Researching the student experience in the Humanities and Social Sciences: the implications of difference

Tamsin Haggis warns against over-generalisation in understanding how students approach their learning.

Research into the student experience of learning in higher education tantalises teachers and researchers with the disturbing information that a very large number of students appear to take a 'surface' approach to their learning. Students taking this approach are strategic, focus on reproducing information, and seem to be trying to cut corners. In other words, they are engaging with learning in ways which are precisely the opposite to those which their tutors are trying to encourage. And despite decades of trying to change this type of engagement by using new forms of teaching and assessment practices, teachers seem to be complaining more, not less, about students engaging in this way.

Part of the difficulty in developing a better understanding of the student experience is the assumption that research has to produce particular types of large scale, generalisable finding. And yet current research into learning in other areas of education increasingly points to the need to understand phenomena in context; to recognise that situations differ, and are specific, and that specific problems need particular answers. It is this approach that underpins the research that I am currently engaged in, which attempts to look somewhat differently at the student experience of learning in higher education. Rather than interviewing or surveying a large sample of students at only one or two points in time, this study followed a group of individual Access students over a period of five years. It also considered their experience in relation to the multiple, interlocking contexts of their lives, rather than only looking at students in the context of their discipline or institution, and examined written outcomes as well as narratives of experience.

The results of the study offer some interesting food for thought. First, when viewed in relation to the 'initial conditions' of their lives (place, class, gender), and in relation to their specific histories (schooling, post-school learning, work history), the students are profoundly different from each other; far more different than might have been anticipated. On one level, this is no particular surprise. In the research world, however, analytic techniques which focus on common themes tend to build up a picture of learners as members of groups, and to suggest that these groups can be adequately described. Looking closely at the detail of these student histories, however, is a reminder of the limits of such description. To give one example, there are two 'working class' men in the study, who come from a similar part of Scotland, are of similar ages, and share similar social backgrounds. The way that the two men engage with learning, however, is

extremely different. For one of them, learning to write essays is experienced as an enormous struggle; for the other, everything about university, including writing essays, is an exciting adventure.

Second, although so different from each other, the nature of each student's engagement with learning is not difficult to understand when initial conditions, history and multiple contexts are considered together. A general category such as 'surface approach' indicates that students are not learning in the way that tutors want them to, but it cannot say anything about *why* a student takes a surface approach, or very much about the detail of how this approach might manifest itself. Studying students individually and longitudinally, however, can answer both of these questions.

A third interesting finding relates to definitions of learning. The way that these students define learning, and their own sense of whether or not they are being successful, is often framed in terms that are very different from the ways that either researchers or lecturers would describe learning or success. This leads to questions about whose definitions of learning are being privileged in discussions about 'the student experience'.

For these students, studied in this way, it seems that the experience of learning cannot usefully be linked to research-based categories such as individual trait, types of approach, or even social categories such as gender or class. Each experience of learning is, in some very important ways, *particular* to the individual's situation and agenda, and this particularity appears to hold the key to understanding the nature of the student's engagement. The problem, of course, is that, even if it is possible to understand how and why students engage in learning by looking in this kind of detail at their lives and histories, it is clearly not possible to do this for every individual student. Not only is it impossible logistically, it is also arguably not desirable ethically. In the end, each student's experience is their own, and is largely unavailable to the researcher, or to the marker of their essays Nonetheless, it might be useful to bear in mind that a student's engagement might, in principle at least, be quite understandable if considered on its own terms.

The questions raised by this research project are not an argument for trying to understand more and more about individual students. They might, however, be a useful reminder of the level of difference that may be hiding within generalised categories and themes. One message to university teachers could be: although you may recognise that your student belongs to a particular category – be it 'mature', 'non-traditional', 'Pakistani-Scottish', 'not very bright', or 'under-prepared' – you may not understand them as well as you think you do.

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Social Science â€" studies social Institutions and structures by using the quantitative methods of social statistics. It can study small groups, but it often involves statistics involving thousands, millions or hundreds of millions of people. It then forms theories from the actual social statistics.Â The difference between humanities and social science can be drawn clearly on the following grounds: Social Science is the systematic study of social, cultural, psychological, political and economical factors which guides a person actions and decisions. As aga. Continue Reading. SimplyÂ On the other hand, humanities help individuals to understand the human experience better. 9 2. David Chan. In the classification of the social sciences and humanities there is a relative uniformity in Spanish universities. The strongest definition of a discipline in the Spanish academic system is a â€˜knowledge areaâ€™. Today, there are 178 â€˜knowledge areasâ€™ recognized by the CCU. Recruitment of staff, evaluation of research and practically all crucial education and career matters are circumscribed within the limit of a â€˜knowledge areaâ€™. Disciplinization in Spain follows a top-down approach, where the importance of strategic interests and the power of regional and national governments is demonstrated. COLLeGIUM is a scholarly, open-access journal published by the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, a research institute for advanced study in the humanities and social sciences at the University of Helsinki. The journal consists of electronic volumes written or edited by the Fellows of the Collegium. As against, Humanities implies the field of research belonging to the human culture, primarily literature, anthropology, history, arts, music and philosophy.Â Humanities is closely linked to social science, in the sense that the two disciplines deal with human beings and their culture. Humanities refer to the subject which tends to understand, acknowledge and analyze the human behaviour in all its depth and scope. Practically, as a human being, no field of study is more significant than social science. It helps an individual to understand the society as a whole, i.e. the conditions which limits our growth and development and the opportunities which can be tapped for better livelihood. It helps in creating a society where human beings can live freely and happily. Draft. Guidance Note for Researchers and Evaluators. of Social Sciences and Humanities Research. 2010. 1. Table of contents. A. Foreword B. Introduction C. Underlying Ethical Principles D. Objectives and Implications of SSH Research. Minimizing Harm and Maximizing. Benefit E. Methodology and Research Ethics in SSH F. Participating in SSH research G. Obtaining Informed Consent H. Protecting Data and Privacy I. Research in Non-EU (Developing Countries) J. Ethical Review Process.