

Learning for a Complex World

A lifewide concept of learning,
education and personal development

Edited by
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Chapter 13

Adapting to another culture: an immersive experience

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Synopsis

International students who make the transition from another culture into the university environment are required to make a significant transition that requires all sorts of adaptive learning, personal change and development. For many students the process is an immersive experience bearing many of the characteristics described in Chapter 10. This chapter describes a Learning Partnership called Cultural Academy that was developed to enable students to reveal the nature of the learning and development gained through the process of adapting to another culture and to gain recognition for this learning through a Certificate that was part of the Surrey Lifewide Learning Award.

Introduction

In Chapter 10 Cambell and Jackson argued that a lifewide concept of learning and education could embrace the immersive experiences learners encounter in their lives while they are studying at university, and facilitate and recognise the learning and personal development they gain through such experiences. In this chapter we take an example of how new educational practices can be created to support an immersive experience that is common to all students as they make the transition to the higher education experience, but it is particularly significant to those students who have to adapt to another culture as they are making this transition. The challenge is how to help these students make the transition and enable them to be more aware of the transformative change that occurs through this process. The knowledge and confidence that is grown through the experience of making difficult transitions is important self-knowledge for a world that is full of disruptions and upheavals (Chapter 10).

Cultural Academy

Cultural diversity is one of the things that make this world a very complicated place and we cannot claim that we educate people for a lifetime of working and learning without engaging with the issue of how we prepare them, or how they prepare themselves, for the culturally diverse worlds they will inhabit. Cultural awareness is something that we all need in order to be able to operate effectively in multicultural organisations and societies, and multicultural universities provide considerable opportunity for these forms of learning and personal development.

In the UK, cultural diversity is a fact of university life. In the case of the University of Surrey nearly 30 per cent of our students originate from over 130 different countries. Surrey is ranked 45th and 68th worldwide for its proportion of international students and staff respectively in the *THES – QS World University Rankings 2010*, a list of the top 600 universities and colleges selected from an estimated 10,000 institutions worldwide. For students, simply living in the multicultural campus society is an education and the societies, events and other activities organised by students themselves enrich this aspect of a more complete education. But the university can also provide opportunity for learning and development that makes use of the valuable resources of students' cultural knowledge and experiences. Our attention was drawn to the possibility space afforded by the co-curriculum – at the University of Surrey these are opportunities for learning that are organised and designed by members of the university in the space outside the formal academic curriculum and they are not credit bearing. Cultural Academy was created in 2007 and between 2007 and 2010 four Academies were organised, each attracting about 20 students from all cultures, levels (level 1 to doctoral) and disciplines.

Educational design

The main intention was to create a process that would not be too onerous on students in terms of their time commitment but would sustain their interest and involvement and permit relationship development over several months. Underlying the design was the commitment to foster conversations that enabled students to share their cultural knowledge and experiences. We also wanted participants to enjoy their experience and to work together to achieve something that they would value and that they believed would add value to their campus community. Examples of these enterprises include:

- making a film of what it was like to live on a multicultural campus
- organising a conference and workshops to share their cultural knowledge and experiences with other students

- undertaking surveys into what it was like to be part of a multicultural campus community
- creating a radio show on the theme of multicultural campus
- organising a multicultural event which included a fashion show, food of the world, an African drum band and other cultural activities, which they called a 'Big Cultural Bash'.

The design was modified for each Academy. In the first Academy, students participated in three workshops, a planning meeting for a conference and an end of process student-led conference. In 2008–9 students participated in three workshops but this time they organised their event (Big Cultural Bash) after the first workshop. In 2010-11, Cultural Academy took the form of two pairs of workshops, one in each semester. To maintain a sense of continuity from one year to the next a wiki was established and each year resources were added so that students could see that they were part of a tradition and the resources they created would be passed on to other students. Our intention was that the Academies would help students develop friendships and good working relationships and this was certainly the case. Students' feedback was overwhelmingly positive with some claiming it was one of the most significant experiences for them while they were at university.

Three important pedagogic ideas underpin Cultural Academy: *collaborative learning* – learning through sharing knowledge and experiences; *productive inquiry* – learning through finding out in order to achieve something; *learning through the experience* of doing something and through *reflection* on experience.

Pedagogic practices that have been used in different Academies include:

- concept mapping – to facilitate personal enquiry into understandings of culture
- cultural enquiry using simple question-based tools
- use of voting systems to reveal patterns of beliefs in response to propositions about culture
- story telling – descriptions of personal experiences and online blogs, creation of digital stories and use of 'Sensemaker' narrative software
- mentoring to encourage conversation and reflection
- film making – enquiry into our multicultural campus, the recording of the Cultural Academy process and the evaluation of the process
- peer 'teaching' – the facilitation of conversation

- questionnaire surveys – online and paper-based surveys of staff and students to gain their perspectives on our multicultural campus
- reflective personal accounts and conversations to consolidate learning using a set of prompts.

Immersive Cultural Experience Certificate

From the beginning, students who completed Cultural Academy and demonstrated their learning through a reflective account were awarded a SCEPTRe Experiential Learning Certificate. With the advent of the Lifewide Learning Award Framework in May 2010 the opportunity arose for a Certificate to contribute to the framework that enabled cultural learning and development to be recognised. The idea of an Immersive Cultural Experience Certificate was born and it became the developmental focus for a SCEPTRe Fellowship by Novie Johan.

The intention was for the Immersive Cultural Experience Certificate to provide university recognition for informal learning and personal development gained when students are immersed in a culture other than their own. The Certificate is intended for three sorts of situations:

- when international students make the transition into the university and they have to assimilate our culture and adapt their behaviours and communications
- when home or international students go on exchange programmes to other universities or on work placements in another country and have to assimilate a new culture
- when home or international students engage in significant travel experiences during vacation periods when they are exposed to and have to adapt to the cultures of other countries.

Cultural Academy provided the vehicle for developing and piloting the Certificate in the first of these contexts with a small group of international student volunteers. The Certificate was developed and piloted in two stages:

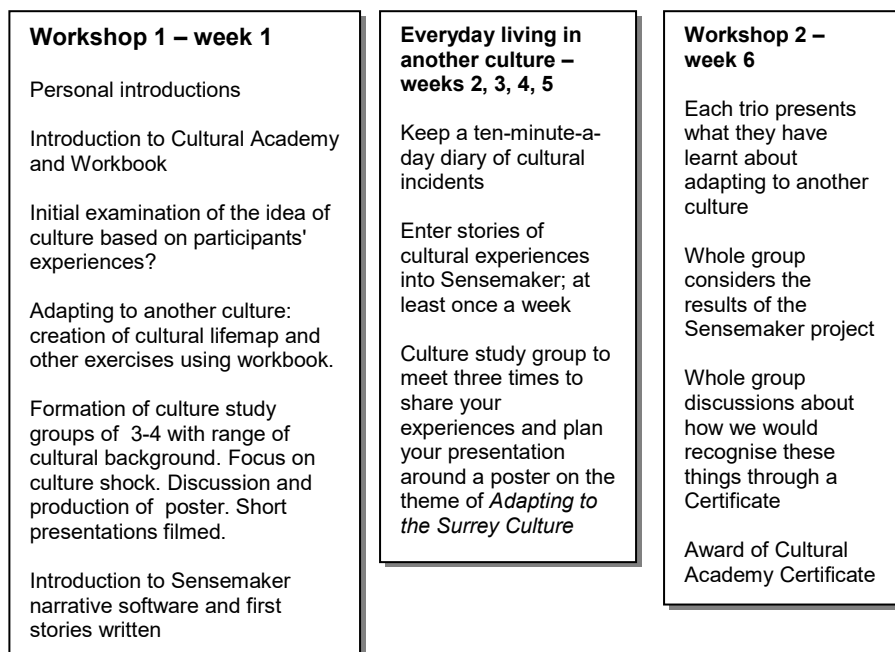
- The first stage involved developing and trialing a tool kit and pedagogic strategies to enable participants to think and talk about their transition to another culture and to encourage them to record their understandings (make their personal knowledge explicit).
- The second stage involved a smaller number of volunteer participants in creating a synthesis account of their transition experience, drawing on the personal knowledge they had recorded and drawing out deeper

understandings of their learning and development. This process was aided by a one-to-one interview with the facilitator.

Cultural Academy, autumn 2010

This Academy differed from previous Academies in that recruitment was aimed exclusively at international students who had only recently started at the university. The Academy involved two afternoon workshops six weeks apart with encouragement for participants to meet weekly in small groups to carry on the conversations and relationship building between the workshops. The overall design is shown in Figure 13.1.

Figure 13.1 Design of Autumn 2010 Cultural Academy



The process was underpinned by two workbooks containing tools and frameworks for stimulating thinking and conversation about the transitional experience and recording incidents, thoughts and feelings about the experiences <http://www.lifewideeducation.co.uk>. Table 13.1 summarises the content of the workbook and shows the reflection, conversational and recording activities it supports.

Process

The first workshop enabled participants to get to know each other and the facilitators to introduce the process. Using the exercises in the workbook, individual reflections and small and whole group conversations explored the meaning of culture. In particular, participants' shared their experiences of culture shock and their initial day-to-day experiences of adapting to the new culture. These impressions were visualised in a poster which was presented to the whole group. Presentations were filmed and the films archived on a wiki. By pooling and capturing experience-based knowledge in this way more perspectives and insights could be gained about the adaptive process.

Table 13.1 Cultural Academy Workbook content – aids to making experiences and personal knowledge explicit

Aids to knowledge development	Activity
Cultural biography (500 words)	Describe where you were born and brought up, your family, the origin of your name, the language(s) spoken in your family, the main cultural influences in your life, the countries you have lived in, your cultural identity.
Culture shock! (500 words)	Describe your experiences, impressions and feelings in the first week after arriving in the England.
Concept map	What does culture mean to you?
Cultural life map	Where in your everyday life do you have experiences through which you gain insights into the influence of culture in the situations you encounter?
Journey of cultural adaptation	Annotate the timeline explaining the emotional journey you are making and the reasons that you feel this way.
Stories of adapting to the English/ University culture using Sensemaker narrative software	Every Friday you will be sent an email inviting you to write a short story about something significant that has happened in the week that has caused you to think about the influence of culture in that situation. You will also be invited to draw meaning from the story and your wider experiences by positioning an X in a triangle that asks you to evaluate the significance of the situation from a variety of perspectives.
Daily diary – ten minute daily reflections	Briefly describe an incident or situation you have found yourself in today that caused you to reflect on culture. What was it that made you reflect on the role of culture in such situations?

Participants were encouraged to develop relationships that would lead to a weekly meeting of their group to continue the conversations and the sharing of cultural experiences. Contact details were exchanged during the workshop to encourage this. Many of the participants agreed to keep in touch through Facebook.

Between the first and second workshop, participants were encouraged to meet their Cultural Academy team informally each week. Not all participants took the opportunity to meet, but those who did reported that they benefited greatly from the experience. Here is an example of a student who honoured the process by recording and reflecting on his experiences and made good use of his team to discuss things that disturbed him about the cultural differences he was encountering.

I met a British elderly man who was looking for his way to Wates House on the campus. Some distance behind him was his elderly wife looking exhausted from walking around campus trying to locate their destination. The man was carrying a big brief case. He walked up to me and asked for the direction to Wates House and I offered to take him there. As we walked together I felt an urge to help with carrying the brief case for him which is culturally acceptable and expected of young ones in my Country as a sign of respect, even for strangers. But not knowing what is acceptable culturally in the UK to this regard I discarded the thought and just took him to his destination. I didn't feel satisfied for not trying and find out along the line what the outcome would be if I offered to help with the luggage; what will be his response ... where the fears that went down my spine as I discarded the choice to help. ... I'm yet to find out if my decision was right or wrong and general tips as to how respect is shown to the elderly in situations like this in the UK. I'll discuss with my group tomorrow to find out what they know.

(Weekly story collected by Sensemaker)

Participants were also encouraged to complete the exercises in the workbook. Three methods were used to encourage systematic reflection on and the recording of experiences.

- The annotation of a timeline (see below) segmented into weekly blocks of time, to reveal how participants felt and why they felt that way.
- The maintenance of a daily diary (ten minutes per day) recording incidents that caused participants to think about cultural dimensions of a situation.
- The contribution of an anonymised short story each week describing a situation that caused the participant to think about the significance of culture.

This story was sent by email to a database for processing using SenseMaker¹ narrative software (the story above is an example of the types of story told). Students' stories were shared through a booklet prepared for the second workshop.

A traditional English 'cream tea' was organised at the midpoint of the process to encourage participants to come together to share their experiences and aspects of their culture.

The second workshop gave an opportunity for each group to present what they had learned about adapting to another culture. The workshop was essentially a facilitated reflective process and a few important parts of the first workshop were revisited in order to investigate further the process that participants had gone through in the six weeks between the workshops using a second workbook as an aid. This workshop ended with the award of SCEPTrE's Cultural Academy Certificate for those participants who had attended both workshops and submitted their workbooks.

Evaluation of the workshop process

The feedback received from participants indicated that the Cultural Academy helped them develop and share their knowledge about adapting to another culture (scores of 8–10 on 10-point scale in agreement with achieving this aim). Participants believed that it benefited them largely by facilitating their thoughts and reflections about the adaptive process and enabling them to share their experiences and gain more perspectives on the transition through the interaction with others. They felt that meeting and speaking about their concerns with others who were involved in a similar transitional experience and were thus able to understand and empathise with their situation was an uplifting experience.

All participants felt that Cultural Academy provided a good opportunity to meet other students to share their experiences about living in another culture (rating of 8–10 on a 10-point scale of achievement). One participant commented that: "it was the vital aspect in the whole Culture[al] Academy workshop. We built a strong friendship with my team mates." From this positive and trusting set of relationships, they could converse freely and be exposed to different languages, traditions and beliefs. They were able to share their own culture, listen to others talk about their culture and discuss each other's cultural experiences, which they deemed to be a valuable experience. Another participant believed that as a result, "if I meet other [people] from their country I can easily talk to them." They

appreciated the opportunity to meet other students from various cultural backgrounds, and appreciated the co-operations and understandings of others.

When commenting on the usefulness of the workbooks, participants indicated that the exercises helped them to reflect on and appreciate the learning gained through the process of adapting to another culture (ratings of 7–9 on a 10-point achievement scale). The additional comments provided by participants were all positive, for example:

- The reflecting process was very effective.
- I reflected a lot and Cultural Academy helped me to share my ideas, my experience, my goal regarding my future adaptation to the U.K. system.
- It made me notice things I was not noticing about myself before.

Besides reflection, the participants also found that the workbook was helpful in guiding their understanding through cultural exercises.

One important outcome of students' learning through the Cultural Academy process is that it gives them an opportunity to learn about other cultures that they were not previously aware of. One participant commented, "through the process, I have learnt [the] other people[s] culture and their life. It means that I can have the chance to share a wide variety of culture and their thinking." While learning about other cultures is an important part of their learning, the main areas of learning suggested by the participants is in the area of their personal view about another culture or their cultural experiences, e.g. how to be positive, optimistic and open-minded; to take responsibility; to take initiative; to not fear asking and seeking support; to be open and willing; to motivate oneself; to take initiative, etc. One participant said that she learnt "to be honest with one's self and express your views openly, frankly", while another said, "I've learned more about myself and what I can be."

Throughout the feedback, students indicate positive aspects of their learning experience during Cultural Academy. Participants felt that taking part was useful in improving both their reflection and their ability to adapt to the campus culture. The words of one participant summed up the general feeling: "The experience helped a lot and had an enormous amount of improvement. Things started to be better and better." Similarly, another participant said: "Things get better and better. I have a lot of new friends, easily get a lot of help and support and take part in many activities. That all enrich[es] my life, I enjoy my life here." One participant explained that by sharing ideas through discussion and presentation, an understanding of one's own culture compared to others' could be more

deeply understood. As another participant commented, “Now I know what other people feel, do and act in other cultures.”

Piloting the Immersive Cultural Experience Certificate

Having gained experience of using the tools and techniques to facilitate individual learning gained through the process of adapting to another culture, the nine participants who completed Cultural Academy were invited to submit a 2,000-word integrating reflective essay describing the learning they had gained while adapting to another culture in order to complete the requirements for the new Immersive Experience Certificate (Table 13.2). As the workbooks included items 1 to 4, the only additional requirement was the one-to-one meeting to discuss their transition process. Four students submitted essays for the Certificate in March 2011 and all were successful. The next section describes the nature of the learning revealed in student essays and interviews.

Table 13.2 Certificate requirements

To join the programme you will be making a commitment through a learning agreement to evaluate and make explicit the learning and personal development you gain through a minimum of three months' immersion in another culture.

In order to receive university recognition for your learning and personal development you will need to document your experiences and your evaluation of the learning and personal development you have gained in a Reflective Diary (handwritten or word document) or online blog.

Five techniques are used to help you understand, evaluate and reveal how you have changed your understanding and how you have changed as a person:

- 1) creation of a life map showing where in your life you encounter different sorts of cultural experiences
- 2) construction of an ongoing reflective diary or blog to record and make sense of your experiences and the learning and personal development you are gaining from them
- 3) creation of a timeline map showing the journey you have made over the period of time you are involved in the certificate
- 4) creation of a concept map formed around the idea of adapting to another culture
- 5) production of a 2,000-word reflective account – to connect, synthesise and integrate the learning you have gained from your experience.

You may include other methods of recording your experiences and demonstrating your learning such as digital images or audio or video recordings. The Certificate encourages you to focus on key aspects of personal development that are generic to all informal learning situations. These are incorporated into a capability statement.

Learning gained through adapting to another culture

Adapting to another culture requires people to move from a world of familiar contexts and challenges into a world where the contexts and challenges are unknown, and where the ability to communicate and understand the contexts

and challenges might be hampered by language and perceptual barriers. The norms of behaviour learnt and developed in one culture may no longer be valid and people become uncertain about how to behave. Adapting to another culture involves learning new things and also unlearning some things (at least temporarily). The reflective account provided participants with an opportunity to try to make sense of their transitional experience of adapting to another culture over about six months. By using the tools contained in the workbook to help them reflect on their experiences and their diaries which provided a record of their experiences, they had a wealth of material to draw on in their synthesising accounts.

We used the framework of Campbell and Jackson (Chapter 10) to evaluate participants' accounts of their immersive experiences. The overarching theme of any immersive experience is the sense of journey and this was also apparent in participants' accounts. The form of an immersive experience journey is caricatured in Chapter 10 Figure 10.2 and this general pattern, with some elaborations, could be discerned in the transition stories of participants. Some examples of deep and enduring learning and personal development are represented in the quotations from participants' essays below.

Dealing with culture shock

The process of adapting to a new culture often involves the phenomenon of 'culture shock': the transition from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment where old behaviour patterns become ineffective. According to Ryan & Twibell (2000), culture shock is a transitional process involving a journey in which four stages can be recognised which they called (a) honeymoon, (b) disenchantment, (c) beginning resolution and (d) effective functioning. Cultural change is a stressful process as students' cope with their concerns, anxieties and uncertainties associated with where they live, what they will eat, sleep, health, safety, money, weather, academic challenges and communication. Students who study abroad are unique in that they must not only adapt to a new host culture but also function quickly and effectively in a new academic cultural setting.

In recording their transitional stories, Cultural Academy participants revealed their particular concerns and how they coped with the confusion, anxiety and uncertainty of the situations they found themselves in. Culture shock was expected and had to be dealt with and developing coping strategies was part of coping with and mastering the transition, as described by some participants:

In the event that you experience culture shock in it's [sic] fullest with chronic depression and longing for home, my advice is to meet friends for emotional support. I have not experienced this but I have helped people who were foreign get through downs due to culture shock. Hang out with some people from your country and heal yourself with the culture you missed but don't be scared to return back to the foreign culture, embrace it! You are never alone, and there is always someone there like you who is willing to help.

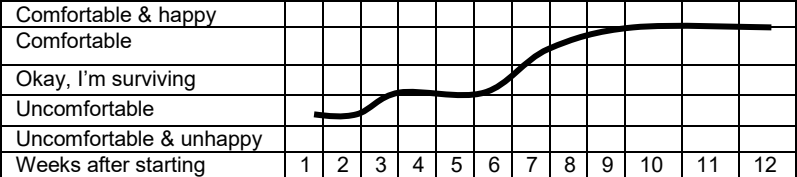
It has been a wide experience that most of the International students face problems like boredom, monotony during their course, homesick, isolation and loneliness, difficulties socializing due to cultural, history and language barriers etc. Therefore, life and study have not been easy and smooth as I thought at the beginning. ... I also felt a little bit worried and scared, because I have been far away from the support of family and longstanding friends. When I came to UK first week, I terribly missed my parents. My two luggages [sic] were missing after getting off plane, I could not describe this issue very clearly to staff and felt anxious. There were other problems for me at the beginning, such as how to open bank account, how to sign mobile [contract]. Overcooked food and changeable weather also made me negative. In addition, I was afraid to make mistakes when I communicated with someone in English, especially [because] I felt so nervous on the phone. After making some Chinese friends in campus, things were getting better. We cooked together, studied together and went to town together. We can learn and know many things quickly through our activities and chats, such as cooking skills and local news. I was not too shy to talk, and shared my views.

Out of all these challenges, the behaviour and attitude of the people around me [was] my greatest hurdle. I constantly found myself in awkward situations due to me not understanding or being understood properly. ... Another thing which was sort of a culture shock and made me quite unhappy ... is that people didn't touch me much... I'm used to getting a hug or at least a handshake from my friends every time I see them, whereas here people mostly said 'hi' and walked past leaving me in some awkward 'hand stretched out but not shaken' situations. I felt like people didn't want to touch me or were just 'inhuman' by my standards, after all, who doesn't like a hug? But one day I spoke with a friend from Argentina who experienced the same thing ... and he felt the same feeling of 'not getting enough love'. But he explained to me that it is just the culture of the people, everywhere is different. One thing that really made me glad and gave me a very positive

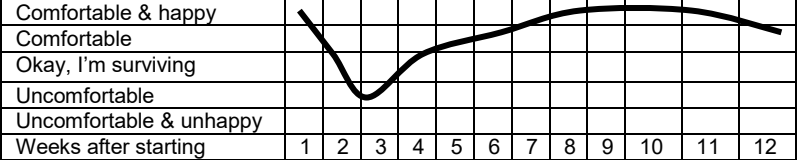
impression of the English culture was that when I and my friend told our housemates about this, they always hugged us when we met from then on.

Figure 13.2 Timelines showing how students felt about their experiences of adapting to another culture during the first 12 weeks

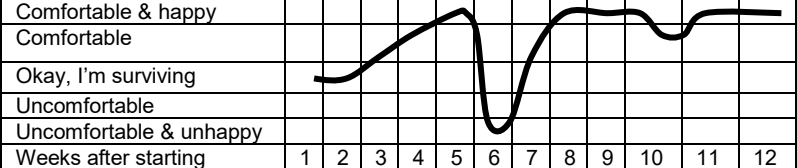
Student A



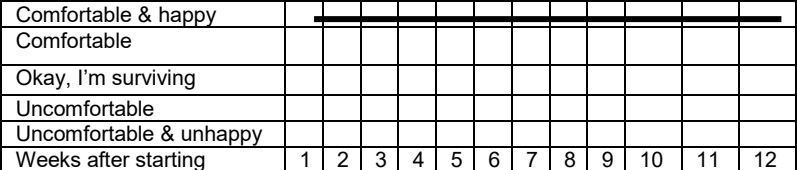
Student B



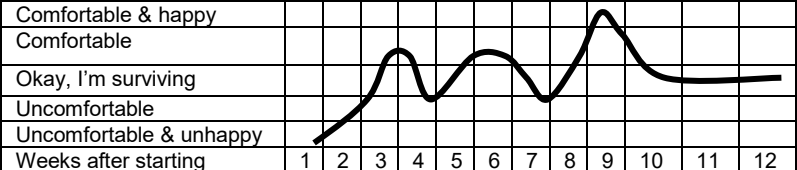
Student C



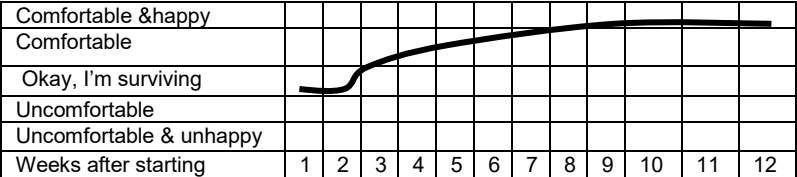
Student D



Student E



Student F



Ward and Kennedy (1993, 1999) drew a distinction between psychological (emotional/affective) adaption and socio-cultural (behavioural) adaption. Psychological adaption can be understood within a stress and coping model and refers to feelings of well-being or satisfaction with transition. Learning to manage emotions is another intangible but essential dimension of the learning that comes from cultural adaptation. The psychological/emotional journeys of several Cultural Academy participants are depicted schematically in Figure 13.2.

Except for student D who felt confident, comfortable and happy throughout the three months of this study, all the students were able to recognise changes in their emotional states, but the journey is different for each participant. Emotional stresses are associated with many aspects of their experience. Homesickness, felt by all participants, is compounded by what many students see as a lack of friendliness of the home culture, but when they experience kindness and generosity this has a significant positive effect on their well-being.

Another challenge for me was the perceived 'coldness' of the English people. [People from my country] are generally friendly and trusting in the public domain. It is not unusual to strike [up] a conversation with the person behind you in the queue at the bank. In my new country I found that on a bus, everyone stared firmly out the window or into their newspapers, and striking [up] a conversation with a stranger was considered close to bizarre ... The English are big on privacy and do not take nosiness lightly. An innocuous question such as whether the expected baby has arrived yet can be found intrusive. In [my country], it is taken for granted that family units will not only stay up to date with each others' affairs, but they have right by default to offer advice, remedies, and in instances step in and take action during any form of crisis. The rule in England seems to be wait until you are told, then you can ask questions. This adjustment has been trying, since I am used to 'intruding', and being intruded upon. I lost a few friends at first because I was accustomed to discussing my problems in painstaking details, then asking for advice.

The first thing I noticed was the courtesy and friendliness of the people at Heathrow Airport as a security official helped me get to the correct terminal and a shop assistant helped me get a sim card to call a taxi. The taxi driver who transported me to the campus was very friendly and even offered to carry my bags to my room. This left a lasting impression in me.

The HOST scheme links British families with international students. I greatly appreciate Host UK that gives me some opportunities to visit this beautiful and affluent country. It is an excellent way to experience the British culture. The other good thing is the University will pay the cost for you to apply for the visit. I was lucky to be a guest of Mrs..... in this Christmas holiday. I have been to the seaside town of Looe in South West Cornwall. I roamed a long and beautiful coastline of Looe, it is quiet, beautiful and unspoiled, which made me relaxed and happy. I love the boundless sea and blue sky. I also had a big Christmas dinner with [her] daughters and grandchildren in the countryside. They treated me as a member of family, I felt like I was in my home. I am deeply impressed with their hospitality and affability. The weather was cold, but I was warm in my heart. It is really an unforgettable experience for me. In addition, the Friends International Society in Surrey also provides the opportunity to enjoy fun social events, explore life outside of studies and learn more about the Christian faith.

I was shopping at Tesco and I was impressed by the service at the checkouts when I was finished with my shopping. The lady at the checkout was friendly and helpful when she helped me pack my items. Later that day I was also impressed by the customer service at Natwest Bank on campus when the teller was helpful in explaining things to me.

Coping with prejudice and disrespect is another source of emotional stress.

A further challenge I experienced when adapting to English culture [was] the stereotypes that came with my darker skin and my very obvious [foreign] looks. While before I had been one in millions of others like me, now I stood out. There were instances when I was unfairly labelled with the stereotypes given to my countrymen and women. I was referred to as being lazy, a drunk, and good for nothing. I was expected to be loud, callous and uncultured. I was once asked if any member of my family owned a shipping line. These accusations were not necessarily true, but ... I had to bear the brunt for the traits most commonly associated with people from my country or origin.

Developing a positive and optimistic disposition seems to have been one way to overcome feeling homesick, lonely and despondent. Indeed, being able to turn negative emotional states into more positive and optimistic states was considered important in order to cope with the transitional experience.

There were numerous ... challenges in my path to settling with the culture. All these differences, language, food, weather, behaviour and attitude towards situations, these all affected me and my emotions daily, and not always for the best. I'm a very optimistic and happy-go-lucky person who would require a lot to keep my mood down for long so I usually recovered quickly from negative emotions. I was also always willing to adapt because the English from my experience are very accommodating to people of other cultures and that really boosted my confidence as a person. Because of this mindset I had there weren't any particularly terrible or horrible times I've had as a result of a different culture. However there were times where I felt quite depressed and/or disappointed when I received a different result than what I expected just because of a difference in culture or two. Times where my self esteem hung really low because the people around me weren't reacting as they should. And some times, just plainly being fed up with the way everything seemed different and inhuman.

Adapting to a new culture is a long journey and there are many unforeseen things that could cause a culture shock for people. However, having an optimistic and open minded attitude to anything and anyone of the strange culture is the best thing to do in order to fully adapt and even soak up the new culture. I am optimistic and positive about all experiences and embrace the opportunity to learn as much as I can, thus I believe all of these benefits will enhance my employment prospects and make my life meaningful in the future.

There was recognition that adapting to another culture involved learning new things and also unlearning things that were known through their own culture (at least temporarily).

Culture ranges from more noticeable behaviours like music to even more subtle and unnoticeable behaviours like how to put your cutlery down after eating (yes it really is complex and different between cultures!). And to the uninformed man, could result in some very awkward and/or embarrassing situations. I am a citizen of [African country], born and raised there with traditional values and grew up learning the way of doing things. With that being said, it is no doubt I had to do a lot of 'unlearning' to do when I came over here to study. I shall talk about the differences in my culture and the English culture and how I started to understand the people here and what I experienced in my journey of adapting to the English culture. To be more specific about the latter of the afore mentioned two, the challenges and

experiences I faced when adapting; coming to an understanding and being understood by the people of this culture; and finally advice for people who want to adapt to a culture peculiar to them.

There was also recognition that changing one's perspectives was an important way of coming to terms with living in another culture.

My culture is largely family based. The family image and values are the most important thing to a man and everything else like fame, money, pleasure etc comes later. Children learn the importance of family and are usually guided by the parents' wisdom in order to excel in life even when the children are adults. This is quite a contrast to the English culture I've observed which promotes a more 'individual' upbringing for children which promotes children to do more of what they want to do while growing and figure out decisions for themselves with a lot less parental guidance [than our] parents. This came as quite a shock to me at first because I felt that so many children were unruly and lacked respect towards elders and this was clearly because they are given too much room to do what they please while growing. However, there was a situation that altered my view on this. One day out in town, I saw an old lady in the street carrying not too heavy bags and I thought "Oh my God! Where are her children!? They should be carrying that for her", the same scenario in [my country] would be somewhat of an insult to the children that they are not good children to let their parent do such. Imagining the same scenario with my mom, I'd feel like a terrible child for letting her go out at that age. I then went over to her to help her carry the things and she said "I might be old but I'm very capable of taking care of myself" and even more peculiar response! I went home pondering on that response and then asked my teacher who was English why I got that reaction and funny enough she told me that my actions could be seen as insulting in a way, VERY contrary to my original idea of an insult being her children not helping her. And then it hit me, perhaps what I thought was completely wrong ... perhaps they weren't the ones being unruly and ill mannered but 'I' the ill mannered one for insulting her strength and competence. This was a true eye opener for me, it was the first time I ever thought in a different sense and seen the world from a different perspective.

While at first I was very conscious of myself in the midst of English men, because I was certain everything about me screamed 'foreigner', I came to learn that the reason why I stood out was because I thought so much about it. Gradually, I came to relax and mingle freely, and you would think now that

I was born and bred in Buckingham Palace. Initially I had concerns about blending in; with my accent and my colour, it was made doubly obvious that I did not belong. I have overcome this awkwardness now. For me to blend in, I do not have to be the epitome of the perfect English gentleman, I just have to understand that I carve my own place, that what is of greater importance is that I be comfortable in my own skin.

Life in the UK has been really exciting and challenging as well. However all the way it has made me reflect on my approach to life. It offers a good opportunity to accelerate my growth and also brings a lot of changes to me, which include the self understanding, handling problems, showcase self talent and etc. Generally, I feel it easy and positive to adapt to life in the UK.

When I compare the person I was in February 2010 with the person I have become, I realise that I no longer make generalisations about other people from other countries since I have learnt that each person is unique. I have become appreciative of new people I meet.

And as the unfamiliar situations become more familiar and better understood, confidence grows and there comes with it a sense of achievement, pride and comfort in making a successful transition into a totally different world to what was previously known.

The differences in culture between people is an amazing thing, and to have adapted to one different than mine is something that I will cherish for the rest of my life. Although it may seem unnerving at first, the learning, the growth, the memories and the feeling of triumph are all worth the journey to understanding this magnificent thing we call culture.

Living in England gets easier by the day; I have become to read the nonverbal language that is to be found in any given cultural or societal setting and can only be learned by familiarizing oneself with the culture. While before there were nonverbal cues that puzzled me, or which I missed out on all together, I can now easily pick up on the subtle nuances of nonverbal communications. ... My confidence has greatly gone up. When I was new to England, I second guessed myself at every turn. I had suffered a complex that arose from years of being drilled with the mantra that England and all things English were superior to what I had in my own country. While initially I so badly wanted to fit in that I tried to ape English mannerisms, from speech to dress and a penchant for the races, now I am

confident enough of my place that I opt to watch basketball over a game of cricket. I have decided to work with aspects of the English culture that work for me – like the strict observance of time and unerring politeness, while not trying to turn myself into the clone of an Englishman.

Discussion

The case was made in Chapter 10 for the importance of challenging immersive experiences in the transformational (rather than evolutionary) development of individuals. This chapter has focused on a single context for immersive experience: a context that is relevant to all students who leave home to inhabit the unfamiliar environment of a university with its new contexts and challenges. Universities are aware of the challenges of adaptation and they have developed a range of strategies for helping students make the transition from home to independence. Nevertheless, the experience is much more of a challenge for students who are making this transition from a different culture. The Immersive Cultural Experience Certificate focused on this context to demonstrate how personal learning and development gained through the adaptive process could be valued and recognised by students and the university. The first part of the chapter described the process and tools to support and record learning while the second part provided examples of the sorts of learning and personal change that were recognised through the process.

The development of new capability in the English language is perhaps the most obvious developmental challenge for those students with limited language competency. It was a source of psychological and practical challenge for some participants in Cultural Academy.

My greatest challenge was communication because no matter how keenly I tried to listen, or how carefully I enunciated my words, I neither fully understood native English speakers nor seemed to get through to them. It seemed incredulous that I had been speaking English for the past two decades. This was my greatest frustration since I could not accomplish a task as simple as ordering a plate of fish and chips without bustle. Being unable to communicate hampered with my social interactions. I was at first not confident about trying to make friends because I knew it would take extra effort for us to understand each other. My classes took more effort too, and I was concerned my grades would be affected by my inability to keep up with variations of the nasal Queen's English.

Students recognised that a lack of culturally related knowledge about what was expected of them academically also presented a fundamental challenge to their success (Ham and Wang 2009). This sort of knowledge is essential to academic performance, so mastering it quickly, along with all the other knowledge that has to be mastered, is essential.

The course is quite intensive, with too much reading and thinking involved. In addition, I never expected to have to speak so much. In China, the teaching is very teacher-centred; the students just listen and take notes. However, there are many pair work and group works in here, actually that is good for us to practice English and communication. Although we have many tasks and assignments, establishing a balance between work and leisure is equally important for us. For the assignments, at the beginning, I felt it was very hard to write down thousand words essay just like a fish out of water, I do not know if I can do that, so I sought some help from staffs [*sic*] in library. With their friendly help and useful advice, I felt more confident and finished all assignments on time. Therefore if I am not sure about anything, I always try to ask someone.

Beyond these obvious challenges to a student coming to study in a culture that is very different to their own is the need to comprehend the culture, grasp what is expected and develop the capability and confidence to operate and perform in a social, not just academic, sense. This requires students to immerse themselves in the everyday world of those around them in order to learn the ways of being and becoming in the cultural context which they inhabit.

It must be said that many of the generalised features of immersive experiences described in Chapter 10 can be recognised in the narratives and other representations of learning through being in everyday situations created by the students who participated in Cultural Academy. All had begun their experience with a sense of excitement and positive anticipation accompanied by anxiety about the unknown. Most had experienced a significant culture shock when they first arrived that had caused them emotional stress, discomfort and unhappiness and challenged their existing conceptual frameworks for making sense of the world. Some had lost confidence and many had encountered situations that had stretched them emotionally, engendering feelings of negativity, frustration, confusion and anger. Many had felt the loss of their family and friendship networks that encouraged, supported and valued them for the people they are. Through their own agency and effort they gradually overcame their despondency, developed practical coping strategies, changed

perspectives and turned their negative feelings into more positive and optimistic thoughts to come to terms and be comfortable with the situation. Making this transition required them to change considerably, and through the tools and frameworks provided by the Immersive Experience Certificate they were able to articulate and represent these changes and the way they felt about them in ways that enabled their learning to be valued and recognised by the university.

In adapting in such a transformative way the students were displaying many of the habits and characteristics of what Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004, 2009 and Chapter 5) terms self-authorship – the capacity to internally define [redefine] their own beliefs, identity and relationships. Self-authorship is the necessary foundation for mutual, collaborative participation with others in adult life (Baxter Magolda 2001:xvi). The development of self-authorship is encouraged and facilitated by 'exposure to epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal complexity' (*ibid.*), all of which are present when students put themselves into cultural settings very different to their own. In such situations students realise that they must create the knowledge they need to adapt through active participation and engagement with the world around them. Through sharing their perspectives they come to realise that 'authority and expertise are shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers' (*ibid.*). We might speculate that the sorts of transformative experiences we have recognised through the Cultural Academy and the Immersive Experience Certificate, accelerate learners along the trajectory to self-authorship as their beliefs, inherited from their cultural backgrounds are questioned, challenged and modified.

I was invited for dinner by the Chinese students in my flat alongside their friends from other halls of residence. It was great and being part of the culture academy I was proactive during the dinner making the most of the opportunity to learn from their culture. I equally shared with them about my culture. The dinner lasted about three to four hours where in I learnt about their dining ethics as well as family, government, marriage, history policies to mention but a few. It amazed me why they attached so much importance to eating together as a family even here in the UK away from home. In my country and my home, we hardly eat together on the same table, the most important thing is that you've had your meal be it in the dining [*sic*] room, your bed room, sitting room or you can go to the toilet if you don't mind (laugh out loud) nobody cares. This Chinese culture made me take a decision to make a difference with my own family and no matter where life takes me (e.g. here in the UK) I can connect to the environment and the

culture around me and ‘having a meal together’ is a good way of doing that, not just with fellow Nigerians but with the people you find yourself with just as the saying goes ‘they that eat together live together’.

Cultural Academy has proved to be a powerful learning partnership for everyone involved (students and educators). The structured and facilitated process encourages development of cross-cultural relationships and engages learners in thinking and talking about the epistemological, interpersonal and intrapersonal complexity associated with the transition they are making. The feedback we have received suggests that for some students it has been one of the most formative experiences they encountered while at university.

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Endnotes

1 <http://www.sensemaker-suite.com/>