

**The classroom as a learning community?
Voices from postgraduate students at a New
Zealand university**

By

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Chunying (Diane) Huang: _____

Date: _____

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Abstract

How important is the social experience of learning in the postgraduate classroom?

This thesis explores what eight postgraduate students judged to be their ‘best’ classroom experiences within one New Zealand university. The researcher started from the assumption that the students’ ‘best’ classroom experiences would correspond with what the literature characterises as ‘communities of learners’ in which the students felt that their past experiences were valued and personal relationships were respectful and relatively equal. This assumption was, for the most part, accurate. Problematic areas, such as assessment, were also identified. International students’ experiences were a key part of the research. Six of the students were studying in their second language yet that alone was not the main indicator of classroom participation as personality (such as shyness) also affected how students engaged with the course content, the lecturers, and with each other.

The case study approach raises possibilities and questions as well as recognising trends that suggest that postgraduate students value interactive learning within meaningful classroom contexts.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Introduction

This chapter begins with an outline of my research journey in shaping this study. The purpose of the study and its significance is presented in this chapter and this highlights a gap in the literature and methodology. Following on from this is an overview of the chapters in this thesis.

1.1 My research journey

The thesis presented here shows my passion and interest and understanding of community. I arrived in New Zealand in April 2005, and studied in a language school. I lived with a New Zealand - Philippine home-stay family. One month after arriving in New Zealand, I was introduced to the Auckland Chinese Evangelical Church, which is now my *family* here. I was baptized in September 2005.

Initially, my thinking journey on this research was based on the research proposal within my course work. At the beginning of my thinking, I was looking for a sense of belonging to the church as a Christian. In addition, my interest in the research topic comes from my personal experiences of postgraduate learning at AUT University. I enrolled in this programme in July 2006. I studied on this programme as an international student in a completely new educational system and social environment with English as an additional language, and as consequence, I experienced some difficulties in my initial postgraduate study. I was keen to know whether postgraduate students have a sense of community in the classroom or on the campus generally, and what they experienced through their studies.

Through the data collection process of this research, written communications and face-to-face interactions with participants increasingly developed my communication skills. My commitment to the research and my enjoyment of using the data collection approach, and the whole research process brought a better understanding of the research topic itself, as well as a deeper insight into the participants' uniqueness and complexities. An unexpected benefit of the research project was to hear some participants' voices that the process had provided them with a chance to reflect on

their learning experiences and to make evident their concerns to lecturers and the university. In the next section of this chapter the purpose of this study and the significance of the study are outlined, and finally an overview of the chapters in this thesis is presented.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the following issues:

- To document postgraduate students' classroom learning experiences.
- To investigate whether their 'best' classroom learning experiences would be described as a 'community of learners' in the literature.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study aims to bridge gaps within the learning community literature, using qualitative methodology to explore the characteristics of postgraduate classrooms at one university in New Zealand. While the literature on undergraduate learning communities is extensive (St. Onge, 2003; Tinto, 1993; 1997; 1998; Tinto, Russo & Kadel, 1994), it is less fulsome in its coverage of postgraduate students' learning experiences in the classroom model of a learning community. Some previous research has focused on postgraduate students on research courses (Hedberg & Corrent-Agostinho, 2000; Johnston, 1995; Wright, 2003), and used quantitative research methodology to explore how students feel about classroom communities (Christensen, 2004). Although the United States is the dominant voice in the 'community of learners' literature, there is however an emerging voice in New Zealand universities (Tertiary Education Commission, 2005). I believe that this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge that surrounds the issues of learning communities at the postgraduate level in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

1.4 Chapter overviews

This thesis consists of several chapters. Following the first chapter which outlines my research journey and the purpose of the study, in the second chapter, I start with a

review of the literature surrounding the basic concepts underpinning my study: the history and definitions of learning communities, theories related to learning communities, characteristics of learning communities, and models of learning communities. Then I synthesize the various factors within the tertiary classroom learning community, including teachers, students and classroom subject matters. Finally, the rationale of the present study is presented.

This research sought to document the postgraduate students' 'best' classroom learning experiences and is conducted under the general umbrella of qualitative research and the constructivist epistemology. Within this paradigm, face-to-face individual interviews are taken. The research context of the present study and participants are introduced as well. Ethical considerations and how the data are analysed are also presented in this chapter.

The findings are presented in the information gathered from the interviews verbatim. The three main themes that became evident when the participants describe their 'best' learning experience in the postgraduate classroom: Continuity, Meaningful support networks, and Safe classroom contexts.

Whilst Chapter Four outlined the findings, these are discussed more fully in Chapter Five. The discussion chapter draws the data alongside Boyer's six principles for vital learning community. The six principles were grouped into three broader categories, *Purposeful*, *Just—Disciplined*, and *Open—Caring—Celebratory*, based on the findings in the current research.

In Chapter Six, the research findings are briefly summarized and the implications for enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, and recommendations to the university, lecturers, and future researchers are presented in the final section of the thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into my research journey as a postgraduate student and as an international student. This journey has enabled me to understand

postgraduate students' classroom learning experiences from different voices and a deeper insight into the postgraduate classroom as a learning community.

In this chapter the purpose of the study is outlined, which is to document the classroom learning experiences of postgraduate students. The significance of this study is explained in terms of the gaps in the research on learning communities in New Zealand and different methodologies with other previous research. Lastly, an overview of the chapters is presented.

The conceptualisations of learning communities are explained in Chapter Two to reveal different aspects of learning communities, such as its history and definitions, related theories, characteristics and models. The tertiary classroom learning community includes teachers, students, and classroom subject matters, which are interconnected and compromised together.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

“Experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context.”

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.2)

Introduction

This chapter begins with the conceptualisations of learning communities and its bounded theories. Then the characteristics and models of learning communities are presented generally. After that, the interrelationship between teacher, student and class subject matter in the classroom community is discussed, followed by a conclusion at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Learning communities

The concept of learning communities goes far beyond a simple programme or activity. Learning communities emphasize many ideas, concepts, and theories that generate a community of students who experience university through a socially constructed pedagogical perspective.

Although there are different concepts of learning communities, they share several common characteristics. According to Shapiro and Levine (1999), these characteristics are broadly defined as “creating an integrated teaching and learning experience for participants” (p. 6). In addition, Chesebro, Green, Mino, Snider and Venable (1999) state that some specific characteristics of learning communities exist in the classroom. A learning community exists if: the classroom structure is designed to promote student –student and faculty-student collaboration, students are more actively involved in their academics, to see ideas from another’s point of view, to link academic issues to real-world experience, and to promote knowledge construction (Chesebro, et al., 1999).

Laufgraben (2005) stated that teachers, students, and subject matter should be interconnected to improve students’ learning. The teacher influences students’ learning in the classroom, both directly and indirectly. Also, students with prior

experiences and prior academic achievement can influence how they perceive a class and interact with teachers. Other students, in turn, influence the sense of community in the classroom (St. Onge, 2003). Furthermore, different types of cognitive learning strategies, such as motivation and self-regulation, shape the characteristics of learning communities in the classroom (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2004). The characteristics of learning communities depend on the characteristics of learners within them.

Based on the previous definitions of learning communities, a comprehensive model of learning communities is given by Brower and Dettinger (1998). They proposed that a learning community “must integrate academic subject matter and social interactions while providing the physical space or facility for an intellectually stimulating environment to emerge” (p. 16). The academic component of a learning community is the course curriculum that is presented in the classroom; the social component is the interpersonal interactions that occur between the students and the students and faculty; and the physical component is the place where the community meets, most commonly the classroom.

A classroom run as a learning community operates on the understanding that the growth of knowledge involves individual and social processes, and classrooms that operate as knowledge-building communities enrich conceptions of teaching and learning (Watkins, 2005). It aims to enhance individual learning which is both a contribution to the students’ own learning and to the group’s learning. In classroom learning communities, members not only take responsibility for themselves and others, but also enable knowledge to be shared instead of being controlled or isolated experiences (Tinto, 1997; Watkins, 2005).

Learning communities are embraced as a way of addressing the problems of student retention and academic achievement (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Smith, 1991; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994; Tinto, 1993; 1997; 1998). There are various definitions and goals of learning communities, but one common thread that flows through each is a focus on a learner-centred model of education (Chesebro, et al., 1999).

One of the ways to move to a learner-centred approach within tertiary education is to incorporate active learning in the classroom, in the form of collaborative learning, student-lecturer interaction, student-student interaction and student-subject interaction. Collaborative learning is typically one of the keys to learning community success by promoting connections, a deeper concept of teaching and learning (Dodge & Kendall, 2004). Smith, MacGregor and Gabelnick (2004) proposed a model for core practices in learning communities that illustrates the interrelationship among the practices, to integrate theory and facilitate student learning. These interrelationships include: community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection and assessment (see Figure 1).

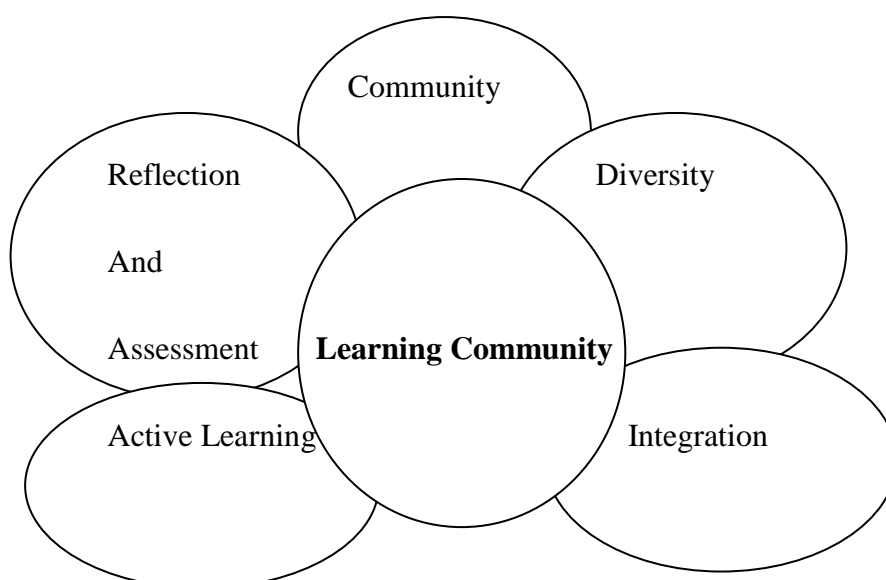


Figure 1: Core practice in learning communities (Smith et al., 2004, p. 98)

2.1.1 History of learning communities

Several researchers have cited John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn and Joseph Tussman as founders of the concepts of learning communities (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1992; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Smith, 1991). Dewey's beliefs laid the foundation of the theory behind learning communities (Capps & Capps, 2005). Dewey (1938) stressed the relationship between students and teachers, as well as the relationship between students and students, as a critical part of the learning process. Dewey argued that education plays a key role in

teaching students to be effective citizens of a democracy. Dewey (1938) stressed that students are individuals with different backgrounds and experiences that must be taken into consideration in the teaching process. Meiklejohn and Tussman developed the basic concept of learning communities (Gabelnick et al., 1992).

Smith (1991) described learning communities using terms such as *social environment, friendships and sharing ideas*. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) endorsed learning communities for their emphasis on the educational interaction between faculty and students. Smith (1991) asserted that learning communities provide students with the opportunity for active, collaborative, and social learning, as well as the opportunity for interactions with faculty.

Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994) believe that learning communities emphasise collaborative and active learning between faculty and students, with both contributing to the learning process. Tinto's work (1993, 1997, & 1998) served as the foundation of learning communities within colleges and classrooms.

Boyer (1990) was one of the first theorists to explain learning communities at the classroom level. He thought that community in higher education should have two goals: individual learning and community learning. He developed six principles for vital learning communities, which provided the interactions between individual student and collective community. The six principles are:

- *Purposeful community*, which is when members work to develop and attain a shared set of goals;
- *Open community*, which is when students feel that they are expressing themselves in a respectful environment;
- *Just community*, which allows for dignity, acceptance, and equality for all members of the community;
- *Disciplined community*, which deals with the rules, regulations, and standards that define acceptable behaviour;

- *Caring community*, which signifies that each member feels like they belong to the community and that the teachers care about each individual member;
- *Celebratory community* has fun in the learning process and the process is recognised, applauded, and appreciated.

2.1.2 Theories related to learning communities

The theoretical framework of learning communities is related to co-constructivism – a form of *social constructivism* (Crotty, 1998). This view emphasises the influence of cultural and social contexts in learning and that knowledge is constructed through sharing ideas. Learners in learning communities interact with each other and share their experiences/knowledge through dialogue. Dialogue in Freire’s notion is “the social process of interactive communication among individual learners and transforms the living contexts” (Freire & Shor, 1987, pp. 98-99).

Education is cumulative and prepares the individual for continued learning throughout life. In particular, Dewey explored “the relationships of the social and individual and of knowledge and action” (Dewey, 2005, p. 15) and emphasized the role of experience, collaboration and reflection. It emphasizes the centrality of human experience in constructing knowledge. Dewey’s student-centred ideas advocated a crucial role for teachers while maintaining a concern for student needs and interests.

Dewey (1954) also emphasizes the role of vital experience in education. He initially posits vital experience as an essential component of the educational process. This vital experience involves consequences of both the individual and the environment. Worthwhile or vital experience in education links interactions with previous, present and future actions.

2.2 The tertiary classroom as a learning community

2.2.1 Teachers and classroom community

The teacher influences the community in the classroom both directly and indirectly. Teacher interactions with students, as well as personality traits, are direct influences on classroom community. In addition, the way the teacher organises the course and conducts the class influences the classroom community. These concepts are interrelated; they are combined to give a big picture of the classroom and the teacher's role in creating a classroom community.

One of the main roles of the teacher in a classroom community of learners is as a facilitator of knowledge acquisition (Barr & Tagg, 1995). 'Teacher as a facilitator' means that the teacher should guide the students through the learning process instead of dictating student learning, and bridge the gap between the content, the learning activity, and the real world application of the material (Zion & Slezak, 2005). Teachers who act as facilitators must take on a number of roles in order for learning to be successful (Crawford, 2000). First, teachers must possess a high degree of knowledge about the subject matter; that is, be experts. Then they must be innovators, be able to produce new ideas and activities regarding the content. They must be experimenters and researchers, trying new ways to guide students through the active learning process. Teachers must be collaborators, able to work with the students as they learn and even be a part of the learning process, and finally, teachers have to be motivators, who can help keep students focused on the task and interested in the learning process.

Lichtenstein (2005) found that the role of the instructor was critical in creating a sense of community in the classroom. Classroom community was present when instructors were approachable, showed respect for students, developed a personal relationship by getting to know the students, and adopted a pedagogical style that used active learning and feedback, facilitation, and active listening. These skills helped instructors to lead discussions involving students to help them understand the material, and helped them to listen to questions from the students in order to respond

appropriately and to reframe student questions that were unclear in order to focus their thinking (Lichtenstein, 2005). The progression of these behaviours leads to feelings of community in the classroom.

The instructor's personality trait influences the classroom community (Lichtenstein 2005). When students describe effective teaching, they talk about instructors who care about them and respect them, who are excited about the material, and are able to motivate them (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001).

Thus, the teacher is important in creating a classroom community, but it is classroom matter, like course design and pedagogy, and particularly the interaction between the two, that builds and sustains a classroom community (Rovai & Lucking, 2003). Research has suggested that students prefer a certain classroom learning environment where they feel safe and connected to the other students in the class. In addition, they also prefer experiential learning methods and a visible link between the course and its real-world application (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001; Delli, 2005).

Often, students have so much information to learn that they do not know how to organise it for effective learning. A facilitating teacher can help guide students' organisation of content using different teaching approaches (Delli, 2005; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999). The way the teacher presents questions and how the teacher manages the class can be effective in promoting a sense of classroom community; for example, Rovai (2003) found that students had more discussions and felt a higher sense of community in the class, if the students were involved in group activities, which allows them to work with a variety of students and make connections to the other students in the class (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006).

2.2.2 Students and classroom community

While teachers bring different personality characteristics to the classroom, so do the students, each of whom can affect feelings of community in the classroom. Harland (2005) proposed that extroverted students participated more in classroom discussions and activities than introverted students, and they perceived a greater a sense of community in their class than their introverted classmates.

Students also walk into a classroom with prior experiences and prior academic achievement, which can influence how they perceive a class and interact with teachers and other students, and in turn influence the sense of community in the classroom (St. Onge, 2003). Another student variable that influences learning and may influence the feeling of classroom community is students' cognitive strategies (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). In general, there are three different types of cognitive learning strategies: surface processing strategies, deeper-processing strategies, and meta-processing strategies.

Besides the cognitive component of students' learning strategies and skills, learning orientations that students hold have important influences on learning communities (Pintrich, 2000; Weinstein, Husmsn, Dierking, 2000; Wolters, 1998). The learning orientations are defined as "all those attitudes and aims which express the student's individual relationship with the course of study" (p. 16). The orientation are the set of purpose which develops when an individual interacts with a given higher education context at a particular time in the student's life (Webber, 2004).

Learning orientation is conceptualised as a product of the desire to reach one's goals, providing that the goals are specific to the desired outcome and challenging, yet can realistically be completed. If these conditions of a useful goal are not met, motivation can decline. Goals can also influence cognitive processing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, students who are motivated will be more engaged in the content they are learning and will be more likely to choose appropriate strategies to help them study and learn, and ultimately reach their goals.

Another part of strategic learning is self-regulation, which is most often related to the deeper-processing strategy (Vermunt, 2005). Self-regulated learners know how to plan their time, use available resources, monitor their understanding, and evaluate their learning. Otherwise, self-regulation with the surface approach may result in poor learning outcomes (Vermunt, 2005). Since self-regulation can help students reach their academic goals and since one of the characteristics of a learning community involves working towards a shared goal, self-regulation might be seen as a part of a classroom's learning community.

2.2.3 Classroom and classroom community

One of the classroom components that most helps to create a classroom community is content organisation. The way in which the class is organised should promote effective learning and community in the classroom. Discussion and group work can promote student's effective learning in the classroom. Students' involvement in classroom discussions and group activities allows them to work with a variety of students and make connections to the other students in the class (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006). These interactions may lead to mutual respect, which may foster feelings of community.

One thing that influences the type of student learning strategies is class structure, particularly, the tasks that are assigned to students. One type of task that requires deeper-level processing is a collaborative learning task. When students work with others, they have to understand information, evaluate the information, use problem-solving strategies, construct their own knowledge, and be able to explain knowledge to the other members of the group (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994). Because collaborative learning and active learning appear to contribute to an effective learning community, it seems that deeper-processing and meta-processing strategies may be an important part of a community.

As noted earlier, learner-centred instruction allows students to set their own goals, make choices about how to reach their goals, and respond to the outcome of their work. It is the dynamic relationship among teacher, student and class subject matters that impacts on community in the classroom.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the bigger picture of learning communities generally and in a tertiary educational context. The interrelationships among teacher, student, and class subject matter are the major influential aspects in the classroom community.

In the next chapter, the methodology of this research is described, which includes the theoretical framework of the study, and the context of the research. Finally, how the data are collected and analysed is explained.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

This chapter begins by providing the theoretical position to the present study and is focused on social construction of knowledge and the qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach forms the foundation of this research and a case study method provides the framework that binds the participants together as people who share similar experiences within the context of postgraduate programmes at AUT University.

There were ethical implications to consider before this research could begin and the research context was given in this chapter. The research technique that was used in this study was individual interviews. This technique is defined and justified in this chapter with regard to its compatibility to the research methodology.

The process of the data analysis and how this was organised is presented in this chapter. In the last section of this chapter, an overview of the research process is presented as well as a discussion of some of the difficulties and obstacles that arose and how they were overcome.

3.1 Theoretical position

This study was based broadly within the constructivist approach to education which prioritises language as the vehicle for teaching and learning, while also validating diverse experience and multiple realities (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999; Kumar, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962). Such constructivism is a philosophy of learning based on the premise that “knowledge is constructed by the individual through his or her interactions with the environment” (Rovai, 2004, p. 80).

The research approach taken in this research is qualitative, based on recording students’ own classroom learning experiences. Using qualitative methodologies allowed the researcher to draw out students’ learning experiences to a richer and deeper level. Allan, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly (2000), which included students’

own insights into how they learned in the classroom and their perspectives of the postgraduate classroom as a learning community.

Qualitative research is essentially relationship based. The researcher seeks to gather rich and in-depth data through face-to-face interactions with participants in order to make meaning of socially constructed phenomena. Qualitative research produce both exploratory and highly descriptive knowledge (Schmidt, 2005).

Within constructivist approaches to education, individual understanding is constructed through interactions with the environment. In terms of student learning in the classroom, their points of view on the postgraduate classroom as a learning community is not imposed or transmitted by the learning environment, but are implied to their interactions with the learning environment. However, through dialogue the researcher can become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings (Manen, 2001). Thus, the case study approach and the interview technique were used in this research for data collection.

3.2 Case study

A case study values the context while exploring the experiences of one group of people (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2004; Crotty, 1998; Wellington, 2000). As this is a case study about students within one university, the individual nature of participants' experiences can be explored.

Yin (1993) argues that a case study involves deeper, more comprehensive descriptions of the participants' beliefs, understandings or experiences of a particular context, which can be used to seek a holistic understanding of a phenomenon. Eight subjects in this study were selected with the intention of developing a rich descriptive picture of each participant because I, as a researcher, would like to gain insight into the classroom learning experiences of postgraduate students and their perceptions of the postgraduate classroom as a learning community.

Neuman (1997) suggests that due to the volume of data that may be generated by case study research, researchers can find themselves immersed in the data to the

point of intimate familiarity with the participants' unique situation. From this, patterns or themes emerged which can lead me, both as a postgraduate student and a researcher, to make certain interpretations from the meaning of the participants' experiences.

The study aims to explore individual differences in the classroom learning experience in higher education. In this study, the desire is to gain knowledge about teaching and learning at the postgraduate level.

3.3 The research context

The importance of the context should be emphasised for the understanding students' learning environment. The experiences students have had in the classroom, importantly, are determined by the context in which teaching and learning occur. As discussed in the previous chapter, the features of classroom community vary according to teacher, student, and class subject. Thus, it is necessary to look at the context in which this research is situated.

AUT University is a comparatively young university which was designated as a university in 2000. Postgraduate degrees at AUT University commenced in 1996 with the introduction of a Master in Health Science and AUT has produced the Postgraduate Research Student Experience Reports since 1997 (AUT Postgraduate Handbook, 2007). The postgraduate programme provides an inspirational and stimulating learning environment where students have the opportunity to work with teaching and research staff. Students learn from experts, but are able to apply knowledge to the real world.

Postgraduate Programmes at AUT are offered in five faculties: Applied Humanities, Business, Design and Creative Technologies, Health and Environmental Sciences, and Te Ara Poutama (Maori Development), which cover these following qualifications: Doctoral degrees, Master degrees, Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas, and Bachelor's degrees with Honours.

Some of the papers are taught through classroom lectures and some are taught on-line. Class sessions are normally in the afternoons or evenings, and some are in the weekends, with consideration for part-time students' work situations. Some faculties offer block courses during the term breaks.

3.4 Ethical issues

Ethical approval was sought from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) in November 2007 (Ethics Application Number 07/207). Interviewees were assured that their identities would be protected. It was agreed that all participants in the present research would be referred to with pseudonyms and in some cases, gender was altered.

The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) of the present research was given beforehand to every participant for their understanding of the present research. Participation was voluntary. If they decided to take part, they were invited to have an interview of about 30 minutes with the focus being their best postgraduate classroom experience. Before the data from the interview were processed, participants would have an opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcript and confidentiality was assured.

The Consent Form (Appendix B) was signed at the start of the interview. Participants could withdraw from the research project or withdraw information at any time without reason before the information was analysed.

3.5 Research process overview

The research was timed to be finished within one year of full-time study. I, as a researcher, am an international student, and English is my second language, which makes the research process more difficult than for others who have English as their first language.

There were several important milestone dates during the study, which included gaining ethical approval from AUTEC (reference No. 07/207) to begin the study, undertaking the interviews, and analysing and writing up the findings.

In the recruitment process, I used my networks within the postgraduate study rooms at the university. I asked familiar students who studied in the postgraduate rooms in the City and North Shore campuses at AUT University. In order to obtain the rich data, they were asked to complete the background information sheet first. I then selected them according to whether they had at least one semester of classroom learning experience. The range of faculties, gender of the participants, and the length of classroom experience were also considered when choosing the participants. A pilot interview was conducted first to test the interview questions (Appendix E) and the whole process. Some changes were made, such as changing the question ‘how did you value the class you took?’ to ‘what benefits did you get from the class?’ which was discussed with my supervisors.

At the end of February, seven participants were interviewed. In my Ethics application, I planned to have eight to twelve interviews. The eighth participant was finally recruited and interviewed at the beginning of April.

During the interviewing process in March, I wrote the methodology chapter draft and wrote the transcriptions for the seven interviews. As English is my second language, the process of transcribing had difficulties. After finishing the last transcripts, I analysed each case, and then went through all eight transcripts. Some themes emerged from the data. I wrote a draft of the findings chapter. In addition, my supervisors first worked independently to identify themes in the interview data. Then I met my supervisor to discuss the themes. This process maximised investigator triangulation (Davidson & Tolich, 2003), and the analysis of the data were discussed from different perspectives.

3.6 The participants

The participants in this study were recent or current AUT University postgraduate students with at least one semester’s experience of postgraduate classrooms within the past two years.

Initially I had hoped to email all postgraduate students using AUT contact systems but this was regarded as inappropriate use of that information. So to begin the

research, I displayed the poster (see Appendix C) in the postgraduate study rooms. I also used my existing network in the postgraduate study rooms with a view to introducing the research and inviting participation (Appendix A). The background information (see Appendix D) was to be completed first. One of those who fitted into the research criteria was identified to do the pilot interview. I also used the networks of my friends and colleagues to find the other participants.

As a result, eight students participated in this project. The eight cases were chosen to be manageable in terms of understanding each case in-depth. There were four male and four female students, who came from the Faculty of Applied Humanities, Faculty of Business, Faculty of Health and Environment Sciences, and Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies. Most of them are taking their Master's course of study, while two of them are doing their doctoral study. One had a Bachelor's degree with honours learning experience. Six participants were studying in their second language. Two speak English as their first language.

3.7 Pilot interview

According to Bryman (2001), in order to test and check the appropriateness of the interview questions and the whole process of the interview, a pilot interview was conducted in advance.

The pilot interview was conducted with one participant, who was told in advance that it was a pilot interview and that comments or discussion about the interview questions were welcome during the process of interview.

Before the interview started, I introduced the research topic about postgraduate students' 'best' classroom learning experiences, which gave the participant an overall idea about my research. After the participant signed the Consent Form (see Appendix B), the pilot interview started. After the participants' feedback and subsequent discussion with my supervisors, the interview questions and process were amended.

The interview took thirty minutes and was tape-recorded, and a pseudonym was used. The transcript was sent to the participant to check for accuracy. With the consent of the participants, the data were used for the data analysis.

Afterwards, the interview questions (Appendix E) were modified. For example, the question ‘how did you value the class you took?’ was changed to ‘what benefits did you get from the class?’ During the pilot interview, the participant had understood ‘value’ to ‘be number’, so gave a percentage in his response.

3.8 Interviews

In the context of this study, exploring the participants’ experiences involved collecting data using an interview technique. Eight individual interviews were conducted from February to March of 2008. Each interview lasted between twenty and sixty minutes, and was tape-recorded.

The interviews were conducted during the holiday time and the beginning of the semester to avoid times of greater academic stress. Interview times were made at the convenience of the participants. The interviews all took place within the university: the postgraduate study room after working/studying hours, a group study room within the library, and in the interviewee’s office.

The interview questions aimed to collect the participants’ ‘best’ experience in the classroom, and the first section focused on questions around their personal prior experiences, including educational or work backgrounds. This was followed by another section about classroom experience, such as classroom structure process, classroom process and description of their ‘best’ learning experiences in the classroom. All the topic areas were covered in each interview, giving a rich description about ‘classroom as a learning community’.

3.9 Transcripts

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed within one week after being conducted. I personally transcribed all of them. The original version of the transcripts was returned to participants for amendments. The participants were also informed

that they could edit, add to, or delete from the material in the transcripts. I met two participants after they amended the transcripts. We discussed together unclear words and amendments.

In this study, only two students had English as their first language. For the other six participants, English was their second language. They have spoken English for many years but they had an accent. I am also an international student, and English is my second language as well. In the transcripts, the proper meaning was discussed with a proof-reader due to some grammatical mistakes.

3.10 Data analysis

By focusing on the main research question, and then the interview questions, I was able to analyse the transcripts into ‘themes’ that were identified from the participants’ interviews (Kumar, 2005). I then met my supervisors to discuss the themes. During the first reading, notes were made in the margins of each transcript. The second reading was conducted while listening to the tape recordings with special attention paid to the emerging themes, participants’ perceptions and the meanings assigned by participants to specific words, and the excerpts were marked with different colours according to the emerging themes.

Being a postgraduate student, I also had classroom learning experiences. Common understanding existed between myself and the participants which made the site access and rapport building easier than as an external or ‘outsider’ researcher. The insider knowledge and experience provided an advantage of having thorough and in-depth understanding of the complexity of the students’ classroom learning experiences.

Conclusion

The major work outlined in this chapter in relation to the present study includes the theoretical framework underpinning the case study method and individual interview technique, which posits that meaning is constructed from the lived experiences of the participants as they interact within the teaching and learning environment.

The data that were generated from these interviews was analysed and organised into some common themes that became evident. The data were validated by the participants, who were asked to read the transcripts and verify their accuracy. The data were also validated by my supervisors who read the data and endorsed my interpretation of the themes.

In the next chapter, the findings, the participants' lived experiences, are presented and grouped into the common themes: Continuity, Authentic support networks, and Safe classroom context.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

The information presented in this chapter is the common themes that were generated from the interview data. The data are grouped into relevant themes which include: Continuity, Authentic support networks, and Safe classroom contexts. Then, these themes were divided into some sub-headings. Extracts from the interview transcripts are presented to support these themes.

The 'Continuity' section refers to the participants' personal history, for example, prior experience before studying in the current programme; such as what they had studied; which areas they have worked in; their language competence; their motivation to move to the current study; the relation between theory and their working practice.

The section on 'Authentic support networks' displays the dynamic interactions among lecturer-student, student-student in/outside the classroom and university support systems.

The section on 'Safe classroom contexts' outlines the process and structure of the classroom that affects the development of the classroom community. The participants' voices are identified by name and through the use of italics.

4.1 Continuity

Continuity sees meaning within one's history, experiences, skills, and motivation. The participants' past memories affect their current participation in the classroom. Their future directions are evident in their 'current' decisions and experiences.

4.1.1 Motivation to study

For the participants in the present study, the main motivations for their enrolment in the postgraduate programme study included career advancement, preparation for future development, self development, personal interest, and to make friends from different countries or cultures.

The reason that participants chose to study within a particular postgraduate programme related to their career development.

I was appointed to a new role of my work. I chose that paper because it was a good starting point for me to start my master's journey, while this paper seemed that it was just right time to take, as I took the new work role (Sarah).

I would like to know more about my field under the New Zealand context. When I became an employer, it helps me to have a better idea about the New Zealand construction environment (Sean).

I chose this postgraduate paper because I want to move into another career area where I can get better pay (Lucy).

Some of the participants come with their own interests and self-development, for example:

I chose this paper because it was quite interesting for me. It is based on the [one subject] and logic thinking. It is my internal interest. I feel I am quite good at it. Also, it made me feel a sense of achievement (Jack).

The paper was a core paper, and also it was in the field that I am interested in. I took this course because I want to broaden my perspectives and thinking in this particular area (Henry).

I would like to improve my academic writing for my doctoral thesis writing (Amy).

From an international student's perspective, Amy and Jack added their intentions:

I know that I could not study alone. I should make more new friends from different cultures and countries. We can share ideas with each other. (Amy)

I think I can get more new challenges when I further study overseas. (Jack)

In addition, Lucy expressed another reason for her study. She also wanted to learn more about how she studies at postgraduate level. She wanted to gain experience of this level of study during her life.

4.1.2 Prior experiences

All the participants have had work experience before doing their postgraduate study. Their previous knowledge backgrounds and work experiences have different impacts on their postgraduate study:

Jack had an advantage because of his undergraduate background:

Normally I did not do the preparation before attending the class, because I could understand the information that the lecturers gave in the class with some of my previous background. I could follow the lecturers.

In contrast, Sarah presented her experience:

I had no experiences on the new role that I was appointed. Also, my background was other than in education. I have not known much about the educational theories. So, I felt that quite good to make one step ahead, to know what was going on in the class. It made it easier to follow the lecturers and gave me time to reflect some ideas.

Alex was struggling with the course interest, in terms of his previous work experience:

I did not have any background on it, and I was just aware of what happened in the process.

4.1.3 Course benefits

All the participants gave a good evaluation of the course that they had taken. They valued the course contents from different aspects; however, most of them linked the course contents with their current/future working fields.

One good thing happened in the data analysis lab. A professor came to show us what the humans like and test the instruments and equipment. You read in the journal article and knew someone did it, you do not know how to do it actually. When you did it and part of programme, made you feel good. It gave the actual life and what the instrument looks like. It gave you ideas to do the research or know what the research has been done. It gave you certain topics or interests in certain fields. It was what postgraduate training gives you. (Alex)

I felt that it was the best paper that I have done. It was useful and applicable. It helped me through the time when I was feeling insecure and my new role. I think it was a wonderful opportunity for me to go to that class and share my problems, those I was facing and had feedback from the lecturer and other students' experiences and had what the literature says as well. I felt that I was not alone. The ideas that I got helped me to cope with the problems that I got. I thought that paper had the right content for me at that particular time, which made it very useful. As well as that it was easy for me to relate to the lecturer in that paper. So, sometimes, you have an easy connection with people, do not you? I felt that communication in that paper was easy. (Sarah)

It exactly led you to apply your knowledge in the working field. I did not know the NZ construction industry environment until I took this course. (Sean)

I know about adult learning theory now and how adults learn through experiences. Definitely, for my own learning, how I learn the approaches

that worked for me and made me aware that some approaches I used that were not very effective. It highlighted that to me. Also, it brought me to be aware when I start the adult teaching education, and how I can manage this. So, it had a good benefit. (Lucy)

This was such memorable because the theory can be applied into one's life. (Lucy)

I cannot say, because I am not sure what happens in the future. It maybe helps, or maybe it does not. It depends on what kind of jobs I take in the future. I have learnt a lot about the skills, how to use the software and how to do the system modelling, etc. Also, I have learnt how to communicate with other students and lecturers. Sometimes, I did not understand what the lecturer said, and I needed to ask. In this way, I learnt how to ask. (Jack)

Getting knowledge on this field, you can apply the solid knowledge into your working field. It satisfies the meaning of the life. It was quite applicable. (Henry)

For myself, I improved my writing and got more friends. I can meet people from other countries with different cultures and different thinking. It reflected their society. (Amy)

4.1.4 Language competence

Confidence to speak in the classroom is another issue affecting participants' feelings on classroom community. Some interviewees said that they did not talk much in the class, but mostly just observed other people.

Language competence was cited as a substantial problem by some of the international students, as exemplified by the excerpts below:

English is bit of a challenge for me. But, sometimes, in the class, to speak English is not important engineer students. I think that sometimes English could not express all the ideas in the subject, like the part of the machine. In engineering, we have our own language –drawing. We can draw some part even the whole machine. We can communicate with the drafts. It was a good way for me that I did not need to speak good English all the time. If others cannot understand me, I could draw pictures to explain. I speak English in the class was just ok. I can understand what they said, but sometimes I could not express exactly what I want to say. So, I draw the pictures and write down the formula, they could understand. If in the subject that I am quite good at, like maths, I feel quite confident to talk in the class no matter whether my English is good or bad. (Jack)

English is my second language and I would like to improve my academic writing. (Amy)

Amongst the students with English as their first language, classroom participation was not easy.

I am naturally a quiet person and quite shy person, so I found it was difficult to start with talking with a group of people that I do not know. (Sarah)

Not being confident to talk in the class, but because my personality is ok to express myself. (Lucy)

Some of the participants with English as their second language had no problems with participating:

My educational base was in English, so speaking English is not my problem. (Alex)

Although English is not my first language, all of our education like masters courses were taught in English and all examinations are held in English. That is why it was not a problem. Even if you were at your work place, you should communicate in English. So, it is not a problem. (Sean)

It is a long time for me to speak English. Now I can think in English. I have been NZ for ten years. (Henry)

To be confident with speaking English in the class, depends on the participants' personality, confidence with course contents and their willingness to participate in the class.

4.1.5 Theory and practice

For some interviewees the paper closely matched to achieve their vocation and they had already gained considerable experience relevant to the paper.

Lucy expressed that the current course was linked to her goals for her future career. She said that:

I am interested in this paper. I want to be an adult educator and also to learn more about how I study at this level. So, there were two main reasons for choosing that paper: one is my own self-development; another one is for the career area that I want to move into.

All the participants had work experience before starting the postgraduate study. It is assumed that they more easily relate to theories in their study because of their work practice. However, some of them felt that the course was not relevant to their future working field.

Alex felt that the course he chose was not very relevant to his future field, for example,

I would not participate into the subject actively, because I know that I would not use it in my field.

4.2 Authentic support networks

Support from lecturers, students and the university system were taken as an important part of building the participants' sense of community, both in and outside the classroom.

4.2.1 Meaningful lecturer-student interactions

Lecturers played an important role in the classroom. The diversity of lecturers and their teaching-styles and their personalities, are addressed in this section. The participants in the present study had different interpretations of lecturers' availability and use of this kind of support.

Most of the participants thought they had a reciprocal relationship with the lecturers and guest lecturers:

The lecturers and students are going into one to one interaction. The lecturers gave you lectures and discussion on the topics. Whenever a student has a doubt, the lecturers try to help out with their ideas. (Sean)

It was quite good. We talked in the class and had good communication. (Jack)

The guest lecturers brought new knowledge and different approaches to teaching. I felt quite confident when I listened to the guest lecturers' teaching. (Henry)

After finishing this course, I have made appointments with the lecturers to meet quite regularly. My writing improved a lot. (Amy)

Sarah felt that there was much equality and sharing of life experiences between students and lecturers in the postgraduate class rather than the power differential in the undergraduate classroom:

We are all adults together. I think that it actually helps, from the point of view, you feel the more equal setting, and that what you have to say is quite important. The lecturers were really interested in your life experiences. So, the relationship is more sharing between the lecture and student, whether you get a big age different when you took the undergraduates. Although we still need to go through the assessment process, in that way, we still have the power differential, because we need to produce something we have learnt that will be marked by the lecturer. I think in that classroom setting, it generated a good discussion because we are relatively equal.

In addition, Lucy expressed similar ideas:

Relationship with more students and other students was more evident when he made jokes. Some of the students think the teacher was in the role of authority. They were not able to relate to him as a colleague.

Henry experienced one lecturer who showed some bias to the class:

Some of the lecturers are very friendly, some of them are not. For example, students in general thought that the lecturer has bias on some cultures and gender; I do not want to name any lecturer. In one presentation situation, two groups of students gave the presentation. The male group had mature knowledge, but the female group had some kind of knowledge gaps. They were more attracted and had more cosmetics things. So, they got higher marks than the male group, it caused frustration for us.

Some participants experienced good relationships with lecturers with the exception of two of them, Alex and Henry, who had unhappy memories of lecturers. However, the interactions between lecturers and those students' 'best' postgraduate classroom experiences were in general good, open, and equal relationships.

4.2.2 Meaningful student-student interactions

All participants acknowledged the positive support from their classmates, except Alex who felt that there were no interactions with his classmates. Because he took the block course within a short period, he met his classmates quite a few times. For example:

I did not feel that we have this kind of interactions at the postgraduate class because the block courses were in a short time. By the time, you could be familiar with the faces, who were in the class and who were not, you would not have interaction time with each other, except the person you know from the undergraduate.

When he talked about the extent of interactions with his classmates outside the classroom, he was more positive:

It was good. More mature than the undergraduate. We support, and respect each other. You can approach your classmates and most of them have teamwork experiences. We had good communication and the team works together.

Most of the participants mentioned the good support from their classmates.

We are quite close. Some of us went through the same class for one year, so, we knew each other quite well. We shared ideas with each other and I felt that I belonged to the group. (Jack)

As an adult mature student, lecturers would like to make friends with us. With other students, we would like to share ideas together. (Amy)

Students were dominated into the class as English is the only language. Their relationship was quite free and open. And then the other side of the class were, probably, English as their second language, they were more quiet in the class. But we were related more together, it was just about personality differences. (Lucy)

I think that it is much the same really. Each student has the important experiences as well as the lecturer, so we are all able to share those, which really made rich. We all had something important to add. (Sarah)

When Sean dealt with a group task, he felt there was good interaction among them:

Some of our assignments were group assignments. So you have to do it in a group. You have to have interactions or conversations with other students. We started discussions and the roles were divided. This guy did this, and that guy did that. If one person cannot deal with the tasks, we met together, and we solved the problems together. Periodical meetings about the progress were held to share knowledge to help others.

The participants had collaboration with their classmates during class time; however, some of them extended interactions with their classmates after class hours. Sarah saw relationships develop outside of the classroom:

We went to that class and I gave the people a lift to the other side. When we were in the car, it was the good opportunity for us to talk about what we had learnt in the classroom. I think that it was good for the relationship, because we could revisit things that had been ideas in the classroom. I think that it was probably my best experience of a classroom community, because of what happened after the class. (Sarah)

4.2.3 University support systems

The participants received support not only from lecturers and classmates, but also, from the university support systems.

All the participants have asked for or received support from lecturers and classmates.

I always feel thankful that all lecturers of all papers have been willing to meet and go through with me, my ideas, or drafts on the assignments. That was incredibly helpful. And they always are willing to do that. That was so much appreciated. (Sarah)

I went to learning support centre in order to learn about the writing academic level that it needed and also critique is new to me. I did not approach my lecturer so much for that particular paper. I discussed with my classmates and went to learning support centre. (Lucy)

Among the classmates, we shared ideas together. We searched the information online. It seemed like that we did not get enough time to complete the assignments. We always ask for extensions for complete assignments. We should search the information first, and make our own ideas to complete them at the postgraduate level. I did have problems with understanding the questions in the assignments. I asked for help from my classmates. We did not meet lecturers quite often, so, I just asked my classmates. The lecturers did not explain the questions in the assignments, and we did assignments only by ourselves. (Jack)

However, support was always forthcoming:

I have been to the support centre once and they told me not to come. I brought my assignments and I did not know what the topic was about. I would like to check the sentences and vocabularies. The lady said that I did not know what the topic was and I could not help you with it. I asked about checking the sentences, grammar or vocabulary. She just went through one paragraph, and she said everything was fine. I had a twenty-five page assignment and she went through one paragraph that she said it was fine. They do not have time to do it and they do not think postgraduate students should go there. That was what I have been told. (Alex)

Sarah was satisfied with the library services that she used:

I have used the library, such as the website, and the physical books. That was good. But I have not used other services available though.

Though the university gives some support to students, the participants either found they were a bit difficult to approach, or some of them were reluctant to use the support.

4.3 Safe classroom contexts

This heading broadly includes themes such as

- Participation in the class
- Assessment
- Class size and settings
- Cultural differences

4.3.1 Participation in the class

Most of the participants thought they tried to actively participate in the class. However, sometimes, they felt a lack of interest, lack of background on certain

topics, confidence to talk, had an introverted personality, and even the insufficient preparation before attending the class.

Sarah said that she did not have any background on this area, and for some reason, felt a lack of connection with the lecturers:

Always at the beginning of the class, I was in the dark. I did not have any basic theories with this area, because my undergraduate study was in another field.

I really have not analysed in my head that was why it was, but it gave me two words: lack of experiences from my part, probably the lecturers did not quite gel together, and have lack of connections with them for some reason.

However, she did overcome these barriers with the different teaching approaches in another class:

It was quite often the case you had some articles that you were supposed to read before you went to the class. And discuss points from those articles. I think that it was a very useful way to approach teaching. It gave you an opportunity to grapple some topic ideas before you went to the class. For me, it was very useful. I always try to read the articles before I went to the class. If we went to the class, we talked about something else, I was probably lost. If I read the articles, it was better to know what the class would be about, it was good for me.

In addition, other students found that it was easy to engage with a class if they did some preparation before attending it:

It was easier for me to understand the lecturer when I pre-read some articles or signs. Usually, I just did the brief skimming on the topics. It is better that you have questions in mind, that you can ask and you can focus on what the lecturer delivered. (Henry)

I should have. It was very valid to do that though. You do need to do readings for that class and it was not necessary, I would not do all the time. I would do it if I had the time or if I had the time to do it. Maybe that is why that I did not contribute much in the class. Maybe I did not do readings enough or something like that. I know I should have done that and read the articles, but I was just too lazy to do that. (Tania)

Some participants added that they were trying to actively participate in the class. However, this depends on their personal interests:

Like me and my colleagues, we did not have any background on it, so we just observed what happened and what was going on. That was it. I would not participate into the subject actively, because I know that I would not use it in my field. (Alex)

If in the subject that I am quite good at, like maths, I feel quite confident to talk in the class no matter despite my English is good or bad. If in the subject that I was not familiar with, I would just be a listener. I was really trying to participate, but, sometimes, it was a big challenge for me. I just tried to understand what they were talking about. Just try my best to participate in the classroom. If I know something about the field, I talked to my classmates. (Lucy)

4.3.2 Assessment

Assessment appeared to be a significant aspect of students' learning:

I felt that the assignments were quite useful and the learning from the assignments was solid. Students do focus on the assessments, because we know we should pass them. But, at the postgraduate study level, I did much value the classroom teaching process. You can get broad perspectives from other students and lecturers. You were not pointed to a particular assignment, but you could get some ideas to add into your assignments. I think that the assignments were quite valuable. But my problem was about, not gaining as much as I could from the classroom situation. I really have not analysed in my head that was why it was, but it gave me two words: lack of experiences from my part, probably the lecturers did not quite gel together, and I lack of connections with them for some reason. (Sarah)

I found the assessments were quite interesting and were relevant to the paper. I was doing an assignment on eating disorder. I want to do my research on obesity from the reasons of eating disorder. It had more opportunities for me. It helped me to look at the different research. It has been quite beneficial for me. (Tania)

Most assignments are individual tasks. Only one or two assignments are group assignments. We started the discussion and the roles were divided. This guy did this, and that guy did that. If one person cannot deal with the tasks, we met together, we solved the problems together. Periodical meetings about the progress were held and to share knowledge aims to help others. (Sean)

4.3.3 Class size and settings

Class size and settings affect student learning as this is an important part of building the classroom community from the point of view of structure. Some participants expressed very positive points about their class settings, in terms of class time, classroom layout and classroom size:

I was grateful that the class was at the end of day. It makes it easier. I do like having a lecture once a week. That was good for me. Because it gave you the time to talk about it during the week and does not let things disappear. (Sarah)

It was a big table we sat around in a small room. So I think that the classroom layout was a good way that we can see each other and talk and across to everybody in a group quite easily. I do like a small group classroom. It is about eight to ten people which are a good number to learn with. I thought the educational research paper, was just too big. It was about fifteen in the class. It meant that not everybody can take part into the conversation all the time and you would not notice somebody not taking part in the class. It may be easy to encourage that person to contribute more and help them along in a small class. But in the big class, it was easier to disappear. (Sarah)

Our classroom layout was like this. We sat in a circle. Three people, three people, three people, like this, it is convenient to discuss. The lecturers gave us some discussion, conversation and arguments like these. (Sean)

Approximately seven or eight, sometimes were less, only five or six. It was a small class. It was quite different from the undergraduate class which was quite big. In a big class, the lecturer could not take care of every one, but in a small class, no matter who cannot understand, we can raise our hands to ask immediately. (Jack)

We sat in a circle, like in the meeting room. We can see everyone and face to face talking, it was good. For students, English as their second language, sometimes, we do not understand their accent, when we saw their face or body language; this helped us to understand more. (Amy)

It was quite an interesting layout. We had the big table. We sat around it. It was not intimidating. We could see everyone. If we had a seminar, actually you were leading the class, and a group of people were sitting like this. I have found that quite comfortable. It makes more; I do not know how to say. It is less intimidating. It is not just people sitting around and listening. It makes it easier to talk and confront things. (Tania)

In contrast, some participants had negative experiences with the class setting:

The practical session was cut short because there were too many students and the numbers of instruments are quite less. We were divided into small groups which were five or six people. So, there was one person doing the subject and the other five were observing. (Alex)

We had moved to three different classrooms. The first room was like a meeting room, and we sat around the table. That was quite ok. The second room just had a single desk. I think that it was like a conversational setting. In the third room was a meeting room again, but it was much smaller. From the first time to the third time we moved, I do not know that was much of a community of conversation. It was just like that we had attended the class. It was not good at all for building the sense of belongings in a community, to move the classrooms and change the classroom environment. (Lucy)

4.3.4 Cultural differences

Some participants were aware of the cultural diversity in the classroom community.

I found that they were interesting from different cultures and nations, because I am personally interested in people from different countries. I saw this was an opportunity to make new friends. (Lucy)

I found that students go together when they share the same culture, Chinese together, Kiwi together, and Indians together. I would like to go to a mixed culture group, because it was very interesting. (Henry)

We had lots of different cultures. We had people from Russian, a girl is Taiwanese, and I am from India, people from Australia, one girl is Maori. We had debates like this. The lecturers would ask about what you would do in terms of different cultures. We had different perspectives. It was really interesting. We had Maori, Pacific and other cultures. We had cultural balance, not balance; it was mixed or diverse. (Tania)

Different cultures existed in the classroom, and the students presented them in quite a good and acceptable way. The students learnt from each other, and made a collaborative classroom atmosphere.

Conclusion

One student consistently described classroom experiences (and broader experiences as a university student) which did not link closely to being in a learning community. It is beyond the scope of this research to find out more about his experience but it would be reasonable to suggest that either (1) he experienced a learning community in another class but did not value it and therefore did not describe it as being his 'best' postgraduate classroom experience. Or (2) that the sum totals of his classroom experiences were either indifferent or difficult and the best experience remained at least potentially unsatisfactory. I would suggest that (2) is probably more likely. I propose that not all postgraduate students are able to experience learning communities. There is some validity in suggesting that students regard their best postgraduate classroom experiences as happening within the context of a learning community, which is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Introduction

This case study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the ‘best’ postgraduate classroom experiences of eight students at a New Zealand university. The characteristics of those ‘best’ experiences were described by the students and these data contribute the original research for this thesis. The data privileges ‘student’ voice and their stories about university experience has not been considered critically beyond the attempt to hear their multiple voices.

The research question and methodology were grounded in my assumption that those postgraduate students would experience, as I have myself experienced, what the literature defines as being a ‘learning community’. As is evident from the previous chapter, a range of experiences was documented, which indicates that my assumption was largely accurate although with some interesting variations and commentary.

This chapter draws together the data alongside the literature. The framework followed is based on Boyer’s (1990) six principles of a learning community which I have grouped together to create three broader categories:

- *Purposeful*
- *Just – Disciplined*
- *Open – caring – celebratory.*

The data are considered alongside this framework as well as other literature. The chapter finishes with a conclusion.

5.1 Overview of Boyer’s (1990) six principles for vital learning community

Many theories related to university student development have certainly been articulated, both theories that are specific to the educational setting, and those that reach across the environment, such as businesses or not-for-profit organizations. However, Boyer’s multi-principled approach to creating a community in a learning

environment seems to be timely, and appropriate because: it conceptualises the relationship dimensions, personal development and goal orientation dimension, and interpersonal communication. It is consistent with the research findings.

Boyer's principles are very broad, overlap and require his explanations - principle by principle - in order to see the links to learning communities. When considered alongside the original data from this case study, it becomes clear that three of his principles (*purposeful, just, disciplined*) could relate to institutional activities more generally – not just education. It is the other three principles (*open, caring and celebratory*), which start to position his principles within a social context. Another layer of analysis is needed to fully integrate his principles into the lived experience of a learning community.

The only principle that I have chosen to leave 'ungrouped' is *purposeful*, primarily because it alone strongly links to the theme of 'continuity', which is a core theme of the research findings. I recognized within the principles *Just and Disciplined* the intentionality of the classroom contexts and the possibility of intellectual and personal safety. Within the final grouping *Open – Caring – Celebratory*, I recognized the social nature of classroom teaching and learning which, in a learning community, minimizes difference in relative status and maximizes meaningful social interaction.

5.2 Purposeful - continuity

"First, a college or university is an educationally purposeful community, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus"

(Boyer, 1990, p. 9)

In a *purposeful* learning environment, members of that community work to develop and subscribe to a shared set of basic goals. The learning environment is not divided. Learning occurs in and outside the classroom through events and activities within and beyond the institutional structure. Within the findings, this linkage between past experience, current activity (the classroom) and the students' direction (career path, or other personal agenda) were all *purposeful*.

In a *purposeful* learning community, members are active learners who are encouraged to look for connections among their experiences that provide a more complete view of knowledge and a more authentic, more integrated view of life (Church, 2000). Students brought their different orientations, life experiences, and future directions into the current classroom experience.

In the findings, participants expressed their different orientations to the current course. Lucy, Sarah and Sean stated that their motivation for coming to this course was to improve their career development; other participants stated that they chose the course for their own personal interest and their self development, such as Amy, who wants to improve her academic writing skills and meet more friends during the course; Jack and Henry are personally interested in the subjects.

Henry said that:

“I want to broaden my perspectives and thinking in this particular area.”

Additionally, not only do individuals learn what is most relevant to them as individuals, but also there are common learning and development goals for everyone who is part of the community (Church, 2000). The students would not take the knowledge for themselves, rather they are learning collaboratively with other students. Students like Henry and Sean talked about how they worked cooperatively on their group assessments and helped each other when others had problems.

However, in Alex’s case, he feels somewhat disconnected and isolated from his class, as well as from the campus at large. The reason that he took this course was that it was the compulsory course and the only one left to complete the credits for graduation. Rather than participate in the hands-on classroom activity, he just observed other students’ practices. He did not actively participate in the class, because he knew this practical course was not his future work area.

Several students’ stories indicate points where ‘disconnect’ occurred – when what they were trying to do felt thwarted. For Alex that happened several times, including when he sought help from a Student Support Service for an assignment, but was sent

away because he was a graduate student (so he turned to other students for help). For Amy there was ‘disconnect’ when the classroom venue changed several times in the course of the semester class. She recognised this as affecting both her sense of purpose and her sense of belonging.

Interestingly, intensive courses feature as being the ‘best’ classroom experience for several of the participants. The purpose of these courses was clear and the intensity helped to focus the classroom experiences, including the importance of the social experience.

Amy’s ‘best’ classroom experience was a short course in preparation for postgraduate study, but her agenda was only partly on its content. She recognized that her primary interest was to make friends, as she was relatively new on campus.

Both the research findings and the literature suggest that a learning community is more likely to develop where there is a sense of continuity and integrity between past experience and future directions.

5.3 Just and disciplined—safe and authentic classroom contexts

“A college or university is a just community, a place where the sacredness of the person is honoured and where diversity is aggressively pursued”

(Boyer, 1990, p. 25)

“A college or university is a disciplined community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and well-defined governance procedures guide behaviour for the common good”

(Boyer, 1990, p. 37)

In a *just* learning environment, the dignity and acceptance of all individuals is affirmed and equality of opportunity is vigorously practised. Members in a just environment are viewed “as being accepted of all, as well as firm in their stance on creating equal opportunity, confronting sexual, racial, and religious differences” (Astin, 1996, p. 25). A *just* community is a place where diversity is aggressively pursued. This would include students in a group, with different gender, race,

ethnicity, age, nationalities, different religions, students from different backgrounds and so forth.

In the experience of students like Sarah and Lucy, the relationships with the lecturer and students are quite equal and open. They felt free to ask questions, and to share their own ideas. Tania felt safe with a group of people who she was familiar with. She knew that people tended not to judge her. In a familiar environment, members build up a sense of safety with each other.

In the findings, Henry observed that students from different ethnicities participated differently. For example, he mentioned that an Indian student group was keen on asking questions; however, the Chinese student group was comparatively quiet.

One of the challenges of learning communities is to find a balance between authentic relationships (which is discussed more fully in Section 5.3) and the power relationships that are basic to institutional classroom learning, and especially assessment.

In his ‘best’ classroom experience, Henry identified that his lecturer had gender bias and gave higher (presumably unjustified) marks to the beautiful female students. His critical comments are accepted here at face value; his lecturers and the beautiful females’ voices are not part of this study and could tell a different version of events. However his discontent closely links to the literature, which indicates that assessment can be problematic within a learning community (Knight, Hakel & Gromko, 2006).

A community builds upon with *Just*, one that is both equitable and fair, with the basic rules. Brown and Van Wagoner (1999) advocated that lecturers “build academic communities in which people learn to respect and value one another for their differences, while at the same time defining the values shared by all those who join the university as scholars and the citizens” (p. 25).

One of the recurring findings of this study was the correlation between the ‘best classroom experience’ and the class size and space. The class size was consistently

small and the teaching space was either contained or small. Typically the class sat around a large table. In Jack's experience, his 'best' classroom experience was in a large lecture theatre, but the small group of students all sat in the front rows. He also talked about the lecturer's interesting teaching approach of using the racing cars to make the class content more exciting. Trigwell, et al., (1999) stated that the way teachers approach their teaching and perceive their teaching context is a function of their previous experiences of teaching and the way the department in which they are teaching structures the teaching context. Briefly, teachers adopt more student-focused and more conceptual change-oriented approach to teaching, rather than having teacher-focused and more information transmission-oriented approaches.

In this study, the postgraduate learning community is a disciplined one, in which students were requested to prepare before going to class. Most of the students said that they did the readings and got to know the class content before going to the class. However several participants acknowledged that they did not do any preparation either because of being self-described as 'lazy' (Tania) or in the case of Jack, because his background was sufficient for him to follow what the lecturer presented without additional reading in preparation.

5.4 Open - Caring - Celebratory — meaningful and authentic social interactions in the classroom community

"A college or university is an open community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed"

(Boyer, 1990, p. 17)

"A college or university is a caring community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged"

(Boyer, 1990, p. 47)

"A college or university is a celebratory community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared"

(Boyer, 1990, p. 55)

In an open learning environment, members are fully free to express themselves, but choose to do so in a way that is respectful of others. In an open community, “members engage in frequent and reasoned discourse, and they speak and listen with great care, seeking understanding at a deep, personal level” (Glasser & Van Eynde, 1989, p. 15). For those students whose experience could be described as having been within a ‘learning community’, a key indicator was the quality of the relationship with the lecturers.

Most of the students thought they had a reciprocal relationship with the lecturers. Jack talked about his good communication with the lecturer. Sean said that the lecturers and students had one to one interactions. The free expression of ideas in a community of learning is essential, and integrity in the use of symbols, both written and oral, must be continuously affirmed if the relationship is to flourish. Sarah felt that the relationship with the lecturer was very much equal, and they shared their own life experiences. Lucy noticed her lecturer liked to make jokes, and there was much humor between them.

The relationship between students and students is another important part in the classroom community. Most of the students recognized that they had quite a close relationship with their classmates. Alex said that they are more mature than the undergraduates; they liked to share ideas together.

Proficiency in language is essential for communication with others. Lucy observed that for several international students, English was their second language; they were quieter in the class. Some students mentioned that different personalities affect their active contribution in the classroom. Sarah described herself as a shy person, and she was not used to being talkative in front of a group of people. On the other hand, she found that she was a reflective learner. She needed time to reflect on what the lecturer talked about in the class, so she could not contribute very much immediately. She would do the preparation before the class.

Building on the intercultural relationship with students, members would reach out to each other, as well as to others outside their community. In a caring learning

environment, activities that are carried out are humane and contribute toward the members developing a feeling of belonging and of social embeddedness (Boyer, 1990).

Students like Sarah, Henry, and Jack, mentioned that they had really good communication with their classmates, both in and outside the classroom. Sarah experienced her best relationship among her classmates, when they attended another class, and she gave some other students a lift in her car. She expressed that it was good for relationships, and they revisited some ideas talked about in the class. She said that it was one of her best experiences of a classroom learning community. When people got together, with more time for talking, and for sharing; it fosters a sense of belonging and sense of community.

In a group, members have more interactions, so they got to know more of each other, and they built up a closer relationship between them. Henry shared that he had some group assessments to do together:

...We have to have conversations with other students... started discussion and the roles were divided....

If one person cannot deal with the tasks... we solved the problems together... Regular meetings were held to share knowledge to help others.

The findings through the cases showed that students built up a caring relationship among themselves. They made the connections between what they learn and how they live. They built up relationships that are intercultural, international, and interpersonal.

As members in a caring community, they would like to celebrate their success when they achieved their goals. Celebrating fosters a sense of fun, enjoyment, and enthusiasm, by recognizing the value of the community as a unit, as well as the value that each individual's diversity contributes to the whole (Boyer, 1990).

In the current study, celebratory was not explored at a deep level. However, from the researcher's classroom experience as a postgraduate student, I experienced several celebrations both in and outside class, which I recognize as contributing to my sense of belonging within the classroom community. Students brought more significance

into the community to create connections between students of dramatically different backgrounds, broadening their experiences and learning for all (Levin, 2000). Students in the community, as well as the diversity of people who make up the community, informs the formal and informal celebrations in and outside the classroom.

A classroom community, with the spirit of *open, caring and celebratory*, is a learner-centered community. It listens to people, cares about people, and has fun with people. Also, it is a relational community, where members interact and make connections with each other. The interpersonal relationships they had in the community are based upon the equal, respectful, and shared classroom environment.

Conclusion

This case study suggests that taken generally, the postgraduate classroom had the potential to be more satisfying than these students had experienced as undergraduates. What appears to be the key is the social element, - which is what Boyer called *Open, Caring and Celebratory*. However without the other four principles, the institutional aspects could render the experience meaningless.

In a *purposeful* classroom community, teaching and learning are the central functions. Sometimes, learning reaches out of the classroom. Community is strengthened not only by academic knowledge, but also widened by the students who in a purposeful community, built up their basic goals, and inter-related together in the community. In the next chapter, the conclusions and implications are presented.

Chapter 6 - Conclusions

“We went to that class and I gave the people a lift to the other side. When we were in the car, it was the good opportunity for us to talk what we had learnt in the classroom... I think that it was probably my best experiences of a classroom community... build up relationships, sort of meaningful relationships.”

(Sarah, an interviewee)

Introduction

In this chapter, the findings of the research are briefly summarised and the implications of this research are examined with regard to the institution’s policies and practices. Some reflections which may be useful for postgraduate lecturers are offered as well as implications for future research.

This research sought to address the following research question: *What were the ‘best’ postgraduate classroom experiences at a New Zealand university?* The findings presented in this study privilege eight postgraduate students’ voices from classes which largely confirmed my assumption that those postgraduate students would experience what the literature defines as being a ‘learning community’, with some interesting variations and commentary.

The findings revealed the effects of continuity that postgraduate students brought into the classroom, their different motivations to study and the prior experiences that influenced their performances in the classroom. The meaningful interactions between lecturer-student and student-student were illustrated well in the classroom community. Furthermore, the safe and authentic classroom context seemed to contribute to their description of classroom experience, which the literature describes as characterising a learning community.

Based on the findings of this study, what suggestions can be made for better practice? That is, how would this study contribute to the enhancement of classroom learning communities in the university? I suggest that the findings in this research highlight the need for greater consideration to be given to a number of aspects in the lecturers’ voice and university support services at large. I would agree that the findings of the present study could bring awareness to the university administrative

staff, lecturers, and students to understand the characteristics of the AUT University postgraduate classroom as a learning community.

6.1 Implications for the university

Reflecting on the findings of this small-scale study and the literature surrounding classroom learning communities, the question that arises is how to create a classroom learning environment that is more conducive to effective learning for all students, particularly for international students with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and aspirations.

Given the situation that the findings of the present study suggested the diversity of students' characteristics, and the reality of lecturers' commitments besides teaching, student-centred teaching and learning might be a model for ideal teaching and learning. Students might want to be an active learner rather than solely relying on expectations of lecturers' support. As a result, it might be necessary for students to assume a higher level of personal academic responsibility in the learning situation and to actively choose their goals and manage their learning.

The university might want to look at creating different teaching approaches and a more conducive environment for lecturers which would directly benefit students' classroom learning. This could be achieved by greater and on-going dialogue between the teaching staff and students in each programme.

Students in this study were motivated by their professional development or improvement of their working practices and their own interests. Studying at postgraduate level, students need to become self-directed learners who are capable of managing their own learning, as well as thinking independently and critically (Hedberg & Corrent-Agostinho, 2000).

On one hand, students may acquire the skills necessary for self-directed learning; on the other hand, these findings suggest that changes in the design and choices of courses affect how students manage those courses, and in particular that desirable approaches to studying could be promoted by appropriate course design, teaching

methods and modes of assessments. The university appears to have a responsibility to create the classroom as a learning community that promotes knowledge that is socially constructed.

Mutual understanding between lecturers and students appears to be imperative in evaluating the classroom learning environment and adopting appropriate teaching and learning approaches. Sharing responsibilities and activities seem to be important to creating more effective classroom learning communities.

6.2 Implications for lecturers

The voices of lecturers are not directly evident in the research. However, the lecturers' impact is evident throughout, in terms of course structure and classroom interactions. The findings might cause lecturers in the academic programme to recognise individual differences in their classrooms and their personal behaviours, and authentic relationships with students.

Lecturers teaching certain papers make primary contact with students. Their ways of teaching and assessing determines the extent to which effective teaching and learning happens. Given that students bring with them different learning motivations and prior knowledge, lecturers might want to reach an understanding that students at this postgraduate level are not likely to accumulate more and more information assumed to be important in an academic view, rather they want to see that information in relation to their own experiences, interest or personal development.

Given that students' perceptions of the amount and type of required work they have to do, appear to impact on whether they 'cope with' or learn the content, lecturers might give attention to the subject design process, typically in the value of assessments. Lecturers may also want to find ways to identify the students' perceptions of the obstacles preventing university learning leading to those perceptions. Once appropriately supportive university learning environments are created, negative outcome expectations about learning communities could be lessened.

6.3 Implications for future research

My goal for this research is to assert that a mutual understanding between lecturers and students contributes to learning communities; the future researcher could continue study in this area by seeking multiple perspectives to understand students with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and aspirations. To compare domestic and international students and between ethnicities would explore the cultural component in the social construction of learning. The methodologies could involve interviews or focus groups with students from different ethnicities and those who have diverse backgrounds, or matched questionnaires given to the students in order to systematically compare their interpretations of individual situations and perceptions of learning communities.

A range of possibilities exists for the researcher as a consequence of this research. One such possibility is to privilege the lecturers' voice. It could be an extension of the current research to investigate whether the lecturers 'best' approach to teaching and their choices of pedagogical tools in the classroom fit with themselves as a 'good' teacher. Further, these are options for investigating what happens outside the classroom for postgraduate students at the university. It aims to give a deeper picture of them as university students and improve postgraduate students' experiences. Further research could expand this goal much further.

The problematic area of assessments has not been explored in any depth in the current study, so, future research could investigate whether there is a link between the 'best' classroom experience and the highest mark for a student. In addition, future research could focus on how the social learning can be assessed through the classroom learning experiences.

It is my hope that other researchers will draw upon, and extend my findings into other areas of research on postgraduate studies. Should a broad range of methodologies be applied to this area of study, it should help to build our understanding of the complexity and intricacy of creating a learning community at the postgraduate level.

My challenge to current and future postgraduate students and researchers is to agitate and advocate for reciprocity and mutuality in postgraduate education in New Zealand's higher education institutions. These are issues that I believe require further research and investigation.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet



Date Information Sheet Produced:

29 September 2007

Project Title

The classroom as a learning community: Voices from postgraduate students at a New Zealand university

An Invitation

This is an invitation for you to take part in a research project documenting postgraduate students' learning experiences in the classroom.

My name is Diane; I am currently studying in the Master of Education programme at AUT. I am interested in "communities of learners" in the tertiary setting.

By participating in the interview, you are contributing to the knowledge of postgraduate students' learning experiences in the classroom. I hope you will also benefit by the findings of this project.

This research project is the basis of my thesis, part of the requirements for my Masters degree in Education.

What is the purpose of this research?

This study aims to give a voice to postgraduate students and to document their classroom learning experiences. Present and past postgraduate students (within the past two years) will be interviewed about the quality of teaching and learning in the postgraduate study; the role of peer mentoring in the learning process; the role of lecturers in encouraging students' learning and students' personal learning outcomes.

What will happen in this research?

The research project involves a 40-60 minute interview in which I will invite you to share some of your perceptions about classroom learning experiences. An interview time could be made to your convenience and the interview place could be at a venue, where you feel comfortable and secure.

What are the discomforts and risks?

No major ethical risks are involved. However students on the present courses might suffer some embarrassment about acknowledging uncomfortable events that occurred in the classroom.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

The possible discomforts are intended to be avoided in this research by wording the questions in an appropriate way. It is acknowledged that potential embarrassment and discomfort will probably be low. Participants will be advised that they may terminate the interview or choose not to answer some questions. Participants' identities will be protected at all stages of the research. It is also important to let the participants know that the only individuals who will actually listen to the audio tape will be the researcher and supervisors.

What are the benefits?

This research topic arises from my own personal experiences and the recognition that the postgraduate classroom can be experienced as a 'learning community'.

The research will bring insights relevant to the future development of the quality of teaching and learning in the postgraduate courses. This will be particularly interesting because there is an emerging voice in New Zealand universities in the area of 'learning communities'.

The participants will find their learning deepened through the interview process which could be seen as a form of guided reflection. Research outcomes will be informative both for the researcher and the postgraduate students and will contribute to the body of literature on 'learning communities' within the tertiary sector, where the 'student voice' is not heard often.

How will my privacy be protected?

Please note that all attempts will be made to protect your confidentiality. It is unlikely that you will be identified as I will only be identifying themes and not focusing on specific students' comments.

I will give you a copy of the transcript of your interview to review. You will have the opportunity to delete, clarify, or amend any statements that, on reflection, you would prefer not be included as data of the study.

Original data and consent forms will be stored separately in locked cabinets in the School of Education. All original data will be destroyed after six years.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There is no financial cost to you for participating in this project apart from the hour that you spend in the interview.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Your participation is voluntary and I hope you will find involvement interesting and rewarding. If you are interested in participating in this project, please reply to me by email rmt9049@aut.ac.nz , or call/ txt 021- 261 9381.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research, please complete a Consent Form and return it to me.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You will be informed where to get a final report of the project and each participant will be sent an electronic version of the final report if requested. You will also be informed of any future publications concerning the findings of this project.

If you are interested in receiving a summary of the findings, please indicate this in the Consent Form.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Sue Stover, sue.stover@aut.ac.nz, phone: 09 921 9999 ext 6027.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 8044.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher contact details:

Diane Huang,

Email: rmt9049@aut.ac.nz,

Mobile phone: 021- 261 9381

Project supervisor contact details:

Sue Stover, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, AUT,

Email sue.stover@aut.ac.nz,

Phone: 09 921 9999 ext 6027

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*,
AUTEK Reference number *type the reference number*.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Consent Form



Project title: **The classroom as a learning community?: Voices from postgraduate students at a New Zealand university**

Project Supervisor: **Sue Stover**

Researcher: **Diane Huang**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 29 September 2007.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one):

Yes No

Participant's signature:

.....

Participant's name:

.....

Participant's contact details:

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEK Reference number type the AUTEK reference number

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix C: Advertisement



YOU ARE SPECIAL!



What is your classroom experience as a postgraduate student?

As part of my M Ed research into 'learning communities', I am interviewing AUT postgraduate students about their classroom experiences.

If you are interested in being part of my research.

Please contact me:

Diane

Call/ txt 021- 261 9381

Email: rmt9049@aut.ac.nz

Appendix D: Background Information Sheet

Background information: (please tick one)

1) Gender: *male* *female*

2) Is English your first language? *Yes* *No*

3) Are you an international student? *Yes* *No*

4) Which faculty are you studying in? (Please tick one)

Faculty of Applied Humanities

Faculty of Design & Creative Technologies

Faculty of Health & Environment Sciences

Faculty of Business

Te Ara Poutama - Faculty of Maori Development

5) Number of semesters study at AUT as a postgraduate student (Please tick one)

1 2 3 4

If you have any comments, please write here:

Appendix E: Indicative Questions for Interviews

Indicative Questions for Interviews

Title of project

The classroom as a learning community: Voices from postgraduate students at a New Zealand university

1. Prior experience:

- i. What have you studied before enrolling into this programme?
- ii. Have you had any work experiences? In which area(s)?
- iii. Do you feel confident with speaking English in the class, if English is not your first language?

2. Classroom experience

Please describe one classroom-based paper in which you have had most fully participated as a postgraduate student at AUT University.

a. Structural aspects

- i. Why did you choose this paper?
- ii. What have you expected to achieve through enrolling in this paper?
- iii. How long did the lectures take?
- iv. How many students were there in the classroom?
- v. What was the classroom layout; for example, tables and chairs?
- vi. How many lecturers were involved in the paper?

b. Process

- i. How would you describe relationship between student-lecturer and student-student in the classroom?
- ii. Could you describe the teaching approaches used by your lecturer? And how much did you value of learning about this course content?
- iii. How did you participate in the classroom?
- iv. Did you feel you get adequate support to complete your assignments? And how were you supported?

c. Other aspects

Can you tell me one of your most memorable stories that happened in the postgraduate classroom?