in the postgraduate community of practice.
Analysis was carried out using a focused problem approach (Anderson, 2002) in that the reassembling of the disassembled data (in the form of individual coding by each researcher, followed by comparison and recoding of emergent meanings by all the researchers) was informed by the aims expressed above and the literature. The final themes reflect breadth of experience in that we have not included, in this work, individual narratives but, rather, representative experience across the participants. The following analysis represents our interpretation of emergent postgraduate identities in the face of university practices.

Analysis: exploring identity in postgraduate students in transition

It is worth saying at this point that, perhaps contrary to our predictions, no significant difference in underpinning subjective experience emerged between different postgraduate groups. That is, the observations and views expressed by doctoral candidates did not, in respect of identity negotiation, differ materially from those of taught masters students. We have not, therefore, separated them in this analysis but we do identify participant by student status to illustrate this.

Negotiating life in the context of postgraduate study

A prominent theme that emerged from the data collected was that despite previous success in undergraduate environments, postgraduates still experienced a complicated and sometimes frustrating transition. Given that identity here is conceptualised as engagement and performance in context, the significance of postgraduate students’ lived environments emerged as particularly significant in understanding their transitions, which for nearly all participants presented a range of issues to be negotiated and problems to be addressed. Significantly, without specific prompting participants made little distinction between lives outside the university and their learning within. This resulted in an analytical imperative; that is that in accounting for transition, attention must be paid to the whole of the student experience, not just their engagement in the curriculum.

The reasons for frustration were multiple and were located in both personal experiences and university practices. The interaction of the personal and the pedagogic emerged from all participants at all points in the data collection process. As such, it became clear that in understanding engagement in university practice (which we have defined above as one understanding of transition) it is not sufficient to restrict data to the university context because this results in a reductive understanding of the transition process. Participants commented spontaneously on their negotiations of the complex demands of their lives. That learning is a process of negotiation in the face of identity was argued above and Lawy et al.’s (2004) point that institutions do not take account of complexity was particularly prominent. Nearly all of the participants led complicated lives outside of their study and most found the negotiation of their different roles challenging. It seems that it is not straightforward, if indeed it is possible, to compartmentalise aspects of identity. Instead a range of experience contributes
and influences engagement in all practices and communities. Data from the first term of study suggest that to a greater or lesser extent all the students were struggling with the demands of ‘real’ life and study life from the beginning of their study period.

The initial email diaries and interviews report the following:

I am starting to notice the impact the course has on my social life as I don’t have as much time to spend with friends and family, which is hard adjusting to. (Masters student)

My youngest daughter started bleeding heavily out of her mouth...turned out it was her tonsils and she is ok now but the late night trip to hospital and her being ill set me back about three days! It’s surprising how easily it happens. (PhD student)

I have recently bought a car and a new flat and so my finances have changed quite a bit!...I’m working in a restaurant as much as I can but I am still putting my course first. (Masters student)

I have cut my hours at work down so that I can focus on my uni work at the moment. I will be able to pick them up again nearer Xmas, which is good. (Masters student)

We are currently in the process of moving flat because our lease has finished on our current flat—that’s time consuming so I could be doing without that. Similarly, all my friends (who have full time jobs) are having Christmas parties and I don’t seem to find time to fit them all in. (Doctoral student)

The excerpts above are indicative of the extent to which lives exterior to the university require a great deal of attention. Moreover, the shift to postgraduate study, in addition to engaging in paid employment to support the study, demands that some enjoyable social activities must be sacrificed. As a result, albeit in unpredictable ways, the performance of life, and therefore the experience of self, shifts and all such shifts must be negotiated. This is indicative of the complexity of experience (Tobbell, 2003, 2007), the dialectic of denial and self-improvement through engagement in study emerged in many participant accounts. Many postgraduate students are giving up time and money, which indicates a commitment and involvement with the process but this exists in parallel with the tensions of family demands and self-denial. It is perhaps such feelings that illustrate Lave’s ‘learning curriculum’, whereby an individual’s participation in learning can only be understood through a broader understanding of their wider experience. There is psychological ‘work’ involved in making shifts between being a student with a commitment to study and being a mother who is worried about her child or a friend who is missing out on social opportunities. Given Crossan et al.’s (2003) claim above that learning is the subjective experience of change, an understanding of these shifts contributes to an understanding of transition. Moreover, an awareness of personal struggles provides insight into the active self-management in which students engage to achieve their goals and, perhaps in contrast, illustrate Bloomer and Hodkinson’s (2000) point that life events result in shifts in meanings and values, which interact in non-predictable ways to construct learning.

Over time this negotiation is rendered increasingly complex in the face of the negotiation of imposed university practices. The following excerpts reflect diaries and interviews between the middle and end of the academic year:
Exploring transition to postgraduate study

The Masters has been harder because, um, we’ve had to hand four essays in on the one day, so for me personally that has been harder. It would have been easier if we were given targets that were staggered. (Masters student)

…I felt a little lost really, that was the overall feeling of being on the course in having a lack of direction and perhaps a misunderstanding of the direction…[we had] five assignments more or less in the same month and I’d actually written them in the wrong style…truthfully two of the drafts I was told were beautifully written…but when they came back they were obviously marked by someone, by different tutors…and they weren’t written properly. (Masters student)

We’ve spoken before about the fact that there are no individual tutors on this course…A number of students including myself are dealing alone to deal with our worries about the work load…I’m not the only one who is losing sleep and even feeling a bit tearful. I feel strongly that access to a personal tutor would be an appropriate outlet from some of this stress. (Masters student)

Given sudden and unexpected class presentation and had to organise reading relevant material etc. This was justified on basis that [refers to profession of area of study] often have unexpected demands on their time but this was just before the first lab report due in and most of class were unhappy as already have considerable demands on our time. (Masters student)

Given the imperative to negotiate personal shifts, students looked to university practice to facilitate their engagement. In their struggle to make a successful transition there was evidence that participants were actively constructing university demands in the face of their own experience and much of the time this resulted in challenging identity shifts in that it seemed to be their personal responsibility to change in the face of imposed practice. It is evident that time availability and time management present very real problems for many students. Those people who had partners, children and perhaps part-time jobs were particularly time poor. Whilst this is not a particularly surprising finding it is an important one in the face of the revelation that university structures tended not to be flexible and in many cases seemed not to be designed with the student in mind. The identity work involved, therefore, almost demands an intra-psychological response, where each individual must negotiate the conflicting demands and address the success or otherwise experienced.

In the universities, the deadlines for submitting work represent what Wenger might refer to as ‘reified practice’. The deadlines are communicated at the beginning of the module study and, as such, staff expect students to organise their time effectively to meet them. That this practice is sometimes constructed as problematic because students do not necessarily view one multiple hand-in date as the culmination of months of work, makes part of Wenger and Butler’s notions of silence in the construction of identity. It may be that once practice is reified in such terms, the full participants cease to question it and expect new participants to conform as this is part of the study process. If students find such practices difficult then it is possible that this will result in the construction of particular learning identities and given that most students struggled with this, it might be hypothesised that these would not necessarily be identities associated with competence in the new environment. Whilst there were a number of funded doctoral students who participated in this research and who tended
to treat their study like a full time job, most of our participants were self-funded and university was just one part of their working lives. This is illustrative of Cieslik’s (2006) idea of learning being a navigation of the life course. The excerpts above indicate frustration and some anger with university practice, which, in these cases, did not reflect student needs or personal struggles. It follows that such feelings will require attention and perhaps further add to the work of learning. Identity development is not a passive process, it accounts for all experience, to a greater or lesser extent.

Wenger (1998) discusses connections between communities of practice and notes that, to the extent the objects and practices of differing communities overlap, then connections can be made and boundaries broken down. For example, funded doctoral students tend to engage in teaching in their department and are thus members of the teaching CoP and the student CoP, but there is a significant overlap between these two, where interconnections can be made and one used to enable participation in the other. However, for those students whose jobs involved working in call centres or restaurants there was little cross over. This notion of boundary overlap would benefit from more targeted research to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between paid work (a necessity for most students) and academic lives. Moreover, the private lives of students rarely interconnected with their study lives. Further, the absence of power that emerges from the comments above presents a challenge to the notion that postgraduate students are legitimate peripheral participants in the university community of practice. Inherent in the notion of membership of a CoP is its interactional nature, in that change can be exercised in both directions—participants may change the community as well as the community changing the individual participants. Despite personal difficulties and unhappiness the excerpts above represent the students’ conforming behaviour to university-imposed practice, hence our comment above that the identity negotiations may be perceived as intrapsychological experience. There was little evidence of students feeling empowered to demand change. This is perhaps further evidence of the reification of deadlines.

The work of transition involved multiple identity shifts amongst the students. Once more, Wenger and Butler’s ideas of the power of silence and absence of action are particularly pertinent here. In the construction of their postgraduate identity in the face of experience, the demands made by the university and tutors represent an important analytic point. For example, asking students to make surprise presentations in class was justified by reference to the unpredictable nature of demands that students would eventually face in professional contexts and therefore with reference to the construction of future professional identities and not to current postgraduate student identity. Different assessments of essay competence were felt by the students and were accepted as a normal part of university life, yet they contributed to insecurities surrounding students’ understandings of their competence in academic practices and were unheeded by the tutors. There was little reference made by staff to student life outside the university. Subjective interpretations of such experience will vary, but the process of identity production happens in the face of practice and its nature may be absence of student voice and power.
The nature of postgraduate student membership in the community

Wenger is explicit in his definition of what constitutes competent membership of a community. He states that it involves a mutuality of engagement, accountability to the enterprise and the negotiability of the repertoire. In terms of postgraduate study this would mean that students are not only changed by their study but equally contribute to changes in the practices of the university. It would further involve that the students understand the meaning that underpins the practices and can put them to use in the service of their own study. Our data suggest that students, even those who were undertaking postgraduate study alongside careers in academia, did not always experience a mutuality of engagement or an ability to negotiate the repertoire. The following excerpts represent the reflections of students towards the end of their first year of study:

What was interesting to me though was that I did know this stuff but it was so densely presented that I couldn’t unpick it. So I began to think that there was more that I didn’t understand…so I had to go back and reread it all to figure out if my initial understanding was right. So it’s been a really peculiar year…it’s kind of made me question my own knowledge and understanding of something I actually do know quite well…so a complete waste of time…hang on a minute I thought I understood this, let me go back and read it all again, yes I did. (Doctoral student)

No, I didn’t [challenge lecturers when they were wrong]. I don’t know [why] to be honest. Like, well you’re sort of struggling with this, it was reliability and validity, which he just got the wrong way round but then it made me…even though I was absolutely sure that what I understood was correct, it, it consistently made me go, I must have missed…I must be having one of those middle aged moments, where I can’t make sense of the world anymore. So I think, well it’s interesting because I’m a very confident person ordinarily but I don’t know whether it’s something about respect for another…I know how hard that job is to stand there and, and you know. (PhD student)

I’ve thought, that’s wrong that, but keep your mouth shut you don’t want to alienate yourself…it’s not for me to be turning round and saying, actually are you sure that’s quite right? (PhD student)

This lack of entitlement to comment may have been fostered by teaching practices. Whilst postgraduate staff promulgated a discourse of participative learning in face-to-face interviews, claiming that postgraduate teaching is more of a conversation and less a formal presentation or that it should be based on activities (echoing the goals of Fry et al.’s innovative learning technology programme discussed above), the observations we carried out did not bear this out. Our observations of teaching took place in research methods modules that combined PhD and masters students. Almost without exception these sessions were delivered as traditional lectures, where the lecturer stood at the front and spoke and the students made notes. There were reports of interesting discussions and exchange in supervisory sessions and in one university the activities of the graduate school were organised by a board of students, but the weight of evidence would suggest that postgraduate students are subject to the dictates of university practices and this provides further evidence to the argument that they can never achieve full membership of the CoP. This is an interesting point
because firstly, it means that change in university practice can only come from within
the university staff, as students lie outside the boundary that engenders shifts in prac-
tice. Secondly, it may be that this results in a peripheral trajectory (Wenger, 1998),
which engenders some identity change but not full participation, or it may lead to
marginality. Barnacle’s (2005) work, discussed above, argues that true learning is
transformative in nature and whilst both peripheral participation and marginality
may serve to transform, the nature of that transformation might not be as beneficial
as student aspirations call for. It may be that in terms of identity this means that
learning becomes something that is ‘done to you’ rather than something in which you
participate with others.

In contrast to the dominance of traditional didactic teaching methods revealed
through observations, analysis of the student ‘talk’ data suggests that one of the prin-
cipal practices that underpinned participation in postgraduate study was studying
‘independently’. This stands in contrast to the notion above, that learning is ‘done to
you’. There is an interesting duality here, which postgraduates must account for in
their identity negotiation. Whilst successful participation requires adherence to a set
of reified university practices (deadlines, writing style, teaching styles) it also requires
students to take personal responsibility for their learning and participation. The data
suggest that the practice of independence is encouraged by an absence of information
rather than an active facilitation of helpful practices.

This perhaps echoes the peripherality and marginality discussed above. It might
be argued that what separates education from nearly all other endeavours, is that
outcomes must be the work of an individual rather than a collaborative effort.
Assessments were almost without exception about individual performance and there
was also repeated emphasis on the notion of students taking responsibility for their
study. Note this discourse in reference to Fry et al.’s paper that acknowledged that
the actions and practices of university tutors can help create an environment where
this is possible. It was notable that in the observations carried out, there was
repeated reference to the importance of gaining independence. The following field
note is representative of the emphasis on independence that characterised teaching
sessions at both time points:

The session was set up like a lecture...with [tutor name] often pointing out that students
would become independent researchers.

This emphasis on independence emerged not just from direct instruction but also
from practices, again the power of actions and silence in constructing learner identi-
ties is evident. The following quotes represent student experience after completion of
six to eight months of study, where they reflect on their experience and its influence
on present practice:

I think I have learned a lot, but I’ve learned a lot because I’ve had to go away and really,
really engage with the stuff that’s in there. I don’t feel it’s been facilitated by the teachers.
(PhD student)

I think I complete the research laboratories much more easily if I do them myself at home.
(Masters student)
Whilst I accept that learning to research for materials is important this needs to be balanced with some support...so that there is time to learn. (Masters student)

...he [PhD supervisor] doesn’t answer emails and if he does he answers the last question not the six I asked. (PhD student)

Such demands engendered different responses in the participants. One student, who admitted she felt she was ‘born to do a PhD’, rarely made use of her office space at the university, commenting that after attending the university daily for the first few months of her studentship she:

...really I found it more constructive to just stay at home, keep my jammies on all day and just type seven days a week. And I can really work just solid, without any time off because I don’t, I let myself sleep until 8 instead of 6 to get myself out of the house. It’s a lot more constructive...I never seem to leave the house. (PhD student)

Others seemed almost depressed or frustrated by the self-reliance culture. These comments were made towards the end of the academic year for the masters student, when the PhD students were entering their second years of study:

I think postgrad can be quite isolating can’t it? Much more so than undergraduate, in terms of the level of independent study that’s required. (Masters student)

...nobody’s telling me anything, should I just know? (PhD student)

You know when you first start doing your PhD, you haven’t got a clue what you’re doing...I sort it out myself. (PhD student)

Feelings of isolation and struggles to find out what constitutes necessary practice for participation in the postgraduate community were prominent in the data. It may be argued that the notions of finding out alone and independent study lend further support to our supposition above that the postgraduate student is constructed as already ‘expert’ and so less attention is given to their inculcation into university culture than to undergraduate students. The practice of working alone, researching, writing and thinking is a familiar one to most academics and perhaps we do not think about it as a particularly strange practice. However, academics are full participants in their communities and as a result, presumably, have experienced identity shifts that make them comfortable with such practices. Our data seem to indicate that for many postgraduate students this emphasis on independence is a somewhat hostile practice. Indeed, in reviewing the data many participants reported getting most pleasure from interactive discussions with fellow students either in formal or informal settings. It is clear that students resist the academic discourse of independence (which they seem to construe as lack of support) but that universities pay little heed to this resistance.

The principal method of participating in an academic community as a postgraduate student was experienced by participants, paradoxically, as becoming independent. This paradox was certainly a source of tension in transition and for many participants it seemed to represent an identity shift too far, which they resisted. Given the emphasis in the literature reviewed in this paper of the active negotiation of identity in learners in the face of their environments, the tension between the academic practice of
independence and the reluctance of postgraduate students to participate in it represents a significant problem in managing transition.

Concluding comments

This qualitative research represented postgraduate students and staff from five UK universities. The goal of this paper was to explore subjective student experience in the context of their transition to postgraduate study and their wider lives. This aim emerged from the reviewed literature, which argued for a more complex understanding of learning as individual and as a function of the negotiation of often competing demands between the personal, the professional and the academic. The data reflect student preoccupations in the face of academic practice and their negotiations of that practice in the context of their lives. The themes illustrate the challenging negotiations involved in transition to postgraduate study. It is clear that, despite the lack of research surrounding this topic, this particular educational transition is in some ways distinct from others. Whilst all transitions involve the negotiation of new practice and the re-situation of existing knowledge, this plays out in particular ways in postgraduate study. The increasing complexity of life contrasts to undergraduate experience and makes real and important demands on students, which tend not to be acknowledged in pedagogic practice. The increasing emphasis on independent study engendered feelings of isolation and lack of competence with the attendant identity trajectories.

Becoming a successful postgraduate involves identity shifts in light of both personal and university practices and there were no material differences in the way in which these were experienced by different ‘types’ of postgraduate students, such as taught masters students versus doctoral research students. The principal practice of ‘independence’ from both students and staff demands that postgraduates take responsibility for their own learning. This stood in contrast to the need for postgraduate students to simultaneously subjugate their actions to those practices and also contrasted with some observations of postgraduate teaching. These tensions complicated the work of transition as students attempted to negotiate and make meaningful the practices of the community and we have suggested that this tension challenges the notion that postgraduate students are legitimate peripheral participants in the community of practice. Such a conclusion has implications for postgraduate pedagogy. If we accept Barnacle’s notion that effective postgraduate study is transformative, then the nature of this transformation becomes a legitimate focus for research. As the academic year under research progressed participants increasingly reflected on these experiences in somewhat negative ways. Transformations, in the form of learning and performance, were acknowledged. However, many students felt that these had happened in spite of the pedagogic support. Rarely, if ever, did students reflect on their experiences with an attitude of the end justifying the means. Rather, participants tended to focus on the difficulties they had negotiated alone in the face of silence from academic staff.

That postgraduate students, perhaps in contrast to many undergraduate students, lead complex personal lives is not a trivial point. Our argument, supported by the
literature reviewed, is that all learning is inextricably linked to the life course, and learning environments that do not account for this may fail to engender enabling participatory trajectories. As our data show, many of the students in this study had important and demanding commitments external to their study and part of the transition process involved negotiating their new life circumstances. In light of their external responsibilities, the negotiation of the practices surrounding independent learning was made more complex and our data suggest that students felt that they must do this alone. The silence surrounding their outside lives within the university, coupled with the emphasis on independent functioning, may result in identity shifts that do not facilitate learning. Transition to postgraduate study, then, is underpinned by the negotiation of external and internal factors in both personal and university contexts.

The notion of identity as a central factor in learning and transition that has emerged from our data is commensurate with work in other areas of educational transition. However, the nature of the identities and the attendant trajectories differ. This suggests that the processes and mechanisms of educational transition have something in common, but that the particular identity negotiations and practices that construct the processes differ across context. This is important because whilst we may begin to understand the psychological processes of transition, the responses to it will be shaped by context. This paper has not addressed the design of university postgraduate structures in any detail but, rather, has sought to demonstrate that such designs need to account for shifting student identities and that the negotiations of such shifts contribute to an understanding of learning and success in academia. One profitable next step may be to examine how university practices may be designed with this in mind, but our data and analysis suggest that transition to postgraduate study is a topic worthy of further research and investigation.

References


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