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Becoming what you want to be

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Challenges to become what you want to be permeate higher education recruitment literature, inviting students to realize their dreams. Students do not interpret this invitation only in vocational terms. Other aspects of meaning for being and becoming are important for them: self-realization, and becoming who as well as what they want to be. A student voice for being and becoming is less valued and validated in contemporary higher education, and more vulnerable, than voices for knowing and doing. Yet if voices for being and becoming are unsupported, voices for knowing and doing also become vulnerable. Integrity of voice is undermined.

Introduction

> … a student's creativity can only ever be a self-creation … to study is not to create something but to create oneself. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p. 55)

This article examines one aspect of a small-scale empirical study on the student voice carried out at London South Bank University (LSBU), a UK university, during semester two of the 2004–2005 academic session. The project's title was *Recovering the Student Voice.* It was linked to the University's priorities of improving student retention and enhancing the quality of the first year student experience. Its aim was to increase understanding of the student voice.

LSBU, formerly South Bank Polytechnic, was granted University status in 1992, and has nearly 18,000 students. It aims to provide courses equipping students for future employment, and maintains close links with industry and the professions. LSBU engages with its local multicultural community through widening participation activities, and has links with partner colleges in the UK and overseas.

The study's theoretical background is set out elsewhere (Batchelor, 2006). The empirical project described here developed out of that theory to test its practical implications. For this reason, the literature referred to is primarily philosophical.

The project was grounded in a particular conceptualization of student voice: the student voice may be anatomized into three constituent and interrelated elements:

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an epistemological voice, or a voice for knowing, a practical voice, or a voice for doing, and an ontological voice, or a voice for being and becoming. The underlying hypothesis was that a voice for being and becoming is less valued and validated in contemporary higher education, and more vulnerable, than voices for knowing and doing, yet it is fundamental to the successful realization of those other two voices. If an ontological voice is unsupported, epistemological and practical voices also become vulnerable as a consequence. The possibility of attaining integrity of voice is undermined.

A voice for being and becoming

A voice for being and becoming, the voice of self-realization, is at the heart of higher education recruitment literature. During 2004–2005 LSBU's advertising strap-line, displayed extensively on posters and public transport, was *Become what you want to be.* This invitation was printed against a background of possible professions. The process of becoming was interpreted primarily vocationally, and linked to successful career development. London Metropolitan University's advertisement *Become who you want to be* was another example of an invitation extended to potential students referring to the process of becoming.

Using these marketing strap-lines as my starting-point, I aimed to discover whether students on vocational courses interpreted invitations to become what and who they wanted to be primarily in terms of future employment prospects, or whether other possible aspects of meaning for being and becoming were live and important for them. I hoped to learn what the process of becoming meant to students intellectually, personally and professionally as they progressed towards realizing their ambitions.

I was interested in the implications for student retention of the loss of a voice for being and becoming. I hypothesized that a weakened sense of being might underlie and contribute to other reasons for withdrawal from higher education.

Methodology

The study started from two questions. Firstly, how do students understand the process of becoming? Secondly, what spaces are offered to students in a post-1992 university to develop a voice for being and becoming, an ontological voice, or is this voice assumed to develop automatically as the inevitable concomitant of voices for knowing and doing?

Through the project's structure I sought to create a space for students to talk about their experience in their own way and from their own perspective, in face-to-face individual and small group interviews. For three reasons I deliberately chose not to replicate the 'broad brush' approach to feedback and the potentially high numerical returns achieved by questionnaires distributed as part of institutional quality monitoring processes.

Firstly, institutional questionnaires may restrict the scope of what might be said to the confines permitted by the available language. There is a risk that if students are

invited to use an anonymous language, their understandings and voices are hidden or lost by the very means that should communicate them. In an exploration of the restrictive power of language, Barthes (in Sontag, 1982, p. 460) recalls Jakobson's work showing that a speech system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say. From this perspective, power is inscribed in language. Student respondents in internal institutional surveys may be conscientious communicators intent on putting across a clear message, but that message is contained within the limits allowed by the available vocabulary. It is difficult in this context for them deliberately to challenge the boundaries imposed by language.

Secondly, on a purely interpretative level, the language of questionnaires may not register how students from different cultures give different weightings to the collective adjectives on offer: for a Japanese student, 'satisfactory' may signify the same degree of positiveness as 'excellent' does for a UK student.

Thirdly, evaluation forms are not always treated seriously by students. They can become a formality, to be dispatched as rapidly as possible, or jettisoned entirely. Rowland (2000, p. 77) refers to the point made by Johnson (1998) that:

> … the opportunity—or rather requirement—for students to provide feedback on the lecturers' teaching in end of course questionnaires is viewed, by many students as well as their teachers, as a limitation to the kind of open dialogue that would give students a voice.

Orientation

In positioning the study, I conceived it as being in partnership with students rather than on their behalf. The interviews were conversations in which I was myself a participant contributing to the interlocution, as in the communicative dynamic analysed by Habermas (1998, pp. 180–181): 'The relation of observing subject and *object* is replaced here by that of participant subject and *partner*. Experience is mediated by the interaction of both participants; understanding is communicative experience.'

I did not consider the students as being in a weak position, without a voice, or myself as being in a powerful position granting them a voice. I did not want them to assume a voice which had been constructed for them. They should not have to rely on me as an advocate to speak for them, but be free to express themselves in their own voices.

This approach entailed an obligation to try to create conditions in which at least some communication of this kind might have the chance to occur: an atmosphere of trust and an environment of receptive listening, resulting if possible in an accurate interpretation of participants' responses. Habermas (1998) illuminates the complexity of interpretation by stressing the need for patience and humility in the interpreter. Before the interpreter can ascribe a meaning to another's utterance, he must first become a learner himself through empathetic listening and giving attention: 'the interpreter himself must learn to speak the language that he interprets' (Habermas, 1998, p. 172).

Bourdieu articulates his own concerns about interviewing and interpreting:

> How can we not feel anxious about making *private* worlds *public*, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals? … No contract carries as many unspoken conditions as one based on trust...Above all, we had to protect them [*the interviewees*] from the danger of misinterpretation. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 1)

Publicity and population

The project was advertised on flyers, the student intranet in the Business, Computing and Information Management (BCIM) Faculty, an electronic screen in the BCIM foyer, and by word of mouth.

Participation was voluntary, to remove any element of compulsion. In this sense the population was self-selected. However, by being publicized within BCIM participation was guided towards students on courses directed towards specific employment paths. It might be assumed that such students would be focused primarily on qualifying for particular careers. I wanted to discover whether they interpreted the invitation to become what they wanted to be solely in terms of future professions, or whether other dimensions of meaning for being and becoming had significance for them.

The sample comprised twenty full time and part time day and evening undergraduate and postgraduate students from BCIM, and one postgraduate from the Faculty of Engineering, Science and the Built Environment who heard about the project from a friend in BCIM. All participants were in their first year at LSBU, either on the first year of their courses or direct entrants to later years. Their ages ranged from 18- to 40-years. Nine were male and 12 were female. The common denominator was that they were all on vocational courses:

- BA accounting and finance (BAAF).
- M.Sc. accounting with finance (MAWF).
- M.Sc. corporate governance (MCG).
- M.Sc. international business (IB).
- M.Sc. Internet and multimedia engineering (IME).

Fifteen participants were interviewed individually. Four Chinese postgraduates chose to be interviewed together. They regarded each other almost as members of the same family, having shared accommodation as undergraduates in China, and now in London. They were so accustomed to discussing all their experiences that they wanted to continue this group response in the interview.

Two Danish postgraduates also opted to be interviewed together. Although they had not met before coming to LSBU, they had reflected on all their experiences as students together, and wanted to continue that exchange in the interview.

Context

The interviews took place in my room. I hoped this would provide a more informal and relaxed setting than an impersonal public space. I wanted to reduce as far as

possible any overtones of power in the lecturer: student relationship, or any emphasis on lecturer and student roles, however unintended, that meeting students in an empty classroom or committee-room might spontaneously engender. I hoped to establish an atmosphere of trust in which participants would feel able to talk with someone they did not know about areas that are in themselves difficult to think about and describe.

Three questions

The interviews revolved around three questions:

1. What do you think education is for?
2. Have you ever felt like giving up your studies, and who or what kept you going?
3. What does 'Become what you want to be' mean to you as an individual person?

The responses to the third question form the focus of this article. The participants, students on vocationally orientated courses, all focused on their own personal philosophical interpretations of the state of being and the process of becoming as well as on their career goals.

The limitations of this study are apparent: it was a small-scale enquiry, and it might be argued that it is not representative. However probing the idea that there is a normative student or a unitary student experience was one of the project's aims. I hope that something of the participants' diversity will come through in their own voices as they talk about one dimension of their experience of being students, becoming what they want to be.

Responding to a personal invitation

The openness and directness of challenges to become who and what you want to be extend invitations full of hope and possibility. There is an air of confidence and optimism about them. The individual is in control of self-definition and personal transformation. The door of opportunity stands open. The strength and positivity of such invitations have a powerful appeal, not only to 18-year-olds but also to mature students, those returning to study and those hoping for a second chance after educational setbacks or failures earlier in their lives. A first year undergraduate commented: 'It's a very exciting sentence for me. … It's some kind of promise I think' (Full time undergraduate (1), female, first year of three-year BAAF).

A postgraduate was attracted by the way the invitation reached out to her as an individual person rather than through a more general, impersonal tone of exhortation to excellence or success:

> When I actually came across it, wow, I thought this is something very original. 'Become what you want to be' rather than always saying 'Be the best' or 'Be the brightest' and all that so. … I think it really reaches out to everyone regardless of how you're faring or anything like that … if I want to get a better job or reposition myself from a slightly different angle … I think that's why I came here. (Full time postgraduate (1), female, one-year MCG)

Similarly, another undergraduate was animated and stimulated by the opportunity for authentic self-realization, the opening for the individual and the scope for personal will which the invitation offered:

> It's very motivating. If you were never thinking of going to university it motivates you to come to university because you know by doing it, by coming to university, you're going to be what *you* wanted to be. So it gives you the courage to come to the university and it motivates you to do a lot of things. You know that you will change your life. It tells you exactly everything that you need is *in you* kind of thing. It's like you can be what you want to be because if you *want* to be, that is, it's in you, so you can do it. … It tells you that everything is *inside* you so that if you want to shine come and just do it kind of thing. Yes, it's very motivating, very encouraging. … It's an invitation. (Full time undergraduate (2), male, first year of three-year BAAF)

For mature students the invitation to personal fulfilment was especially meaningful. One participant interpreted 'Become what you want to be' as the answer to his own recurrent question to himself: *What should I do with my life?* Successful and established in his profession, he nevertheless stressed the importance of realizing his potential by changing direction, sacrificing the security of his job and income and becoming a full-time student again:

> It's an issue of fulfilment. There are certain educational goals I've been quite keen to achieve but for various reasons I haven't. … I see this as a step to gaining that fulfilment. That's a very personal aim. … I'm looking at changing career paths, shifting sideways to move into a new field. I suddenly woke up one morning and thought: 'Hang on, I'm not learning much any more. I'm doing the same work. It's quite high profile but it's boring'. (Part time postgraduate (2), male, one-year evening MCG)

However such a raising of hopes in students, if unsupported, can create unexpected vulnerability. Becoming who and what you want to be is not necessarily a straightforward process, a linear journey executed within a specific time period. It is a complex and demanding endeavour. The process of becoming, interpreted as coming into one's own, is unique for each student. Students need to translate that evolution of selfhood into their own individual terms.

A sense of self and becoming

To outside appearances all the participants were succeeding on their courses. However, in the following passage Kierkegaard (1989) suggests the ease and silence with which a sense of self can be lost and devalued even when a person appears to external observers to be successful and managing well. It:

> … does not mean that a person may not continue living a fairly good life, to all appearances be someone, employed with temporal matters … be honoured and esteemed—and one may fail to notice that in a deeper sense he lacks a self. Such things cause little stir in the world; for in the world a self is what one least asks after, and the thing it is most dangerous of all to show signs of having. The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc, is bound to be noticed. (Kierkegaard, 1989, pp. 62–63)

Kierkegaard's words resonated for me within a higher education climate characterized by a stress on core skills and competencies, where what students know and do sometimes appears to be prized over who they are, even though the three dimensions of knowing, doing and being are intimately interrelated. Thus a student might appear successful externally, yet at an internal cost of a weakened or dislocated sense of self.

Kierkegaard's definition of the process of becoming stresses the importance of becoming oneself—becoming who you want to be—in order to become what you want to be: 'Becoming oneself is a movement one makes just where one is. Becoming is a movement *from* some place, but becoming oneself is a movement *at* that place' (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 66).

He suggests that self-realization—becoming who and what you want to be—starts with an uncovering and recognition of who and what you are now. The movement of self-recognition in the present might then lead on to movements of change and self-definition in the future.

Both these motions—the activity of self-knowledge in the present as a prelude to the activity of self-realization in the future—suggest elusive and vulnerable uncertainties of identity which need experimental spaces and vocabularies in which they can be constructed and expressed. They are demanding, complex and risky processes, producing perhaps few outcomes that are easily recognizable and quantifiable as successes. They need time and attention to engage in so that students do not feel they are failing in a context geared to success.

Uncertainty and becoming

However, students on vocational courses are often encouraged from the outset to formulate clear objectives and goals, and to plan how to achieve them—to know with certainty who they are and where they are going almost before they start the journey. There is a risk that an over-prescribed idea of a student, a system that 'tells you firmly what sort of being you are and what you should be doing' (Williams, 2005, p. 26) diminishes the space students have to come into themselves as students, unsettling those who are experiencing uncertainty rather than a secure sense of academic and future professional identity.

One international postgraduate described how she felt under pressure to choose options and formulate a dissertation title on her first day. She felt that her student experience had already been prescribed for her in advance. Her possibilities for becoming herself as a student were closed down before she had time to open them up in her own way. There were no external spaces where she could express the uncertainties she felt for fear of appearing a failure before she had even begun.

Accepting an over-prescribed idea of a student also reduces opportunities for teachers to question their own preconceptions. Williams (ibid.) describes a mindset in which unexamined assumptions result in unreflective attitudes that are closed to alternative and new possibilities for being:

> … it will think that it's *obvious* what people want and how they should get it, and so its people will never learn to be strangers to themselves…to meet and know themselves. They will be told what they are. (Williams, 2005, p. 28)

Offering students spaces where they could risk being strangers to themselves, and slip out of their student roles without being told who and what they were, was part of the project. Seeing students respond to these spaces helped me begin to understand Kierkegaard's idea that persons need to make a movement just where they are in order to become themselves. In an unstructured space free of the stigma of failure, participants began to explore the inevitable uncertainties that formed part of the process of becoming what they wanted to be.

Underside of becoming

The sense that there was a difficult and hidden underside to the process of becoming what you want to be recurred in the interviews, together with the participants' belief that this hinterland needed to be concealed and negotiated alone. Newman (1996, p. 99) uses the metaphor of the topside of a tapestry to indicate outward, public achievement, and the multitude of threads on the tapestry's underside to indicate the complex process of moving towards that finished state. The intricate reverse side of the tapestry, like students' uncertain private voices, displays all the struggles, loose ends and intermittent starting and stopping points that combine to create the story of the finished canvas, the equivalent of students' public voices. The reverse side contains the roots of the meaning of the completed canvas, but is difficult to make sense of without the top side, just as the top side must be related to its underside in order to recover its meaning.

This movement of becoming, of creating a pattern, might bear witness to many wrong turnings, false starts, mistakes and new beginnings. Some students thought that experiencing the complexities of becoming meant they were failing: expressing their anxieties would only confirm this publicly. However, the voice of uncertainty needs to be validated and given space for expression en route to formulating any voice of temporary certainty. In Kierkegaard's terms, becoming oneself, movement at the place where one is, needs attention in order to release the person to become what he or she wants to be. The final shape may not be clear for some time. One participant likened the process of becoming who and what he wanted to be to working on a sculpture of himself, an endeavour that needed time and concentrated effort: 'The image of the sculpture—it's the same' (Full time undergraduate (3), male, first year of three-year BAAF).

Choice and becoming

Underlying an invitation to become what you want to be is a challenge to make a choice. On recruitment posters, students are given extensive choices about their professional identities. Autonomy is equated with ownership of choice: the individual is cast in the image of the free chooser, a strong and decisive consumer of possible identities.

However, deciding and choosing also involve losing. They are as much about forgoing and sacrificing opportunities as about gaining possibilities for becoming. There are opportunity costs to making important decisions. These losses can generate tension and regret.

During interviews students sometimes moved tentatively out of their established and carefully constructed identities, their realized possibilities, to explore the alternative possible selves they might have become, but had relinquished to pursue their present courses. They had all experienced the complexity of choice. They recognized different directions their lives might have taken, other possibilities for becoming that had been rejected. For some, this perception was hard and uncompromising. Articulating the sense of loss it entailed was difficult and uncomfortable.

Conflict and becoming

The idea of becoming suggests liberation and fulfilment because of the underlying assumption that students are becoming what they want to be, but the reality of becoming can also involve conflict.

Students on vocational courses are not necessarily vocationally focused. Some students performing well on vocational courses may clearly recognize who and what they are but choose to suppress or deny this self-knowledge, although to all appearances they are in the process of becoming what they want to be. Some participants described how their families had persuaded them to choose particular courses because they would guarantee secure, highly paid future employment. One first-year BAAF undergraduate who was shy and tense during her interview became animated and relaxed when revealing what she really wanted to be—a vet—before closing the subject down with an emphatic assertion that she was performing well on a good course, and could always change direction later. Another participant had always longed to be an artist, but had been dissuaded by her parents repeatedly stressing how talented a person had to be to succeed and earn a living through painting:

> Life is very complex. … You might try to become what you want to be, you want to express yourself, do what you want, but where do you get the money to feed yourself? Sometimes you have to hide what you want to become and do what is sensible, do the right thing. (Full time undergraduate (4), female, third year of three-year BAAF)

For these two students, becoming what they ostensibly wanted to be—a professional accountant and a finance specialist—entailed not being fully who they were. The process of vocational becoming created personal tension and conflict. They experienced dislocation between their inner and outer realities, resulting in a fracture between their private and public voices. Analysing self-knowledge and self-determination, Sartre (2001, p. 440) declares that freedom is the essence of the human condition: 'to be is to *choose oneself*' and 'I choose myself from day-to-day' (p. 555). However, 'We can even choose not to choose ourselves' (p. 472). Both these students were successful on their respective courses, but they were experiencing a certain emptiness and lack of fulfilment. Like Kierkegaard's person who has

lost a sense of self, they were managing well to outward appearances, but at the cost of a sense of personal authenticity.

Another participant addressed directly the dilemma of feeling pulled in opposite internal and external directions. He took pains to stress that the invitation to become what you want to be must be interpreted primarily as a process of self-development and personal fulfilment rather than as a guaranteed ticket to a particular profession. He understood personal and professional fulfilment to be interrelated:

> I've been thinking about it—I've seen it (the advertisement *Become what you want to be)* everywhere—it kind of works but I find it in some ways a little bit misleading because people might actually think this is a passport to something. It isn't necessarily a passport to *professional* development. It's your own development, self-development. … But the statement's ambiguous. *Become what you want to be.* So there is an ambiguity there, but—I don't know—I'm a great believer in fulfil yourself, I really am. I don't think anybody can really get on in life unless they're fulfilled and happy about themselves, feel content with themselves, feel they've achieved what they need to achieve. (Full time undergraduate (5), male, first year of three-year BAAF)

A different participant linked the process of self-development, of becoming, with the courage to be honest with oneself in order to know oneself. His perspective echoed Bourdieu's and Passeron's insight in the epigraph to this article, that studying is about self-creation:

> To be honest with yourself, not to try to lie to yourself, because you just have yourself … to feel, you know, happy—not happy, but what can I say—it's not happy. Feel relief you know and … but happiness is too complex to speak about. But it's part of being at university to know that you are learning something, that you are growing, you are developing yourself. That is part as well of happiness, and everything has a contribution. (Full time undergraduate (6), male, first year of three-year BAAF)

Dreams and becoming

Students referred to the power of their dreams in motivating them to continue rather than drop out. One said: 'University is a kind of dream kingdom. Many people can make their dreams in university' (Full time postgraduate (3), male, one-year IME).

A participant in a group interview said:

> *Become what you want to be* is a power, a power to make us do something strong in our dreams. … I think it's like a power—like a power to make you find your dream about the life. … So what kinds of thing I must do for my dream. So I like this sentence *Become what you want to be.* (Full time postgraduate (4), male, one-year IB)

However, their realism showed through in an awareness of the gap between the dream and the actualities of realizing that dream. They stressed the importance of self-knowledge for successfully translating dreams into reality. One student commented:

> I think this advertisement is quite interesting, but a little bit—you know—Utopian—because it's easy to become what you want to be, it's easy, but there is a long way to do it. It's attractive you know, like it's a dream: I want to be that, that's what I want to be.

> But sometimes there is a big gap between what you want to be and what you have to do to get there, so it's not easy. … And some people are not aware of that. They just say I want to study this, I want to become that, but you have to reflect. If you do something that you don't believe in, you know, where you don't feel realized, then there's no point. (Full time undergraduate (5), male, first year of three-year BAAF)

This participant was aware of the need to preserve through personal reflection the link between becoming oneself and becoming what one wants to be, and to ground career aspirations in self-knowledge. He suggested that it was pointless and hollow to aim for an identity at odds with self-realization.

Another participant, commenting on the overwhelming choice of possibilities for becoming on offer, made the same connection: 'The path through is to connect with what is inside you' (Full-time postgraduate (5), female, one-year MAWF).

She believed that too many choices were potentially dangerous because they generated restlessness, a dissatisfied sense that the grass was always greener on the other side of the fence: 'If you live like that you are never content with what you have, never make the most of your life. By making a decision, a particular choice, you start to define yourself'.

Another participant linked the importance of contentment with the transience of life. She believed it was an illusion to imagine there was an inexhaustible reserve of time in which to re-make choices:

> Life is very short. I have read that many people who are very successful die young. They want so many things, so they push themselves to earn more and more money, but they are not happy. The important thing is to be content with what you have now, to be happy. People plan and assume the future, but you don't know what will happen tomorrow or the next second. (Full time postgraduate (6), female, one-year MAWF)

Expectations of becoming

As well as tensions caused by suppressing self-knowledge, students alluded to other difficulties in translating their dreams into reality and becoming what they wanted to be. They understood the danger of disillusionment in themselves and their peers. The experience of frustration combined with having no-one to listen could lead to leaving higher education.

This disillusion was about reconciling their prior expectations of higher education with its reality, which could seem flat and mundane by comparison. Participants described an initial jarring between their internal and external worlds as they strove to match their pre-existing dreams of university life to the actual experience of being there.

At an everyday level these students were perhaps unrealistically hoping for what Bloch (1985, p. 182) terms 'a feast that can never experience a Monday'. However he goes on to suggest a deeper and potentially destructive level of shock and discord that can be part of the process of realizing a dream compared with the seductive power and integrity of the dream itself:

> … the Here and Now stands too close to us. Raw experience transposes us from the drifting dream into another state: into that of immediate nearness. … The Here and

> Now lacks the distance which does indeed alienate us, but makes things distinct and surveyable. Thus, from the outset, the immediate dimension within which realization occurs seems darker than the dream-image, and occasionally barren and empty … the paradox can occur that the dream appeared firmer or at any rate brighter than its realization. (Bloch, 1985, pp. 180–181)

A sense of loss of bearings in their experience of higher education came through from students who had felt so unhappy that they had considered withdrawing. They felt overwhelmed by a higher education experience in which they could not discern as clear and sharp a shape as in their imaginary picture of university life. They needed spaces where they could examine this sense of disappointment and move forward from it.

Inspiration and becoming

In becoming what they wanted to be, students hoped to be inspired by their teachers as well as by their own dreams. Their dreams were powerful, but also fragile. In their subjects they rejected well-intended messages that they should concentrate only on what was necessary to pass their examinations. Such messages implied that achieving the minimum was all they were capable of, and were experienced as patronizing, or as confirming their own self-doubt. One mature postgraduate who left school early and spent twenty years thinking he was stupid felt demotivated by this approach, after summoning up the courage to return to higher education:

> I've had twenty years almost of no education because I think it's wrong [for him], then I started to see this huge light and a very short tunnel, and now I'm seeing the tunnel almost getting longer and the light dimming because I'm being told: Well, you only need to do this, this and this to pass. … I don't really want to be told how to pass it [the examination], I want to be told how to *excel* in it. That's what will motivate *me*. (Part time postgraduate (7), male, one-year evening MCG)

But participants sought other sources of inspiration in coming to university. Stressing how important a sense of purpose was in their lives, the spokesman for a group of four international postgraduates exclaimed:

> … we are looking for some great idea, we are looking for to meet some great people. Yes, and we want to discuss with them and to hope he or she can give us some suggestions or just discuss and I can understand something about the world, the life and I can find out what it is I want. (Full time postgraduate (8), male, one-year IB)

This was a desire for inspiration beyond disciplinary boundaries, for lifelong ideals in the realms of being and personhood (De Ruyter, 2003).

Conclusion

Higher education marketing sometimes focuses on becoming who and what you want to be largely in terms of future employment possibilities, but the intentions of students on vocational courses are not solely instrumental.

Challenges to personal, academic and vocational fulfilment extend powerful and positive invitations full of hope and possibility. However, responding to invitations

to realize their dreams entails potential risks and experiences of disorientation, uncertainty, conflict and self-doubt for students working through the implications of becoming who and what they want to be. They are engaged in processes of formation or transformation of their academic and personal identities that are challenging and demanding. These imply making a journey from expectation to reality that is not always straightforward or linear in its progress, and that involves experiences of personal, intellectual and social vulnerability.

There are implications for retention if a student voice for being and becoming receives low levels of attention. A weakened sense of being and a frail ontological voice might underlie and contribute to other reasons for withdrawal from higher education. Students may interpret the setbacks that are an inevitable part of the process of becoming as evidence that they are failing to meet their own and their institutions' expectations of them to succeed. Consequently they may consider leaving higher education.

Spaces and silences are necessary to listen to students expressing the complexities of realizing their ideals and ambitions in their own way and in their own voices. All the participants stressed the importance of listeners as they engaged in the unpredictable process of becoming what they wanted to be. Each of their understandings of the journey of becoming—finding a voice for being and becoming; discovering a sense of self; living with the complexity of choice; experiencing conflict; drawing strength from the power of dreams whilst reconciling utopian expectations with experienced reality; searching for inspiration—generated a need for space and silence to express these interpretations.

Listening enables students' becoming when listeners suspend preconceptions about student voices for being and becoming, and risk being surprised by what they hear. Offering students unstructured spaces where they were not told who and what they were was part of the project. Free of the stigma of failure, participants began to explore the inevitable uncertainties that formed part of the process of becoming what they wanted to be. These uncertainties were not signs that they were failing, and should consider withdrawing. Rather, they were indications that they were entering seriously into the unpredictable, risky and challenging experience of being students.

Notes on contributor

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