

**Time and Affect in Talk about
'Student Experience' of Higher
Education**

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own

Caroline Norman

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative exploratory study that uses focus groups and arts-based research to examine students' talk about their experiences at one higher education institution (HEI) in London, UK. The study investigates the development and impact of a market-driven approach to HEIs including social policy discourses and measures of student experience, such as the National Student Survey (NSS). These constructions of student experience are examined with regard to narrative accounts given by undergraduate and postgraduate students of their everyday lives within the study university.

Drawing from critical feminist scholarship into experience and adopting a relational approach and a psychosocial view of the self, this thesis proposes alternative temporal and affective understandings of student lives that are frequently marginalised within the market-driven discourse of higher education. The thesis describes how the differential and changing identities of students have consequences for their day-to-day lives and relationships in ways that are not captured by neo-liberal appraisals and metrics.

The findings of the thesis contribute to sociological knowledge and debates on student experience by bringing into dialogue market-driven discourses and other fields of knowledge, such as student mental health research that constitutes a frequently marginalised facet of student life. The discussion contends that student 'satisfaction' does not necessarily equate with student or educational well-being and this conclusion has wider implications for the ways in which student experience is recognised and assessed.

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PREFACE

My interest in researching and writing this thesis originates through a number of different and intertwined personal and political experiences and events. I have been a student at two universities with political traditions - the University of Sussex and Goldsmiths, University of London – where, during times of extreme changes in higher education, I have witnessed first-hand, often through my own involvement, students’ reactions to new politics and policies, frequently relating to tuition fees. My experiences at Sussex, where I studied BA (Hons) Philosophy and Sociology, occurred shortly after the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 and the NUS protests against this (I was within the first cohort of students to pay directly for their education). A number of my close friends were involved in the student protest at Sussex in 1999, where campus buildings were occupied with the assertion that students who could not afford to fund their tuition fees should not face expulsion from the institution. This environment had a formative effect on me as I participated in events and observed with sociological curiosity.

In 2010, whilst I was at Goldsmiths, it was proposed that tuition fees were to be substantially increased by the Coalition Government amidst a backdrop of economic cuts, youth unemployment and the ensuing student movement of protests, marches and occupations towards the end of the year, leading to extreme and violent clashes between protesters and police. This wave of protests occurred on a much greater scale than I had witnessed previously and I was present as Goldsmiths buildings were occupied by students rallying against the seemingly destructive mixture of tuition fee increases and cuts to education, particularly to the Arts and Humanities. I observed a tension between the desires held by my peers and me to study and learn without ulterior utilitarian motives and the apparent side-lining of these educational ideals by an economic and cultural shift that emphasised having a degree primarily as a route to employment and saw departments and subjects that were not directly market-orientated being merged, reduced or closed altogether.

The erasure of the non-commercial within wider discourses of education also appeared to apply to discussions of aspects of student lives themselves, reducing ‘experience’ to ‘satisfaction’, and conflicted with my own sense of the multiple layerings of my life during my studies. The understanding of education purely as a linear progression route to employment conceals the personal and heterogeneous texture of university experiences which, for me, included forming life-long friendships, changing courses, intermitting from

my studies, periods of travel abroad, the birth of my son, developing personally, and various other interruptions and punctuations. By using these personal experiences and political events as my starting point, and thinking outside of considerations of policy and progression, I became interested in exploring the individualised, non-linear routes through university life that seem to fall through the gaps of the broader, market-orientated, discussions of higher education and student experience. My particular concern was the way students speak about and represent their own lives and the potential disjuncture that this might have with how 'student experience' is frequently framed within wider debates.

I was presented with the opportunity to make some of these ideas more concrete during my time at Goldsmiths. In early 2011 a group of staff and students at Goldsmiths met to discuss 'mapping' the university, partly inspired by the Queen Mary, University of London, Counter Mapping initiative (2010), which visually depicted the university 'not only as a knowledge factory but also as a border' (2010: unpag), describing the processes that different students must go through to arrive at university, particularly in terms of the Points Based Migration system. This provoked me to continue to question the notion of 'student experience', the ways that this phrase is used and the various attempts made to 'measure' it, particularly through student satisfaction surveys. For me, such discussions seemed to omit any sense of 'subjective' and personal experience as talked about by students themselves. I already had an interest in participatory research methods following my MA dissertation (a participatory photography project with homeless individuals) and I had completed training with PhotoVoice (an organisation that conducts participatory photography projects). Drawing from these various experiences and my previous knowledge, I made links with other individuals within the university who were also interested in mapping 'student experiences', leading to the development of collaborative investigations of student experience, as well as conducting my own research, and ultimately culminating in the writing of this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Approach and Contextualisation

'Not everything that counts can be counted' (Collini 2012:120)

This thesis maps 'student experience', specifically as discussed by students at one Institute of Higher Education (HEI) – hereafter 'Woodlands' - in London, UK, which has a strong focus on the social sciences, arts and humanities. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Record figures for 2011/2012 show that Woodlands has over 10000 students, with around 5000 of them being undergraduates. Nearly 20% of students at Woodlands are classified as 'international' students (coming from outside of the UK), and almost 40% of all undergraduates are 'mature' students (aged 21 or over at the beginning of their course). These statistics are set in the national context in Chapter Seven. Important to note from the outset of this project is that this study does not aim to provide a widely generalisable view of 'student experience' or what it is like to be a student in contemporary higher education. Instead, this is a project conducted at one HEI with its own unique features. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it is possible, in instances, to extrapolate these findings to wider circumstances.

The approach adopted in this 'mapping' of student experience is a critical feminist view of experience, as discussed by Joan Scott: 'it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott 1992:26). To this end, in what follows I pursue a discourse analytic framework to working with focus group data and arts-based research, concentrating on dialogue and examining the way that students use language about their experience and the work that this talk does (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000). 'Mapping' in this sense is not concerned with scientifically accurate reproduction, but performance, interaction, 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988) and the notion that 'ways of telling' (Berger 2008) not only reflect, but also constitute, social life. In order to (re)embody such talk I contribute to sociological knowledge by understanding 'experience' through affective and temporal theoretical lenses, thereby giving texture and form to the micro-practices of interaction occurring between the students in this project. My perspective is discussed in more depth in the Methodology section (Chapter Three).

'Student experience' has become an important performance indicator in higher education and a much examined - although infrequently defined - term, which will be presented later in this chapter and in the Literature Review (Chapter Two). My approach to the polysemic

nature of student experience running throughout this thesis follows Roger Luckhurst (2002), who writes on the history and multi-sited production of telepathy in Victorian times. For Luckhurst, telepathy can be conceptualised as a 'hybrid object'. As Luckhurst (2002) states:

'Telepathy is a hybrid object. It theorizes intimate distance but it also performs this by binding together extremely diverse and sometimes bewildering resources with a host of experts in different fields ... Telepathy ties diverse social, cultural and scientific resources together in a tightly bound knot' (2002:3)

Similarly, my original approach to student experience is to view it as such a 'hybrid object': produced, but also contested, as it passes through the meeting places between different sites including political, cultural, social and individual. This production in contemporary society is embedded in practices of data collection relating to a variety of aspects of student lives. Factors such as when students go to the library, the books they take out, how often they meet with their tutor, and even what they write in their emails (a proposed measure) are all quantitatively collected and analysed with university-wide decisions being based on this (Swain 2013). However, these metrics of student experience seem to offer a very limited capture of the 'tightly bound knot' and it has become important for me in this project to consider the omissions that such measurements make, which were talked about by students in the focus groups - sometimes tentatively and at other times more obviously - but which were also reflected through the ways in which the participants talked together and the 'intimate distance' that was co-created through the methods employed.

Paying attention to the co-creation of intimate distance necessitated adopting a relationship-based stance to the research that recognised the relational quality of experience and interaction. Such an approach follows in the footsteps of philosophers such as John Macmurray (1957), who argued against a rationalist conception of the subject and emphasised the essentially interconnected quality of human experience. I applied this insight through examining the relational dynamics in the research setting in an attempt to avoid the over-simplification of complex, and often ambivalent, behaviour and talk (Ruch et al 2010).

Ambivalence - the co-existence of conflicting attitudes or feelings – is inherent in Luckhurst's (2002) term 'intimate distance' and in this project it was reflected in the students' frequently exploratory and uncertain dialogues regarding opposing discourses surrounding higher education and their own situatedness within it. It has proved crucial for

me to examine such ambivalences since these are the very aspects of student life that are often overlooked by inherently linear market-orientated metrics, but that also appear to lead towards the very 'heart of the system'. In order to work with the complexity of conflicting opinions and feelings I draw on Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) Kleinian notion of the 'psychosocial subject', where the containment of differing perspectives within the individual signals psychological health as opposed to a more dangerous tendency to 'split' or dichotomise aspects of self, others and world.

Victor Seidler (2005), writing on the necessary tensions, conflicts and ambiguities in 'masculinities', suggests the need to pay attention to both the social power exerted within a patriarchal society and also the emotional feelings of confusion and powerlessness that individuals may experience; such 'deeper questions' are aspects of a more complex social life that incorporates both 'power and vulnerability, authority and love, equality and recognition' (2005: unpag). By listening slowly to uncertainties and emotional dimensions, Seidler proposes a new understanding of masculinities that does not rely on a rationalist conception of personhood as derived from the Enlightenment politics of reason expressed by Leibniz or Kant. Uncovering such complexity and ambivalence in the relational production of experience is essential to my project, acting as a counter-narrative to direct measurements and calibrations.

Neo-Liberalism and the 'Crisis' of Higher Education

It is almost impossible to discuss the issues in this thesis without invoking what has broadly become termed as 'neo-liberalism'. Neo-liberalism is a widely used term that is 'oft-invoked but ill-defined' (Mudge 2008:703) and Terry Flew (2012) points to six different ways that the term is applied in present day critical theory. It is associated with thinkers such as Hayek and Friedman and - as Stephen Collier (2012) highlights - it is not only about markets but also government, law, regulation, the state, and institutions. In this thesis, following Flew, I take neo-liberalism to indicate an Anglo-American institutional framework of national capitalism. It is not intended as a denunciatory category and neither is it accepted as being 'the way things are' (Flew 2012). However, more important here than defining neo-liberalism or excavating the writings of Foucault on the topic is looking at the way that a range of contemporary practices in higher education, commonly designated as 'neo-liberal', have come to define and produce university life for its various participants to the extent that a variety of other discourses, such as the affective (and affected) and non-linear, become marginalised.

The university - writes Giroux (2007:6) - is 'one of the most important spheres in which the battle for democracy is currently being waged'. Indeed, a moment of 'crisis' (Davis 2011) has recently been declared in UK higher education as the Browne Report (2010) is claimed to have eroded the idea of the 'public university', or the 'universitasmagistorum et scholarium' (the 'community of teachers and learners' - Evans 2004), which dated back to the Middle-Ages (Smart 2002) and replaced it with market-driven principles. This 'crisis' is not only conceptualised as an economic battleground but also an affective one: Oliver James (2008) discusses the 'selfish capitalism' of neo-liberalism that has resulted in an increase in mental health problems (including amongst the student population, which is discussed further in the Literature Review, Chapter Two).

The Browne Report (2010) advocated a market-driven university system (a continuation of the already existing one) whereby most undergraduate courses would be funded by student fees (via loans), instead of directly by the Government. As Bridget Fowler (2011) comments, it also advocated reduced funding for subjects such as the arts, humanities and social sciences. These ideas were then further endorsed by the Conservative-Liberal Coalition in 2010 under the rhetoric of deficit reduction, compounding the notion of students as consumers, who purchase a standardised product (and staff as the 'service providers') (Holmwood 2011).

Nick Couldry and Angela McRobbie (2010), commenting on the recommendations of the Browne Report, argue that the market-driven perspective will lead to a narrowing of subjects and a rational approach to higher education by students who will aim to choose subjects to maximise their future earnings (although, as will be discussed later, students as 'rational' consumers is an idea that may not be enacted in actuality, Reay et al 2005). Pedagogically it also creates a situation where 'troublesome knowledge' (Meyer and Land 2005) - knowledge with the power to transform individuals and society - is no longer considered the goal of education (in contrast to classic positions on education that suggest that it once was; Newman 1852).

These moves are discussed as disproportionately affecting 'non-elite' institutions and students and as leading to a further embedding of inequality within the higher education system. Treating higher education as a market also beckons the market-driven necessity to measure quality and place value on almost all aspects of the university. This process is parallel to the proliferation of the audit culture in management more generally (Evans 2004). Mary Evans (2004) argues polemically for the separation between universities and

the economy; she discusses the audit culture in higher education and suggests that universities have been converted into corporate enterprises since the 1980s as progressive assessments become a form of surveillance and policing that stifle creativity.

One such measure of quality and value in higher education has become 'student experience', which is usually operationalized as student 'satisfaction' with courses, teaching and institutions; satisfaction in this case can be defined following Adee Athiyaman (1997) as the evaluation of a particular experience of 'consumption' in higher education. Student experience has become such a key (although ambiguous) term in contemporary rhetoric surrounding higher education that Collini (2011) writes that some institutions have senior posts designated as 'Pro-Vice Chancellor: Student Experience'. Harriet Swain (2013), as mentioned above, reports new initiatives from some universities including tracking the relationships that students have with their tutors with the possibility of analysing emails to glean levels of student satisfaction and their likelihood of completing the course. My aim in this project is to unpack what has become the dominant way of conceptualising and valuing student experience in terms of satisfaction and to argue that there are alternative forms of understanding that can be usefully and additionally asserted.

Critical Approaches to Higher Education and Research

The marketplace strategies that have increasingly become part of UK universities have had arguable consequences for students in higher education. Grafton (2010) suggests that 'slow scholarship', like 'slow food', is richer and fulfilling. Some commentators assert the 'McDonaldization' of student experience (Ritzer 1998; Hayes and Wynyard 2002) or a 'Sat-Nav' education (Singh and Cowden 2013), where education and training become blurred and 'students are increasingly guided through their studies in ways that erode intellectual integrity' (2013:2). As Gurnam Singh and Stephen Cowden (2013) state:

'The apparent freedom that students once enjoyed is looked upon with an indulgent nostalgia, and it is seen to be only right that this now be displaced with an appropriately hardnosed utilitarian approach to education where the student's first and foremost priority is to get a job in an increasingly competitive and ruthless employment market' (2013:1).

Furthermore, Peer Illner (2011) points out that:

‘With the complete subsumption of learning and teaching under capital, education loses its quality of in-depth immersion as it becomes tightly measured and utilitarian’ (2011:68).

Relevant here is the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970), who argued that to overcome alienation, emotions and intellect must be able to dialogue with one another instead of being separated as they are in the neo-liberal context. A predominantly market-orientated education can prevent people from creating and engaging in the spaces of critical thought that pay attention to such relations. Many writers now argue that the very mechanisms of knowledge production and performance within the academy appear to be irrevocably changed by consumer ethics (Kelly and Burrows 2011) and the language of managerialism in form of quality, value, measurement and choice. Such indicators assume that humans are rational beings and deny the complexity of conscious and unconscious affective experiences. However, Diane Reay et al (2005), commenting on their study of choice in terms of social class, race and gender in university life, argue that individuals are not rational actors, but that students at ‘elite’ institutions may be better placed to take advantage of such a conceptualisation:

‘We found little evidence of the consumer rationalism that predominates in official texts. There were some students who could be described as active researchers, especially at the two private schools, but many relied on serendipity and intuition’ (2005:159).

The primary motivation for my thesis came from a collaborative endeavour between staff and students at Woodlands in an attempt to explore and potentially resist the increasing metricisation of higher education through measurements such as – particularly in relation to undergraduate students - the NSS (National Student Survey), or satisfaction surveys relating to students in general, that designate students as consumers and restructure the relationships between students and staff in the university. Times are changing in higher education with many developments underway and his research for this project arose at a particular political and ‘critical’ moment (Thomson et al 2002) in university life, with the assertion of fees of up to £9000 a year for undergraduate study by the Coalition Government and the contention that ensued.

This critical moment continues into the present day and, at the time of writing, despite the neo-liberal model of higher education continuing to dictate the field, there have been significant counteractions including student protests at the University of Sussex (2013) and the University of Warwick (2013). The latter focused entirely on the broader issues of marketisation and privatisation in higher education and is viewed as evidence that students and academics are becoming increasingly active in demanding dialogue on change and a reappraisal of the place and purpose of the university in society. There are also a wide range of challenges to the competitive market-orientated model of higher education, for instance the Free University movements (both free from the market and free for students to learn) and Occupy London initiatives (such as Tent City University). Likewise, some academics are working against the audit culture of UK universities and the 'impact agenda' that requires the evidencing of the value of research in terms of its impact on policy or the economy. Les Back's online academic diary asserts a form of scholarship and publishing outside of the remit of 'assessment' and 'impact' drives.

In an environment that is increasingly defined by the global marketplace and the compression of space, time, movement and place (Bauman 2000) as linked to the capitalist economy (Harvey 1991) and increasingly subject to surveillance (Beck 1992), I aim to give attention to alternative or marginalised discourses of student experience and ways of understanding that 'haunt' (Gordon 1996) higher education institutions but that are lost or are not necessarily encountered by most current research strategies, such as the NSS. Drawing from Gordon (1996) and her notion of traces as 'haunting', I work creatively and collaboratively where possible in order to attentively unearth and listen to lived fragments as an attempt at a different (not non-reductionist: all representation is misrepresentation, Tufte 2006) valuing of student lives.

From this perspective, I am especially interested in the materiality and embodied sense of students' lives (as seen through the lenses of affect and time) and how this relates to current research that focuses more explicitly on 'quality' and 'satisfaction' (Collini 2011). This research is concerned with questions such as: how can 'slow' (Law 2004) spaces, those capable of attending to a complex diversity of manifestations of student life, be opened up in the academy and understood in relation to differing temporalities? What implications do marginalised 'traces' (Gordon 1996) of experience have for the way that education is valued and measured? What are the consequences of the equation and slippage between 'happiness' and 'satisfaction' in social policy and public discourses (Collini 2011)?

Following Shumar (2004), I have approached different theoretical models as partial as opposed to antagonistic and as representing diverse aspects of a 'circuit of cultural production'. I argue that these models are not only 'incomplete' but they are often engaging with (and creating) different 'realities' that might (or might not) cohere to give the impression of a singular subject/object (Law 2004, Mol 2002). In recognising the multiplicity of the cultural production of 'student experience', I also recognise that my methodological approach is implicated within the same system and is therefore also performative (Gunaratnam 2003).

'Methods not only describe', John Law (2004:5) has argued, '[they] also help to produce the reality they understand'. To a large extent I agree with Law (2004) in this respect and my way through the issues has been to employ a reflexive and situated methodology that does not polarise different ways of knowing but, instead, aims to recognise the ways in which different knowledges and discourses 'hang together'. Judith Aldridge (1993) argues, especially in relation to quantitative research writing, that:

'A host of rhetorical procedures are required to disentangle in writing the producer and the production of knowledge from the product. The simplistic epistemological ideas assumed in such writing actually hinge on complex writing conventions that 'textually disembod[y]' the knowledge contained from its time, place and person of production. In other words, the production and the producer of knowledge are systematically removed from the rich and diverse experience of the research process' (1993:54).

It is my intention to embed the process of research within the writing of it and much of this thesis has come 'alive' in the writing process. This contributes to 'Live Sociology' (discussed in the Methods section, Chapter Three), particularly as inaugurated at Goldsmiths, University of London, which uses experimental methods and mindful listening to capture the texture and ambivalences of social life as opposed to presenting the world as flat and two-dimensional (Back 2007). The desire is that this counteracts the encroaching sense of science as a service industry discussed by Helen Verran (2012), where data are collected and presented as straightforward and unambiguous factual representations of an uncritical notion of 'experience' that can be captured and made visible. By applying notions of Live Sociology and Inventive Methods, as discussed below, to student experience, I hope to develop new ways of understanding and thinking about this issue.

Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (2012:2) discuss inventive methods, as related to 'Live Sociology' through their attention to a dynamic social life, that investigate the 'open-endedness' and 'the happening of the social world - its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness'. It is this spirit of exploring the indeterminate that I follow in this thesis. Back (2007), following Burawoy (2005), extends the notion of Live Sociology to argue for a public sociology that transcends the 'academy' and connects with and intervenes in debates and issues that are of public concern: 'if methods are to be inventive, they should not leave [the] problem untouched' (Lury and Wakefield 2012:3).

Central to this idea is the use of a 'sociological imagination' (Mills 2000) that applies a critical appraisal to public issues and aspires to create pathways for change. This current project is interesting in this respect by being both within the academy and reflecting public concern: through an engagement with contemporary issues within higher education and by a process of situated working, both geographically and in terms of identity locations, I aim to create a space within the university to engage with a visible and public sociology. In doing so it has been essential to remember that, according to Lury and Wakeford (2012):

'A device or method is never able to operate in isolation, since it is always in relations that are themselves always being reconfigured...' (2012:8).

Configurations or assemblages of methods are situationally specific practices that produce particular understandings dependent upon the relational elements of the situation in which they are employed. This means that although it is possible to apply methods flexibly and whilst they can be introduced into new contexts, transformations will inevitably occur when doing so. Lury and Wakeford (2012) state that:

'That an inventive method can make a difference is linked to the way in which it makes itself, and in this making produces relations beyond itself' (2012:12).

To this end, a consideration of the multiple temporalities embedded in my methods has been essential to my approach. Although I do not specifically discuss walking as a method (see Pink 2008, Ingold 2000 or De Certeau 2000 for this), this research was largely conducted on foot and walking became an integral part of the process. I walked around searching for participants, putting up notices, keeping appointments with people and collecting responses. I walked alone and I walked with others. I walked along established paths within the university but I also walked in a way that created a unique relationship between the institution and my interactions with it and as I attempted to fashion a

sociological understanding of student experience I found myself also building personal bodily and affective connections with the site of research.

Resonating with De Certeau (2000) and writing about the 'desire paths' or 'footpaths of least resistance' that become etched into the 'edgelands' of urban towns and cities by walkers in their defiance of the decisions made by town-planners, Symmons-Roberts and Farelly (2011) comment that 'these are the kind of paths that begin over time, imperceptibly, gathering definition as people slowly recognise the footfall of their peers' (2011: unpag). As I walked around the university, simultaneously moving through the sociological literature, I forged my own 'desire paths' and the presentation of this thesis, as an exploratory and open-ended endeavour, is very much a reflection of these.

A Brief Background to Post-1945 Higher Education in the UK

'Educational practice and its theory can never be neutral. The relationship between practice and theory in an education directed toward emancipation is one thing, but quite another in an education for domestication.' (Paulo Freire 1970:12)

In what follows I will provide a context for this thesis in terms of the relevant background to the history of higher education. In order to do this it has been necessary to narrow the focus specifically to post-1945 higher education as it relates to students and 'student experience'. This concentrates particularly on the often contentious issues of funding and increasing participation in university life and the successive Government policies that have seen a move away from the elite to a general university education and a public to a privately funded model of participation.

Smart (2002:43) observes that although the idea of the university has a long history, it has recently lost its relatively protected status as it, too, has become subject to the dual processes of economic and cultural transformation. With these changes have emerged fierce debates regarding the place of education as a 'public good' (Davis 2011) and, related to this, much political contention focuses on the affiliated issues of funding and participation in higher education. Peer Ilner (2011) writes that:

'The liberal faith in education for the sake of intellectual nourishment was increasingly replaced by the neo-liberal creed that academic excellence is best expressed through success on the market' (2011:68).

Mary Evans (2004) conceptualises this as a hollowing out of morality from higher education for the sake of market-orientated practices that posit education to be based on economic criteria and indexes of consumption. This then contrasts with many classic positions regarding the purpose of higher education in society, for instance John Henry (Cardinal) Newman's (1852) often quoted position regarding education as a public good:

'If I had to choose between a so-called university, which dispensed with residence and a tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a university which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years, and then sent them away that the University of Oxford is said to have done some sixty years since, if I were asked which of these two methods was the better discipline of the intellect ... I have no hesitation in giving preference to that university which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun' (1852:232).

Newman's idea of the university suggests that a 'good' education is based on the intellect: civilization is developed through an unhurried engagement with classical texts and individuals become wiser as a result (Walsh 2003). Following this, universities should not be about vocational training and should have no ties to the industrial economy or the workplace. However, despite the idealism of this position, universities have been historically elitist and dominated by Oxbridge. Although Newman (1852) might argue against contemporary mass-education, Cooper (2004) asserts that it is unlikely that it would be beneficial to return to the highly exclusive institutions of the past, thereby highlighting the tensions between increased participation, funding and the idea of a public university.

In the 60 years between 1945 and 2005 (partly due to the Education Act 1944 and subsequent legislation and commissioning that attempted to create a 'parity of esteem' for individuals, and also because of the inclusion of polytechnics within the university process in 1992), student numbers in higher education increased by over 350 000 (Tight 2009:25) - especially noticeable in the arts and humanities - and the state quickly began to examine what it was receiving 'in return' for this investment. Commentators debated whether 'more means worse' (Amis 1992) or 'more means different' (Ball 1990 in Tight 2009:188) and how to fund these changes became a major issue for successive governments.

Nevertheless, despite the dramatic increase in university students and the move from the elite to a mass system of education, it is not necessarily the case that an equality of access

to university existed: age, ethnicity, class and gender issues have all been demonstrated as key markers affecting an individual's chances of participating in higher learning and the type of higher education she or he takes part in. Reay et al (2005) write that:

'In contemporary Britain, within the transition from elite to mass higher education, a process of complex stratification and differentiation of HEIs has been created, replacing an earlier university system underpinned by relatively straightforward class-based inclusion and exclusion' (2005:159).

Watson et al (2009) argue that although participation has increased, this has mainly come from the 18 - 21 year old middle-class contingent of students. Egerton and Halsey (1993) focus on social class and argue that inequality on this dimension persists in higher education. Likewise the Hughes Report (2011) - compiled in the context of proposed increased fees for undergraduate study and examining unequal aspiration for and access to higher education from primary school age - highlighted the distribution of university places according to the social background of students. During this period there have also been other alterations in the student cohort in higher education. For instance, Brennan et al (2000) argue that there is a progressive preference for full-time students (particularly working-class students) to actually be studying part-time while undertaking extended hours in often almost full-time paid employment. In addition, students are increasingly enrolled on courses that are part-time (Richardson and Skinner 1992), although this now seems to be dramatically changing with the introduction of higher fees and there has been a significant recent decrease in part-time student numbers (National Union of Students 2013).

Furthermore, there is an encroaching globalisation of higher education, as increasing numbers of students leave their home countries to study at universities abroad. It is anticipated that by within the next seven years there will be around seven million students attending university courses away from their home country (Althach et al 2009), partly facilitated by regulation practices that occur beyond nation states, such as the Bologna Process, originating in the European Higher Education Area in 2010 and intended to ensure the commensurability of standards in higher education across participating European countries (including the UK).

These changes have all led to a heterogeneous student population in UK higher education that has diverse entry qualifications, previous experiences, abilities and personal circumstances. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) suggest that this increasing heterogeneity

of the student body has extreme consequences for research into 'student experience'. Although limited studies have been undertaken into the construct of student experience in the light of progressive diversity, it seems plausible to suggest that the notion of a single and universal student experience is not useful (and probably never was), as institutions must expect to deal with a broad base of needs, differences and expectations of university life amongst students. Ramsden (2008) writes that:

'Over the past twenty years our student population has become large and diverse. The idea of a single experience or set of expectations has no meaning. Higher education in this country is no longer dominated by 18 to 21 year olds living on campus, studying full time, attending classes, enjoying a social life dominated by their colleagues, and being taught by a privileged academic elite. Large numbers of students work long hours in paid jobs, study off-campus or in the workplace, learn in flexible ways that involve networked technologies as well as face to face teaching, live at home, and commute to university. Most belong to social networks that reach far beyond higher education...' (2008:2).

In terms of providing funding for the escalating number of students entering higher education since WWII, the Anderson Committee (1960) recommended that all full-time university students receive a means-tested maintenance grant, suggesting that education at this time was viewed as being a public good. This was supported by the Robbins Committee (1960), which asserted that:

'Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so...' (Tight 2009:67).

In addition to the government funding of higher education students, at this time the University Grants Commission (UGC), which had been established in 1919, was still in place and it acted as a 'buffer' between universities and the state, preserving their independence (Tight 2009:25). However, the rise of neo-liberalism and private-sector market practices within the public sector in the 1980s has impacted on all areas of university life. The UGC established more selective research funding practices and this led directly to the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1985/6, then again in 1989 and then every five or six years subsequently. During this period the UGC was also replaced by the Universities Funding Council (UFC), exposing universities to market forces (Tight 2009:78) and signalling a monumental transition in the relationship between government and the universities.

Simultaneously, student grants were being reconsidered and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was established to assess teaching provision (later superseded by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 1997). Management practices were scrutinised by the Jarratt Report (1985) and found to be deficient, leading to the rapid introduction of performance measures and tests. The Dearing Report of 1997 helped to legitimate a significant change in student funding as it recommended that:

‘The costs of higher education should be shared among those who benefit from it. We have concluded that those with higher education qualification are the main beneficiaries, through improved employment prospects and pay. As a consequence, we suggest that graduates in work should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in the future’ (NCIHE 1997b:28-29 in Tight 2009:86).

However, this report did not go as far as recent changes have, and top-up fees were introduced, which still allowed for the retention of the idea of education as a public good through public funding. Nevertheless, at this time students were increasingly viewed as consumers (the Jarratt Report of 1985 was one of the first sources to make such an explicit reference). The sense of students as ‘consumers’ was then further supported by The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and the subsequent Charter (Gorard and Rees 2002), which fundamentally altered the relationship between students and higher education institutions and preceded the development of a large number of measures to gauge their ‘satisfaction’ (see below).

Managerialism in Higher Education

The Coalition Government, in 2010, proposed the capping of fees at £9000, a move that had not been mentioned by either party pre-election and had been staunchly opposed by the Liberal Democrats. Many Vice Chancellors saw this as an essential aid to endure the financial crisis with as little damage as possible (Singh and Cowden 2013) but it also led to a profound ideological change in the increasing marketization of university life, a move that allowed universities to be placed in direct competition with for-profit organisations (Holmwood 2011:4) and pointed to students as ‘consumers’ with ‘choices’ (paradoxically at the same time that the University and College Union found that the range of degree courses on offer had actually been cut for reasons previously mentioned).

Higher education in the UK is therefore being (re)-shaped through the increasing adoption of practices and economic changes drawn from the process of managerialism (Currie and Vidovich 2011). Here, managerialism is defined according to the application by the public sector of various types of forms, knowledge and values that are typically drawn from the private sector (Benckendorff et al 2009). Nevertheless, what has been termed 'managerialism' is often integrated with more traditional educational practices - such as peer review - in a complex system that Rosemary Deem (1998) has termed 'hybridisation' and which often leads to tensions and conflicts, for instance between academic freedom and rationalist managerial concerns (Deem 1998).

The use of managerialism in higher education - which it is important to remember may take many different forms; for instance, Deem (1998) distinguishes between 'hard' and 'soft' managerialism in education and the ways in which it can be gendered - has been largely driven by the range of factors discussed above, such as increased competition for students between institutions, demands for greater economic accountability, the internationalisation of higher education, privatisation of universities, and importantly reduced levels of Government funding.

Following the opening up of higher education as a mass system and consistent with restrictions in funding and market priorities, universities are increasingly pressurised to make limited financial resources stretch further (Deem 1998). Part of this pressure has been in terms of achieving adequate student numbers and ensuring against student attrition, which has frequently involved the development of sophisticated marketing and recruitment activities where universities create 'brands' for themselves. The NSS responses and results or other measures of student satisfaction therefore become essential tools through which universities can differentiate their unique image and brand from those of other institutions; in this way the NSS becomes not only a measure of satisfaction but it also acts to determine the student intake and also the quantity of funding received by universities (Benckendorff et al 2009).

Peer Illner (2011), following David Harvey (1991) on spatial-temporal factors in social life, writes that introducing the logic of profit and markets into university life changes the experience of time and space and makes it increasingly difficult for individuals (Illner is particularly referring to academics and critical thought) to engage with spaces that are not subject to instrumental economic calculation. However, these changes to higher education have not occurred without resistance and 2010 and 2011 saw protests from students, staff

and others interested in preserving a sense of the 'public good' in education (Freedman 2011:7). In some senses this seemed to be a rediscovery of the radical nature of learning from the 1960s and 1970s although, as Alberto Toscano (2011) points out, 'the 'mass university' of the 1960s and 1970s is not the corporate university of today' (2011:81) and the power relationships and struggles are very different; for instance, it is argued that there is now an increased polarisation between students and staff due to the consumer rhetoric in contemporary higher education.

Claire Le Play (2008) suggests that students are less politically involved now than they were in Britain in the 1970s or Paris in May 1968: 'the ideological battles of the late sixties are over and have been replaced by identity battles' (Delanty 2000 in Le Play 2008:8). In a sector increasingly characterised by competition, diversity and division, battles are fought according to individual needs. Despite this, there are examples of fierce challenges to the neo-liberal model of education that has been dictating the field. As discussed previously, Sussex and Warwick have recently held student protests, generating a different level of sociality to that of instrumental capitalism and creating the spaces that Peer Illner (2011) argues it is increasingly difficult to find. The study university is also intricately involved in this climate.

Shumar (2004) argues that there are some positive aspects to the commodification of HEIs as it has opened up universities to new markets and products so they are not as elitist as they once were as they bring in new groups of students to expand their consumer base. However, on a more negative note, areas of study are established and discontinued depending on the 'market' and academic power and influence has been greatly modified with the state and the market taking a much more active and interventionist role than it did in the past. These factors have led Ritzer (1998) to propose the 'McUniversity' of mass participation, consumerism and homogenised standards (Hayes and Wynyard 2002), which seems to be far away from Newman's (1852) classical notion of education as a public good. It is these issues that have led to the recent 'crisis' (Davis 2011) and mobilisations in higher education, forming the conditions in which students themselves seem to have been endlessly measured and canvassed but simultaneously overlooked (Batchelor 2008). This is the context in which this research is conducted.

During the period discussed above, there have also been fundamental changes in the technologies of education, especially in relation to the Internet and online learning. The Internet dates back to the 1960s but it became widely used in the 1990s and in 2012 more

than one third of the world's population was 'online'. Whilst some argue that the Internet has increased the potential for collaborative working, others bemoan a loss of face to face contact (for instance, Putnam 2001). In higher education there has been an increasing use of online education, including the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), such as the upcoming FutureLearn in the UK, with the Open University as a major shareholder (showing a change of ethos from the OU's original philosophy expressing the education of non-traditional students to the contemporary pursuit of profits).

These courses, offered by a number of high-profile HEIs, are distance-based learning and typically do not charge tuition fees; in return for signing up to a course students study a syllabus and receive credits on completion although it is not currently widely possible to transfer these credits to a recognised higher qualification, at least not without paying to do so. Some of these courses, such as MITx, were developed specifically as a response to the increasing commercialisation of higher education. The goal of the MOOC is often not to merely replicate the traditional experience of higher education (institutions such as The Open University already attempt to this via distance or blended learning), but to redefine the understanding of higher education in terms of connectivist principles of learning based on openness, autonomy, collaboration and more lateral relationships.

Following this discussion of the background to higher education it becomes clear that issues of 'student experience' cannot be considered as simple and one-dimensional. The place of students in higher education is a complex issue mediated by political practices, policy, historical and psychosocial factors; there can be no one 'student experience' but it can instead be usefully considered as a 'hybrid object', produced and contested as it passes through different sites. It is the aim of this project to interweave these varying factors in order to explore a more porous, relational, complex and embodied sense of student experience.

Quality in Higher Education

'Assessment measures permit the easy conflation of what is with what ought to be, of what normal is in the statistical and moral sense' (Nelson-Espeland and Saunderson 2007:36)

Quality has always been important to higher education as an explicit and implicit standard through which to endorse the accomplishments of students; without such a measure the qualifications achieved would be worthless. However, quality in its contemporary sense

became prominent in higher education as the system changed from an elite establishment to a system of mass education, but one that remained concerned to retain the prestige and standards of its former incarnation. This meant that 'quality' was initially quite simply equated with the maintenance of 'standards' in higher education (Fraser 1993). However, there is increasing discussion of the way that quality and the measures associated with it are moving beyond the sense of merely upholding standards and taking on deeper, performative, meanings within higher education (Evans 2004, Burrows 2012).

Despite the importance of the idea of quality to contemporary higher education, there is no singular unifying model to account for this dimension and no universally agreed way to measure it. Historically, the academic community could be considered as being relatively autonomous and universities relied on democratic governance and collective decision-making amongst academics in order to determine the 'quality' of degree programs. This was reflected in the collegial management approach (Deem 1998), where academics were largely responsible for determining quality of degree programmes and assessments through their own decision making practices and expert knowledge of their subject areas (the internal control of quality, as discussed by Harvey and Green 1993).

However, in a system of mass education characterised by funding squeezes, there is increasing emphasis on HEIs being cost-effective and accountable to both the Government and to the public. Consequently, universities have needed to adopt a greater degree of management control and external measures (as opposed to internal measures, Harvey and Green 1993) of quality assurance, which more closely reflect the approach of managerialism discussed by Currie and Vidovich (2011, above). However, at the same time this has not been a unidirectional adoption and private enterprise has increasingly used the language of education with mentoring, collaboration and peer review as practised in the university (The Edu Factory Collective 2011).

The idea of externally measuring quality was first used in industry and manufacturing where it referred to products having no variability or 'zero defects' (see Philip Crosby's (1979) work 'Quality is Free'). When moving to the service sector, quality has become less defined by the actual output or product and more defined by customer satisfaction, representing a subtle slippage from its origin. With students being viewed as the principle customers of higher education, from this perspective, a degree programme considered to be high quality would be one associated with positive measures of student satisfaction, for instance as indicated by NSS scores.

Nevertheless, within a service sector such as higher education, customers (students) are not the only stakeholders and so the term quality is multi-dimensional and relative, meaning that different groups of people may consider quality in higher education to mean very different things: for instance, a course may be high in quality according to students but low in quality according to lecturers. Reflecting on this, Kerr (2001) introduced the concept of the 'multiversity' to convey the sense of an organisation with many roles and stakeholders in both a national and global context and therefore requiring a multiple approach to quality. The idea of quality then becomes something with discrete parts that can be assessed separately: for instance, the quality of research is held as distinct from that of teaching or student experience.

In terms of the assessment of quality, once it is decided what is going to be measured 'performance indicators' are developed; the NSS is one example of a performance indicator. Such performance indicators can be viewed as being able to create accountability and transparency, provide public information, make comparisons, set benchmarks, and act as a way in which the institution can manage itself and improve. However, one risk with performance indicators is that they can become more than merely a way for an institution to manage itself or be accountable: they can be used to control an institution by using them as a ranking device, to allocate esteem and funding differently (Burrows 2012 calls this 'quantified control') whilst revealing very little about the practices and processes that lead to this rating or that could contribute to improvement.

Helen Verran (2012) discusses this 'double force' of numerical indicators that can both order and also represent that order as value in an apparently neutral way. In other words, a flat and two-dimensional image of 'quality' is created, reified and used to shape institutions, often without revealing the mechanisms involved in the creation of the metric. There is, therefore, a danger of performance indicators for 'quality' taking over and diverting institutions from their previous values and purposes as they struggle to compete for funding based on league table positions: Westerheijden et al (1994) write that centralised quality assessment may impede the long-term quality of education and research for this reason.

Value in Higher Education

'Questions of ... value should not and cannot be assigned to the sociological past'
(Adkins and Lury 2011:5)

Discussions of quality in higher education are also linked to discussions of value. In order to define and operationalize quality so that it can be measured it is necessary to consider what it is that is valued about higher education. However, value, like quality, is a slippery term: it is not an objective standard but it depends on who is doing the valuing and for what purpose. For instance, it is argued that higher education is no longer good value from a student perspective, as fees increase and the prospects of obtaining a good job on the basis of having a degree decrease, implying that the value of university from the position of students is solely economic.

However, this represents a specific sense of 'value' in terms of education being about access to the labour market. There are other aspects to value, perhaps things that cannot be so easily measured, such as the transformative value of higher education (Freire 1970). Singh and Cowden (2013:2) discuss HEIs as giving 'students the opportunity to be intellectually provoked, pushed and challenged'. This is a notion of value that may get overlooked when examining student experience since 'challenge', 'provocation' and 'transformation' seems to be more difficult to quantify than employment statistics or 'satisfaction' may be.

Zygmunt Bauman (2005) argues that there is a disparity between the culture of education and the values of liquid modernity. Whilst education could be argued to embody invariant values (such as those discussed previously by Cardinal Newman, 1852), the contemporary age is characterised by instant gratification and constant change and movement. For Bauman, the problem is that education is increasingly moving towards such values and becoming a commodity as opposed to being mediated by dialogue, thereby reifying economic value and marginalising alternative values.

Mary Evans (2004:18) also discusses this in terms of the 'lost moral purpose' of teaching following the explicit economic model of higher education and the value placed on activities relevant to the labour market and the language of efficiency and competition. Likewise, Roger Burrows (2012) argues that a flattening out of value has occurred and what were previously distinct types of value – academic value, artistic value, monetary value – have become consolidated into a single economic criterion that can be quantified and

measured. Burrows (2012) links this consummation, especially in relation to the valuing and measurement of academics in academia, to 'a deep, affective, somatic crisis that threatens to overwhelm us' (2012: upag).

Burrows makes an alternative reading of the issue of value in higher education: drawing on Foucault he argues that the contemporary audit culture is not so much a result of the marketization of public services (as has been asserted in this chapter), but the State's need to justify itself economically by imitating the market, which provides a deeper reading of market control of higher education. Burrows then suggests that the performative nature of such metric assemblages goes beyond mere auditing and comes to characterise the 'structure of feeling' of academic life. Burrows (2012) discusses the 'H-Index' for academics – a combination of the number of papers written plus their quality – to show how metrics have become reified and used not only to refer to 'academic value' but to actually stand for and become what is valued about individual academics.

For instance, Nelson-Espeland and Saunder (2007) conducted interviews with law school administrators, faculty and staff concerning the media rankings of law schools in the USA. They showed how these rankings became reactive in the sense of administrators drawing upon them when defining goals, recruiting faculty and admitting students. One Dean who participated in the research commented that:

'Rankings are always in the back of everybody's head. With every issue that comes up, we have to ask, 'How is this impacting our ranking?'' (2007: uppag).

In this way, rankings create perceptions about law schools and people alter their behaviour and attitudes accordingly. The authors argue that stark increases of spending on scholarships and marketing in law schools exemplify how rankings lead to a calculated redistribution of resources so that institutions can optimise their rank. Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of reactivity discussed by Nelson-Espeland and Saunder is the process of 'gaming', which concerns:

'Manipulating rules and numbers in ways that are unconnected to, or even undermine, the motivation behind them. Gaming is about managing appearances and involves efforts to improve ranking factors without improving the characteristics the factors are designed to measure' (2007: unpag).

One example given is law schools counting as employed graduates with any job, even non-legal jobs, or concentrating funds on marketing instead of teaching. Following such

strategies, law schools are gradually transformed into institutions that begin to appear similar to the criteria that are used to construct the rankings in the first place. This shows how, in order to remain useful, measures must be continually updated to capture other aspects of performance. It also illuminates the way that the power of public measures is not the obvious power of 'elites' but a more dispersed, polysemic power that nonetheless has the capacity to change the people and places that it is applied to (see Foucault 1977 for a discussion of power as insidious).

Burrows (2012) gives examples of a number of different metrics that are often collapsed together and read as 'value' in UK higher education (described as commensuration by Nelson-Espeland and Saunderson); these include: league tables, the NSS, quantitative and qualitative measures of teaching quality, and research assessments (the RAE - Research Assessment Exercise - and the REF - Research Excellence Framework). He links this to affect, arguing that the growth of certain emotional responses amongst academics is correlated with the 'autonomization' and metricisation of the academy:

'In essence academic metric assemblages are at the cusp of being transformed from a set of measures able to mimic market processes to ones that are able to enact market processes ... Academic value is, essentially, becoming monetized, and as this happens academic values are becoming transformed. This is the source of our discomfort' (2012: unpag).

Therefore, both quality and value have become important concepts in contemporary higher education. These issues have been operationalized in various ways and attempts have been made to measure them across various dimensions, leading to reactive responses from institutions and individuals and affective consequences for the participants of higher education. This thesis is specifically concerned with the way that student experience is measured, typically in terms of the NSS or other satisfaction surveys, and I will now examine this issue in more depth.

Measurement in Higher Education

'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure' (Strathern 1996:4)

Measurement can be considered to be the process through which the dimensions of quality and value are objectified and turned into a transactional currency, or ranked (the use of numbers as cardinals as opposed to ordinals, according to Verran 2012). Current

measurement in higher education is bound up with the sense that social 'facts' are 'things' that can be discovered, controlled and changed (going back to Durkheim 1897/2002). Although measurement is intended as a form of checking and promoting 'quality', from certain perspectives it is linked with a lowering of quality in terms of a loss of 'deep immersion' through a package conception of knowledge (Illner 2011).

Peer Illner (2011) writes about the changes to teaching due to the desire for measurement in terms of an exam-focused package presentation as opposed to creative and dynamic conception of knowledge. This remodelling into 'bite-size' chunks then allows the abstract knowledge to be calibrated and ranked. Intellectual development and academic interest then becomes a form of skills training and exam preparation. For instance, a degree programme is standardised and broken down into 360 credit points at various levels for ease of measurement, and these points are further demarcated into modules with specific or generic indicative learning outcomes as specified by The QAA.

Massimo De Angelis and David Harvie (2009), in contrast to Hardt and Negri who celebrate the inability to measure immaterial labour, discuss the spread of capitalist production beyond factories to the measurement of increasingly immaterial, co-operative and collective forms of labour, including information and affects, as exemplified for the authors in the performance of academic work. De Angelis and Harvie describe the various measures of academic labour in higher education that form a 'disciplinary system' as quantification, standardisation or policing and refer to the 'struggle over measure' currently engulfing the university, with conformity and resistances being played out at the micro level. Measure occurs at institutional, national and international level as activities are ordered and ranked with the aim of standardisation and comparison.

De Angelis and Harvie frame this discussion in terms of diachronic and synchronic processes. The former reduce labour time for the production of ideas (academic papers or research) and affects (student satisfaction) due to efficiency savings, made possible by the latter, the commensuration of heterogeneous practices through an over-simplified comparison of their constituent parts. Therefore, capital helps to shape the form of immaterial labour in a parallel process to the way it shapes material labour. The Edu Factory Collective (2011) writes about the 'system of measure' in higher education as:

'A range of increasingly elaborate techniques that the private and public bodies that manage universities introduce to attempt to quantify the quality, impact and value of the work their employees perform...' (2011:3).

It is suggested that this system of measure opposes any notion of the common production of knowledge, which cannot be measured, and instead acts a heterogeneous assemblage of techniques that quantify, order, homogenise and individualise knowledge production. In addition, such systems of measure coincide with other assemblages such as immigration control or the labour market, thereby uniting university governance within broader socio-political dynamics. This abstract measurement has crept into student and academic experience and, to some extent, become constitutive of it (Burrows 2012). Kelly and Burrows (2011) discuss the increasing use of measurement in universities in the UK in the context of the marketization of higher education. They focus on the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – now superseded by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – as designed to measure the ‘quality’ of the research output at each institution in order to determine the allocation of state funding, thereby creating a direct linkage between the necessity for measurement and monetary value.

As mentioned previously and in regard to Nelson-Espeland and Saunder (2007), Kelly and Burrows (2011) argue that these metrics are performative: the measurements actively construct and define university life, in part through funding decisions based on their results but also due to institutional ‘game playing’ as universities attempt to increase their funding and status through incremental manipulations of their structures in line with positive RAE/REF requirements. It has been suggested that it is these strategies that led to the closure of what was considered by students and staff to be the successful Philosophy Departments at Middlesex University and Kings College in 2010, as they apparently made ‘no measureable contribution’ to the institutions (Walton 2011:21).

Following Kelly and Burrows (2011) it seems that an exponential and self-perpetuating culture of measurement exists, tied to increased market-involvement and the subsequent necessity for accountability in higher education that both determines and creates not only the structural but also the everyday fabric of university life. How teachers teach (QAA), what disciplines students can study (RAE/REF) and the pace of the working day (The Transparency Review and Time Allocation Surveys, which aim to provide information on the costs of activities carried out by universities) are all aspects that are, at least in part, determined by a culture of consumerism and the associated instruments used for measurement.

Within this approach, data are treated as something to be gathered, selected, crunched and constructed and at the end of this process they have an autonomous ‘public life’ (Kelly and

Burrows 2011:11). This public life is enacted in terms of research ratings, funding decisions and league tables, which lead to further changes and regulations, always orientated towards the (short-term) future, in terms of gaining or losing funding, attracting students (consumers), halting 'inefficiency' and increasing national and international competitiveness.

Of course, it is possible to critique these measurements in terms of their internal and external reliability and validity: Goldstein and Spiegelhalter (1996) discuss sampling and data problems as potential problems for performance indicators of 'quality' in education and health. However, there is also a deeper sense in the work of Kelly and Burrows (2011) that suggests a mere tinkering with the instruments of measurement in order to make them somehow 'reliable' or 'valid' is insufficient; what is necessary is a complete rethinking of a system in which departments are opened or closed or students are 'won' or 'lost' on the basis of consumer-style staff-student consultation forms and institutional 'tick-boxing'. Information from a variety of these heterogeneous measures, are then frequently collapsed into a single metric in the form of a league table allowing value comparison to be made between institutions and competition to ensue.

Measuring 'Student Experience'

Kelly and Burrows' (2011) analysis is related to the RAE, however a similar set of epistemological and political factors is evident in terms of the impetus to measure student experience. The key national measure of what is termed student 'experience' of higher education is the National Student Survey (NSS), which is incorporated within the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for UK higher education. The NSS has been conducted yearly since 2005 (when universities have had to participate) and it is run by MORI. It comprises a short on-line questionnaire with just over 20 questions and it has scope for qualitative comments.

The NSS aims to gain feedback on courses, contribute to public accountability and aid prospective students in deciding between institutions. It is based on a philosophy of students as consumers with 'rights' and 'choices' (Giroux 2009:113). The NSS applies to all part-time and full-time students in higher education and is mainly aimed at final year students. Burrows (2012) highlights that beginning in 2012 some survey criteria is also available in Key Information Sets that give more in-depth information about issues such as:

‘Contact hours; the mix of assessment methods; costs, fees and financial support; accommodation costs; employment and salary information, such as the destinations of graduates six months after completing their course and, of those in employment, the proportion in managerial/professional jobs; salary data after both 6 months and 40 months after graduation; and so on’ (2012: unpag).

The NSS is split into six analytic scales with 22 questions and an additional scale of ‘overall satisfaction’. The six scales are: teaching and learning; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; and personal development. Students answer the survey by choosing between: not applicable/other; definitely disagree; mostly disagree; neither agree nor disagree; mostly agree; and definitely agree. Respondents are profiled according to the characteristics of the student, the course and the institution they are studying at, which then allows for comparisons to be made between courses, institutions and cohorts over time. In 2012 63% of eligible students returned surveys. An example of NSS questions is detailed in Table 1 below:

NSS questions:

Teaching staff are good at explaining things

Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair

Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices

The course is well organised and is running smoothly

The library resources and services are good enough for my needs

As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems

Table 1: Example NSS Questions

The NSS is mirrored by a plethora of other student satisfaction surveys, which are frequently institution specific (although they are also used to make comparisons between HEIs). In general, the NSS has found student satisfaction to be ‘high’. For example in 2007, 81.4% of full-time students reported course satisfaction (SurrIDGE 2008:2). However, this has not been the case for all measures and assessment and feedback methods have fared particularly poorly with 40% of students being dissatisfied, leading to a variety of initiatives designed to focus on this (Williams and Kane 2008). However, figures have generally been rising and in the latest 2013 survey, 85% of students were satisfied with their degree, 86%

were satisfied with the teaching and 72% were satisfied with the assessment and feedback (HCFCE 2013).

Institutions make structural alterations and students are at least encouraged to make life-changing choices based on the results of the NSS. However, it is not really clear what this consumer satisfaction score is actually measuring. Collini (2011) argues that education should create a sense of 'dissatisfaction' to some extent and, similarly, Fenton (2011) writes that:

'While the National Student Survey gains in importance as the consumer guide to acquiring a degree it is all too easy to see how purchasing power can override pedagogic sense' (2011:105).

Likewise, writers suggest that 'trust' in institutions and academics is eroded by such practices (Onora O'Neill 2013). These commentators argue that 'quality' in education is not reducible to 'likes' and 'dislikes': a consumer-model of 'happiness' does not work for learning. Furthermore, a single metric of 'satisfaction' does not necessarily allow adequate understanding of the processes behind the numbers. This is not to deny that students should not have 'rights', choices or the ability to influence the development of the educational establishments to which they belong, or that institutions should not in some way be accountable to students, or operate according to notions of quality, value and measure.

However, my argument is that the prevailing trend of market-orientated metrics derived from a neo-liberal ethics and based on short-term, future-orientated calibration actualises a distorted image of student life and universities in general that ignores the breadth of 'human experience' (Collini 2011). Here the tension lies within a short-term consumer logic that may not make long-term 'pedagogic sense' (Fuller 2011) and may not, as the 2011 government White Paper claims to do, put 'students at the heart of the system'.

Locating the Thesis: Theoretical Framework

'There is a creeping assumption ... that if we open up higher education to working-class students then we can all become professionals. This is the biggest fiction of all.' (Walkerdine et al 2010 in Reay et al 2005:163)

This chapter has acted to highlight dual yet opposed processes in higher education discourse and practice surrounding students. Since the Second World War student numbers have increased and students are now drawn from more diverse segments of society (although there are still issues with access to university and participation in higher education, see for instance Reay et al 2005). There is currently substantial variation in students' previous learning experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds. However, at the same time as this change has taken place, students have progressively been termed 'consumers' and in a competitive sector keen to control standards and quality, discourses of 'value for money' and 'choice' have become the norm. This sense of the student as an economic consumer has led to the equation of student experience with student satisfaction, the flattening out of actual experience and the silencing of a range of different discourses.

Therefore, despite the emphasis on widening participation, which could be taken to suggest a sense of collectivity in education (following the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and the transformative quality that education can have), the recent focus in education policy has been on the individual as a consumer where quality equates with satisfaction and value is taken to be qualifications that allow entry to the labour market. Such an approach highlights a tension between education as a public good (Newman) where students are moral actors (Evans 2004) and education as a commodity, where students are rational actors.

The aim of this thesis is to re-embodiment student experience through an exploratory mapping of student lives at one HEI in London, UK. In order to do this I adopt a Kleinian-inspired psychosocial approach to the subject (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) that recognises the often unconscious complexities and inconsistencies of subject positions. I also pay attention to the relational aspects of research in terms of the situated nature of my methods and the performativity of talk about student experience. Following critical feminist perspectives on experience I use the lenses of time and affect to explore the ambivalent and heterogeneous ways that students talk about their university lives as moral, frequently non-rational actors

grappling with the meaning of higher education in a climate that attempts to reduce such issues to the market imperatives of satisfaction and choice.

I have developed a number of multifaceted dimensions of student experience as I noted tensions and oppositions consistently arising within the data. These dimensions include: proximity and distance; temporality and spatiality; affect and disengagement; 'official' value and 'student' value; and satisfaction and happiness. In what follows I move between these dimensions in order to understand the hybrid object of student experience at Woodlands. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that these tensions do not represent polarities or a sense of 'either/or'; what is highlighted by this framework is the ambivalence and complexity surrounding talk about 'experience' and the production of student experience as a hybrid object as it moves through various sites of meaning-making including market-driven assemblages of quality, value and measurement but also local experiences of affect and temporality.

Surveying the Chapters: Looking Ahead

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter draws on previous literature relating to student experience and critical approaches to experience, including feminist perspectives. I will review previous work relating to affect, value and time and I will provide a critical overview of these writings as I begin to develop the theoretical literature that informs this project. I highlight the way that I will combine and connect these diverse areas of the literature in order to work within a coherent framework in the later data analysis chapters of this thesis.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology and Methods

Here I will discuss the methodology and methods that informed this research. I draw from feminism, multi-sited ethnography, and creative and collaborative approaches as framed by my psychosocial approach to the subject. I provide methodological justifications for my choices of research methods – primarily focus groups and 'arts-based' approaches – and I situate myself within the research in terms of being both an 'insider' (as a student at Woodlands) and an 'outsider' (as a researcher), plus at times moving between these positions. I frame this sense of the inside and outside in terms of feminist discussions of

distance and closeness (or intimate distance) and the concept of psychosocial space in the research encounter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Everyday 'Student Time' in Higher Education

This chapter surveys previous literature relating to everyday life and examines the everyday affective experiences of students in terms of the temporal structures, continuities and disjunctures in higher education, pointing to a more complex reading of 'student time' than surveys such as the NSS, which are embedded in ideas of progress, allow for. Arguing against a simply linear conception of 'clock time' in higher education institutions, this chapter highlights the complex, multiple and frequently overlapping rhythms of students' lives, the affective landscape of higher education that is established through such experiences and their ambivalent management by individual students, often according to differential social capital.

CHAPTER FIVE

Virtual Affects

With the spread of economic and educational services and production into the evenings and weekends, as aided by the increasing adoption of virtual communication in higher education, learning is progressively occurring 'on the go' (Kear 2013). This mobility creates the experience of an 'absent presence' (Gergen 2002) or 'intimate distance' in higher education for many students. The current chapter reflects on temporal and spatial (re)-shaping of the topography of higher education and the affective implications of this for students, often according to their differential positioning within the university. Such (re)-shaping is particularly relevant to those students - such as postgraduate students - who may be largely reliant on information technology as a way to contact tutors and peers due to flexible and modular strategies within higher education that create minimal timetabling commitments for students.

CHAPTER SIX

Loneliness, Contact, Labour and Love

This chapter explores alternative ways of talking about and valuing student experience that are not often represented in 'official' measures, such as the NSS or other student 'satisfaction' surveys. Particularly the focus here is on the way that students discussed

affective experiences of loneliness and isolation in terms of face-to-face contact, including relationships with tutors. This chapter also seeks to highlight the various discourses that students use to speak about higher education, including ideas of 'love' and 'collaboration' and also neo-liberal individualism and the 'banking' concept of education (Freire 1970). I will make sense of these affective experiences and apparently competing discourses of university through ideas of the imagined university and 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2006). I also discuss the way that students are differentially situated with regard to experiences of loneliness and isolation and the ways these discourses in the focus groups created relationships of closeness and distance in-situ through the methods employed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Degrees of Separation: Affect and Value in Higher Education

In this chapter I examine the way that separation or isolation from the university is an affective site of student experience that appears to be an inevitable by-product of the emphasis on individual achievement within higher education. However, this affective experience is not typically made explicit but 'haunts' (Gordon 1996) the unconscious of the neoliberal university and has, as will be shown, varying impacts on students according to their differential social and cultural capital. Such impacts include issues such as student 'drop out' but also more subtle outcomes including the erosion of self-confidence and self-esteem. I discuss these issues particularly in relation to the de-synchronisation of intermitting students and postgraduate students from the university and issues of 'fitting in', 'coolness' and diversity in higher education. These experiences illuminate the critical paradoxes and pathologies of the market in higher education that emphasises the disembodied and rational individual whilst marginalising other discourses of student life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Discussion and Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis is an open-ended conclusion where I will summarise my main arguments, reflect on the production of this project and make suggestions for further research that takes forward the ideas presented. My particular focus is on the student as a psychosocial and relational subject with complex, differential and ambivalent experiences of university life that are unlikely to be fully understood through market-driven metrics of higher education that focus on 'satisfaction'.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

'Higher education is conceptualised ... as a sorting machine that selects students according to an implicit social classification and reproduces the same students according to an explicit academic classification, which in reality is very similar to the implicit social classification' (Bathmaker and Thomas 2007:3).

In what follows I contextualise my project by discussing existing research relating to student experience in higher education. I will then move on to evaluating this research in the light of critical perspectives on the development of the term 'student experience' and critical feminist approaches to experience. I will locate and define my key theoretical concepts – including time, affect, and value - and I will map out how I will theorise these in this thesis. This contributes to my overall aim of producing an original cartography of 'student experience' that pays attention to questions of value, measure and affect as traced in time (and space).

'Student Experience': Previous Captures

In the UK at least, one dominant strand of research into student experience is statistical in nature or comprised of short qualitative statements, such as the found in the NSS and other satisfaction surveys. There is also a plethora of action-based research specific to a particular setting and geared towards a certain issue, such as class or gender inequality in university life, or research into participation in higher education and subsequent employment of particular groups of students, including: women students (Pascall and Cox 1993); mature students (Woodley et al 1987); part-time students (Callender et al 2006); disabled students (Fuller et al 2004); those from lower socio-economic groups (Robertson and Hillman 1997); and those who are 'over-educated' (Chevalier and Lindley 2009).

Reflecting on the lack of broadly-based qualitative research into student experience in higher education, Haselgrove (1994:4) argues that the tendency has been to treat students only as 'learners' or 'potential workers' and so a complete sociology of the 'whole person' that considers individuals as separate from the economy of university or the job-market has not been developed or applied to higher education. At a practical level this means that universities may make strategic decisions that do not take account of the qualitative dimensions and complexities of students' experiences whilst at a deeper level the value of student experience is reduced and performed according to market-orientated metrics.

In this chapter, in order to better survey the literature concerning student experience in higher education, I have categorised previous studies into two main groups: perception research (students' perceptions in terms of courses, teaching and learning; this includes 'satisfaction' research); and integration research (the way that social networks impact upon an individuals' experience at university or in the transition experiences for students between previous learning or work and university). This categorisation and review of previous research is not intended to be in any sense exhaustive, but merely provides an indication of the methods used and perspectives adopted in previous studies. In addition, there are also other specific areas of research into student experience, such as online or blended learning, which will be discussed throughout the thesis when relevant. This previous research not only reflects student experience, but also forms part of the apparatus of its construction as a hybrid object.

In relation to 'perception research' and student 'experience' as measureable units, a key study by Bekhradnia et al (2006) surveyed almost 15 000 UK university students and found that on average 92% of lectures were attended and students worked 27.5 hours per week. They also found that students were most concerned with teaching quality as opposed to contact hours and that only 16% believed their course to represent 'poor value for money'. However, these statistics give limited insight into student lives and the reasons behind these figures. Student perception research also includes work by Green et al (1994), who discuss the student satisfaction measurement developed by the Student Satisfaction Research Unit (SSRU) at the University of Central England in terms of it providing institution-wide as opposed to course-specific feedback. Green et al (1994:101) argue that this method differs from conventional measurements as it seeks to democratise the research process by involving students in dialogue and focuses on the 'total student experience'.

The approach was comprised of structured and participative discussions with groups of students with the specific aim of generating student nominated indicators of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction (which was used as a proxy for quality). Lists, ranked in order of priority, were compiled regarding positive and negative experiences. These priorities were then weighted and mapped onto a grid and used as 'quality indicators'. However, these indicators of satisfaction, weightings, mappings and grids are unlikely to capture any sense of the 'total' student experience or the 'whole person' discussed by Haselgrove (1994). Likewise, any psychosocial attention to ambivalence is excluded from such measures. Silver and Silver (1997) critique much of this research regarding the perceptions

of students in higher education, arguing that it relates more to the priorities of the researchers than it does to the students:

‘A great deal of research that sounds as though it is about students is not about students at all. It is about statistics, totals, percentages, based on race or age or social class. The literature answers questions about where students come from – geographically and socially - how many there are in what categories (for example, full-time or part-time), who obtains what degrees, and some of the reasons. Useful as the information is, the end product of the analysis is about higher education and social policy, opportunity and access, and its importance is as data for national and institutional policy making’ (1997:1).

Silver and Silver (1997) go on to write that ‘the strange aspect of the story therefore, is how little research exists on students as ‘real people’’ (1997:2), arguing that institutions that research students do so with the aim of employing this information in some way to meet their own ends. However, despite this assertion, Silver and Silver (1997) seem to do little to counteract this trend in their writing. Similarly, Tight (2009:239) asserts that quantitative studies tend to view students as ‘inputs, subjects and outputs of a higher education system’ but, likewise, fails to offer any alternative to this.

In addition, despite Haselgrove’s (1994:4) assertion of the need for a sociology of the ‘whole person’ in higher education studies, she also goes on to write students out of the research. She comments that ‘the students’ experience is what the whole process is supposed to be about’ but then writes that ‘the structure of this book mirrors the stages of students’ experience of higher education – getting in, being there and moving on’. From my current research it is possible to see that the structure of student experience is not necessarily ‘getting in, being there and moving on’. This may or may not be the experience of some students but, for many, their student life is much less linear and more textured than this allows for. There is also a large volume of research from the USA that focuses on the way that individual students involve themselves within the university and manage the opportunities that higher education affords them; for instance Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) argue that:

‘The impact [of higher education] is a result of the extent to which an individual student exploits the people, programs, facilities, opportunities and experiences that the college makes possible’ (1991:610 - 611).

Much of this literature is psychological in nature, focusing on the way an individual integrates herself into the university (or not), and although it was initially conducted to highlight behaviours that led to academic achievement it does also touch upon the themes of belonging that are explored later within this thesis. Such work also recognises differences amongst students and therefore contrasts with the idea of a universal 'student experience' or Green et al's (1994) 'total student experience'. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) write that:

'Not all students will necessarily benefit to the same extent, or perhaps even in the same direction, from the post-secondary experience' (1991:2).

This type of research focuses most commonly on student integration and forms the body of work that I have termed 'integration research'. Vincent Tinto's (1975) significant work on student integration derives from his key study of factors associated with student attrition. Tinto argues that the level to which a student is 'integrated' within the community of the institution at which she or he is studying will have a determining effect on student retention, success, enjoyment and commitment at all points during the course.

This bears a similarity to Durkheim's study of Suicide (1897/2002) in terms of increased social integration leading to a greater protection from 'dropping out'. For students in higher education, Tinto (1975) suggested that integration is essential to success at university and course completion. There are a number of ways that students can integrate into the university community for Tinto, including: behaviours and activities such as developing friendships with other students; the type and frequency of interaction and relationship with lecturers; and attending or participating in a range of extra-curricular activities or clubs. Subsequent researchers have applied Tinto's (1975) basic model of student integration to more specific circumstances. For instance, the effects of the interaction between students and staff in terms of academic success (Peel 2000) or the dynamics of social life and transitional experiences in the first year of university (Gillespie and Noble 1992). These studies all highlight the way that student integration appears to be essential to positive experiences in higher education, including but not restricted to, academic success.

Moffatt's (1989) research 'Coming of Age in New Jersey', which started as participant observation of student dorms in 'Rutgers', a university in the USA, is a participant observation example of integration research. Moffatt (1989), following Geertz (1973), attempted to 'hang around' with students and capture their natural behaviours and

experiences. He then presented these results to some of his students, who wrote papers discussing them, thereby further increasing the participatory nature of his work. He also used techniques such as asking students to draw personalised campus maps.

Instead of concluding his work, Moffatt (1989) chose for it to 'remain as open as the state of adolescence itself ought to be'. Moffatt (1989) noted that students believed that what happened outside of the classroom was more important in forming their identity than what happened inside of the classroom (with in-class activities being more focused on 'making the grade' than developing real intellectual proficiency), collapsing the traditional distinction between formal 'education' and college 'life' and highlighting the importance of non-market-driven discourses of higher education for students, a point that will be taken up in the data analysis sections of this thesis. Following this, Moffatt (1989) saw students as actively creating communities with one another, which provided them with much of this important formative experience:

'Rutgers students enjoyed much of the fun of college life ... among the 60 other young women and men with whom they happened to share the same level of a college residence hall in any given year. They did not need to form personal groups with these particular youths. The students could have lived anonymously in the dorms, side by side like strangers in a New York apartment house' (1989: unpag).

This is in contrast to Silver and Silver (1997:35), who discuss the 'depersonalisation' of higher education and the loneliness felt by many students when on campus, differences that may be connected to the research methods used and also highlight the multiple manifestations of 'experience'. Similar in approach to Moffatt's (1989) 'experience near' knowledge, Shumar (2004) cites the work of Holland and Eisenhart (1990), who developed intimate relationships with women undergraduate students with the aim of 'making the familiar strange' and being able to make broader claims about the high rate of women students who leave science and maths curriculums in the USA due to narratives of romance. However, strategies such as producing 'experience near' knowledge or developing 'intimate relationships' in order to make more certain claims can also have the effect of justifying the research methods and findings through their foundations in 'experience' or 'intimacy' without questioning the devices that underlie these assertions (in similar ways to the quantitative research reported). Commenting on the quantity and nature of research into student experience, Batchelor (2008) argues that:

'Students are trapped in a paradox: endlessly canvassed and consulted through course quality evaluation questionnaires, it is as if theirs are the voices everyone longs to hear. But the restricted scope of the commercial language of evaluation can have the effect of silencing them' (2008:43).

The personal 'voice' of students is largely omitted in higher education research and policy as students are encouraged to think of themselves in certain - often commercial - ways and other understandings are lost, absented or concealed. As much early feminist research highlights, this absenting can occur in research that claims to be 'experience near' as much as it can in quantitative surveys and all of the above research overlooks the complex and often contradictory nature of experience.

Some of the 'alternative' discourses of student experience examined in this thesis are being discussed in other fields that have tended to be marginalised, especially within market-orientated literature that equates students with consumers. For instance, an increasing number of university students are experiencing mental health problems and these problems are becoming more severe due to a variety of factors including a more diverse student background and financial issues (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011). There is also information suggesting an increase in student suicide rates (National Union of Students 2013). Mental health problems are the most common form of disability at Woodlands (Departmental Student Co-Ordinator Annual Group Project Reports 2013).

Reductions in funding plus increasing student numbers and therefore a higher student to staff ratio may be contributing to this increase in mental health issues amongst the student population (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011). In addition, governmental pressure to increase admissions to higher education amongst students from non-standard backgrounds whilst providing little increase in pastoral support has augmented the problem (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011). This relates to Oliver James' (2008) discussion of the affective consequences of 'selfish capitalism' and a market-driven higher education.

Despite this, research highlights that only a minority of students with mental health problems seek out services, due to the negative judgements surrounding such issues. Quinn et al (2009) discuss the stigma associated with mental health issues in higher education and the reluctance of students to confide in others. Ann Macaskill (2012) describes how only one in 20 students with mental health problems are getting support and assistance (the figure may be even lower for certain groups, such as international students, Tang et al 2012) and found that 23.1% of second year students experience mental health

problems (compared to 17.6% of the UK general population). Macaskill argues that financial pressures combined with higher student numbers making it difficult for students to establish friendship groups along with a higher student to staff ratio meaning that there is relatively less support available from staff are some of the leading factors in the problems that students experience at university. Macaskill writes that:

‘The mental health issue is a largely unacknowledged aspect of widening participation. It seems as if the stressors have increased while the opportunities to develop protective factors declined, putting students more at risk of psychological factors’ (2012:5).

Such research into student mental health problems can appear quite shocking but it highlights the way that alternative discourses of student experience that do not focus on satisfaction are present within higher education. However, such findings and ways of speaking about students appear to be frequently marginalised by the idea of student experience as a straightforward progression from school to university to employment, or as something that can be measured by ‘satisfaction’ scores or altered by increased ‘integration’ within an institution.

Excavating ‘Student Experience’

The phrase ‘student experience’ is now deeply integrated within the language of higher education institutions, especially as contemporarily connected with measures of quality and satisfaction, as discussed in the Introduction (Chapter One). However, a definition of ‘the student experience’ remains elusive and instead the predominant way of discussing this concept is along a dimension of satisfaction and dissatisfaction that is considered to enable comparison across and between institutions, or as an ill-defined ambiguous construct for examining factors such as integration or attrition rates, as discussed above.

A more nuanced understanding of what constitutes the student experience is likely to vary considerably from one university to another due to factors such as institutional location, the specifics of the student cohort and the ‘type’ of university (as mentioned by Pascarella 1985, when discussing the relationship between institutional characteristics and student retention). Therefore, although ‘student experience’ is most commonly presented as a universal concept that is shared by all who study in higher education, the reality is likely to be that it differs greatly according to the institution, the background of the individual and the way these factors interact with one another (Pitkethly and Prosser 2001). This

heterogeneity becomes even more marked when taking into account the way that different actors are likely to view 'student experience', with academic staff being likely to have a view that diverges from management, students and so on, as highlighted in the Introduction (Chapter One) regarding the different stakeholders in higher education.

In terms of the origins of 'student experience' Harvey, Burrows and Green (1992) began using the term when discussing a report into quality in higher education. At this point they did not want to limit the use of the term to merely classroom experience but asserted the idea of the 'total student experience' (Harvey and Green 1993, as discussed previously in relation to Green et al 1994) to indicate the importance of education as a 'transformative process' and wide ranging factors in student life such as student support services, accommodation, teaching, and extra-curricular activities (as highlighted by scholars such as Tinto 1975, previously mentioned). This is now more formally reflected in the recent development of the multi-factorial KIS for higher education discussed here in the Introduction (Chapter One) and by Burrows (2012) in greater depth.

Nevertheless, despite this focus on a diversity of factors relevant to student experience, it still appears to be assuming that there is only one 'student experience', giving it a one-dimensional quality and thereby overlooking the embodied and situated nature of all experiences. This approach to student experience, in its lack of acknowledgement of the complex psychosocial and relational nature of individuals, treats students as if they were in some sense free of social background, identity and location, which of course is not possible (see Reay et al 2005 for a consideration of the way that social class, race and gender all impact on inclusion and achievement in higher education).

The model of consumer choice that conceptualises students as rational-technical learners (Sabri 2011), free to choose between universities in a system of almost perfect competition suggests that all individuals are free to form their own lives and experiences in a way that is value free, resonating with Anthony Giddens' (1991) sense of the 'reflexive project of the self', where in post-modernity the self - although it may not be changed whimsically - is continually made and revised through the capacity for dynamic biographical narratives and reflections as opposed to being a static entity. For instance, Duna Sabri (2011) highlights the way that:

‘In the UK government White Paper, The Future of Higher Education, students are: ‘to become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information’’ (Department for Education & Skills 2003, paragraph 4.2)’ (2011: unpag).

The work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) is relevant here (and also Bauman 2000) as they, similarly to Giddens, assert a dis-embedding from traditional society and a re-embedding in modern social forms according to individualisation. As part of this process, individuals may be decreasingly connected from one another but increasingly regulated, for instance through the rules of the welfare state and institutions. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim state that the social structure in terms of class, gender roles and family is no longer applicable in contemporary society and is now largely illusory. Instead, modern life is characterised by dynamic reflexive modernity and the ability of - and imperative for - individuals to orchestrate their own identity and destiny (this notion is related to, but not the same as, the neo-liberal individual who operates according to rational choice). However, as discussed in the Introduction (Chapter One), in contrast to this idea Reay et al (2005) showed how the majority of students, except the most privileged few, did not act as ‘intelligent customers’, shaping their own biographies in higher education, but instead relied on serendipity when choosing their degree courses.

Duna Sabri (2011) critiques the widespread and often careless use of the term ‘student experience’. Following a critical discourse analysis of higher education policy texts, she unpacks how the phrase has developed and the work it does to structure the relationships in the academy (such as creating an opposition between students and academics as students become the consumers with power to assess staff. For instance, see the website ‘Rate your Lecturer’, which encourages students to score their lecturers out of ten) whilst at the same time paradoxically implying a homogenised version of students that devalues different experiences in education and deprives students of agency. Sabri (2011) writes that:

‘Student experience ‘has become an absolute representation of reality that exerts a moral force on utterances and conduct. Therefore, ‘the student experience’ works to maintain and develop a market-orientated disciplining of higher education, obscuring the form and function of experience for diverse bodies of students’ (2011: unpag).

Sabri goes on to show how talk of the 'student experience' as a customer experience has escalated in the last four years, commensurate with the beginning of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Following this, the Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills in 2009 argued that 'the experience of the student is at the heart of higher education' (2009 paragraph 30 in Sabri 2011: unpag). Furthermore 'Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy', a report by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, argued that:

'As they are the most important clients of higher education, students' own assessments of the service they receive at university should be central to our judgement of the success of our higher education system; their choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service' (2009:70 in Sabri 2011: unpag).

Sabri writes that student choice is asserted both as a means of attaining and maintaining quality in higher education and, with the desire to put students 'at the heart of the system', as a worthwhile end in itself. In this way, higher education policy documents treat students as undifferentiated learners exercising rational choice, entering undifferentiated institutions that offer uncritical pedagogy and as having a perfect degree of agency to reflexively shape their own lives and 'experiences' without the burden of historical advantage or disadvantage. This is in contrast to Reay et al's (2005) contention for the importance of:

'The power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses and aspects of cultural capital such as confidence and entitlement...' (2005:161).

By treating a homogenised student experience as reified criteria to judge quality and value in education, these other accounts of student life that pay attention to the deeply embedded unequal structural relationships that persist in chances of attending and completing university studies are silenced and excluded. Brannen, Lewis and Nilsen (2002), in contrast to the notion of total personal freedom state that:

'The structural side of life is more often expressed in silences which punctuate narratives ... people may find the external and structural forces that shape their lives more difficult to comprehend and therefore talk about' (2002:41).

The NSS used as a measure of 'student experience' and institutional competition, through its implicit focus on homogeneity and individual agency, creates a metric that itself excludes and silences the possibility for such talk about structural forces and unequal access to resources. Universities then aim at improving 'services' in a narrow, technical rational sense, without licence to question the value of such measures of 'student experience'. Students are also involved in this process as Brennan and Bennington (2000) write that university marketing tactics, intended to maximise course applications, encourage a consumer mind-set amongst students, which is implicated in universities attempting to 'satisfy' learners (Gilmore and Pine 2002).

Sabri (2011) argues that this form of attention to 'student experience' is implicated in three 'false promises': first, that students' experiences and attainment are unrelated to structural elements such as class, ethnicity or gender roles; second, it ignores the way that students' experiences are interwoven with their relationships with each other and university staff; and third, it bypasses consideration of the way that students' experiences are framed according to the institution at which they study and the curriculum on offer. In short, the NSS and other such measures create homogenised, static measures of students as consumers reduced to economic exchange that assume a value-free identity and rational choice whilst ignoring the developmental and heterogeneous experience of education that does not necessarily revolve around 'satisfaction' (Collini 2011).

Gurnam Singh and Stephen Cowden (2013:7) argue that although this notion of student as 'consumer' may provide students with a superficial sense of power and influence, it often masks an invisible process of resource re-distribution towards consumption and its measurement and away from teaching and learning. For example, much extra income from the introduction of tuition fees was used for the business and commercial bodies of universities and contact time with tutors was reduced. For Sabri (2011):

'The student experience' has become a mantra, apparently used to give students a voice and at the same time constraining that voice by isolating it from other voices around it, and from the complex environment that enables us meaningfully to interpret those voices. The habit of homogenising and simplifying who students are, where they come from, and what their experiences are, perpetuates a taken-for-granted abstract and disembodied 'the student experience'. This amounts to a diminution of student agency within policy discourse at a time when there is clearly a burgeoning research evidence of complexity and diversity in students'

experiences in higher education and, as the example of Dewey shows, a long history of much richer conceptualisations of the educational function and force of experience' (2011: unpag).

These criticisms of the current conceptualisation of student experience therefore call for a fresh examination of this term. In this thesis I develop an idea of student experience as situated in structural factors and students as embodied actors and psychosocial subjects in relation with one another. In some ways, this goes back to Paul Willis' (1981) classic study 'Learning to Labour', which described the influence that background had on young working-class men in schooling, based on how the young people viewed themselves and how others viewed them. It also resonates with the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed' and the way that students speak always from situated positions; by ignoring these structural locations, learning can become an oppressive as opposed to a liberating endeavour.

Feminist Critiques of Experience

Both quantitative and qualitative research into student experience can be critiqued from the standpoint of viewing experience as foundational and, in one way or another, as measurable and thereby as smoothing out difference. In terms of the desire to somehow 'capture' experience, Lisa Adkins (2009) writes that early feminism often attempted to record women's experience by 'sharing the content of everyday life' (Lewis 1996:24), linking individual biography with public concern and thereby embedding personal struggles in cultural relations and historical change. Experience from this viewpoint was foundational and collective: the ubiquitous 'the personal is political' (Lewis 1996:24) that allowed for a sense of women's solidarity and shared global biographies to emerge. However, as Scott (1992) has demonstrated, such speech acts did not confront hegemonic historical narratives:

'The challenge to normative history has been described, in terms of conventional historical understanding of evidence, as an enlargement of the picture, a corrective to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision, and it has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as of the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her texts. Documenting the experience of others in this way has been at once a highly successful and limiting strategy for historians of difference...'
(1992:24).

The 'success' of this strategy, according to Scott (1992), is that it has continued to inhabit the traditional framework of academic history in which, despite acknowledgement of the constructed nature of evidence, new 'data', and especially that of direct 'experience', is taken as a reflection of the real. Scott (1992:24) asserts that 'histories of difference' are impaired by this assurance that experience cannot be contested and that it acts as a foundation for exposition since this commitment locates narratives within the structure of orthodox history instead of placing them in a position with the power to challenge it: 'they take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference' (Scott 1992:25). A critical point here is the claim that 'it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott 1992:26).

From this perspective, it is not sufficient to simply carry out qualitative studies of student 'experience' that will then act as a form of corrective to the current commercial metric assemblages of the NSS and other measures. Instead of assuming that student 'experience' is 'out there' and can be read, I attempt to deconstruct the sense of a shared 'experience' and to work with a politics of location and temporality based on a discourse analysis of student talk. This draws upon the work of a number of feminist writers who aimed to re-invent experience with the aid of post-structuralist theory. For example, engaging with black feminist and postcolonial scholarship, Gail Lewis has noted the importance of:

'Creating a legitimacy to speak from experience, feminists (black and white) had made it possible to begin to undo established ideas about what it means to 'know'' (1996:25).

Therefore, with these insights in place, experience could no longer be viewed as uncontested evidence or as something that people 'have': 'experience is widened, deepened and embedded' (Lewis 1996:26) and used as a tool by which an excavation of historical relations is possible and 'the binaries, the boundaries, the closures and erasures that are produced in time and space' are revealed (Lewis 1996:26). Experience comes to be viewed as part of the discursive conditions of the (re)production of identities as opposed to being in some way accessible to be read as a reliable and valid source of knowledge. From this perspective, Scott (1992:27) quotes Teresa de Lauretis' definition of experience:

'Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in oneself) those

relations – material, economic, and interpersonal – which are in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical’. Traditional research has acted to make absent these relations, treating experience as foundational and therefore as ‘both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation, beyond which few questions need to be asked’ (Scott 1992:33).

This ‘absenting’ of the co-ordinates of experience resembles Law’s (2004) acknowledgement of the (a)voiding of the ‘hinterlands’ of research and both the profundities of experience and of the construction of knowledge need to be excavated to create a space for alternative visions and voices to emerge. Lewis (1996) attempted to find a path through these issues by conducting a discourse analysis on qualitative interviews she conducted with black women social workers.

Lewis (1996) argues that black women’s ‘experience’, although often interpreted as foundational and descriptive, is in fact constituted through negotiations between and within a matrix of historical and present individual and cultural mediations, including the way experience is interpreted and also used strategically in the situated context of employment to achieve certain ends. Lewis (1996) shows how the social workers construct ‘self’ within the parameters of their profession in such a way that they tessellate ‘black women’s experience’ and ‘the nature of social work’ with the overriding implication that:

‘Experience and historical identification act to produce people with a greater capacity to cope with stressful situations’ (1996:34).

Lewis (1996:52) argues that in a profession rife with racism, a ‘raced’ experience is viewed as ontologically foundational in terms of providing a unique contribution to the ethos of social work. Yet Lewis (1996) also highlights how this experience is not foundational but is constructed and interpreted within the conditions of the profession and is therefore located, situated and embedded with differences. This shows how:

‘Added to the big locations along axes of differentiation which organise social formations are the more micro contexts of, for example, specific families or specific workplaces and occupations. These too need to be recognised as the contexts in which archaeological cross-readings [occur]’ (Lewis 1996:49).

Examining experience from a discourse analytic perspective in this way does not eradicate agency or a notion of self but instead excavates the processes by which these are created. This suggests that instead of simply ‘being there’ (Moffatt 1989) it is necessary to examine

what 'being there' means and its effects in particular interactional and organisational contexts. Rather than taking experience as axiomatic it is desirable to look at how and why it is constructed and what these specific constructions do in the context of investigation. For example, the experience of being a 'woman' (perhaps much like the experience of being a 'student') was shown to have created an illusory unity in the sense that by taking experience as primary the historical and contemporary meanings attached to gender, race, class and age were overlooked. The new reading of experience discussed here both creates and calls for a situated politics of location and temporality. The issue then is one of how to move forward from these various insights, how to work with a sense of the subject as de-centred, where there is not necessarily a simple relationship between words and things ('language is the site of history's enactment' Scott 1992:34), or between what happens and how it is represented, between as Dorothy Smith (2007) writes:

'How women find and experience the world ... and the concepts and theoretical schemes available to think about it in... ' (2007:27).

One possible solution involves eschewing linear, causal meanings and 'testing' variables within the assumption of singularity. Instead, there is potential for embracing the 'literary' (Scott 1992:34) and an awareness of social reality as complex, contradictory and inherently unresolvable. This relates to discussions of 'Live Sociology' (Back 2007) that endeavours to work with the 'lived' and 'living' (Merleau-Ponty 1962) texture of social life and the emphasis on process in event-time (Adkins 2009). In what follows I will begin to develop my theoretical framework that will ground and contextualise the work in this thesis, particularly through a focus on an embodied, relational and psychosocial sociology in terms of affect and time and the sense of experience as constructed through talk (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000).

One key element of this methodology, which is discussed in greater detail in the Methodology section, Chapter Three, is the notion of the psychosocial subject (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). This conceptualisation critiques the notion of unitary subjects acting through rational choice, assumed by many previous studies of student experience. Instead it embraces a multiple and contradictory view of individuals, with complex, ambivalent and different experiences and where neither agency nor structure is fully accountable for circumstances but where subjects are located in 'social realities mediated not only by social discourses but by psychic defences' (Hollway and Jefferson 2005:1).

Temporal Factors in 'Student Experience'

'Everywhere there is rhythm, there is measure' (Lefebvre 2004:8)

Clock Time, Heterogeneous Times and 'Busyness'

Time is an important consideration in this thesis as it is linked to value and measurement in higher education. It also acts as a theoretical concept to ground my analysis and to situate the everyday experiences of students. In what follows I will give an overview of time in sociology, beginning with 'clock time' and moving to a consideration of 'event time'. I will then show how this binary opposition is not helpful in this present study but how a multiplicity of times or an excavation of the concept of time is more relevant to my discourse analytic approach to the psychosocial subject. John Urry and Scott Lash (1994) argue that clock time was essential for the instigation and progress of modern society through:

'...The development of an abstract, divisible and universally measurable calculation of time...' (1994:225).

This advance of abstract time produced a separation of home time and work time and times and spaces were bounded according to the activities undertaken: for instance, the factory became the site for work and the home the site for leisure. E. P. Thompson (1967), writing from a Marxist perspective, highlights this change from pre-industrial to industrial time by drawing on Evans-Pritchard's work with the Nuer people and Bourdieu's work with Kabyle society in Algeria. Thompson shows how the Nuer and Kabyle people used the 'cattle clock' and market rhythms respectively in their social organisation, providing an approach that was 'task orientated' as opposed to the 'time orientated' experience of industrial capitalism. He quotes from Evans-Pritchard, stating that:

'The daily timepiece is the cattle clock, the round of pastoral tasks, and the time of day, and the passage of time through the day are to a Nuer primarily the succession of these tasks and their relation to one another' (1967:58).

This task-orientation was not possible in industrial time due to the necessity for the synchronisation of labour, especially in large-scale industry. However, Thompson also points out that contemporary communities can also rely on 'task orientated' time, thereby suggesting that heterogeneity of temporal rhythms can co-exist. Other writers, discussed later, take this idea of heterogeneity further, arguing that time is multiple, gendered and

classed. This acknowledgement of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of time is central to my later discussion of student time in higher education.

Important to my project is the way that this form of industrial clock time has been considered to exert a moral imperative in terms of the use of time. Eric Darier (1998) considers the way that the dominance of clock-time in the workplace has constructed the modern individual as the 'busy self', whereby one should be continually occupied in a rational way, either with work or with endeavours leading to self-improvement. Clock time also allows for the measurement of such 'busyness' and therefore a comparison – and valuing - between individuals to take place. Furthermore, this idea of busyness may have a gendered dimension as Mary Holmes (2002:41) asserts that 'women have no time' due to their 'time-giving' and their lack of control over this male dominated resource.

Dale Southerton (2003) also considers 'busyness' in terms of rush and 'harriedness' in his interview study of 20 suburban households. Whilst the households often explained their busyness in terms of people needing to work more, Southerton argues that the data showed that 'harriedness' resulted from individuals feeling a need to schedule activities into particular timeframes to co-ordinate their practices with others, creating 'hotspots' of multiple, often overlapping, activity that create a sensation of busyness and stress. This illuminates the difficulty of temporal alignment within broad social networks, and the participants were concerned that care might be compromised by such a 'time squeeze'.

Whilst Darier's (1998) work on 'busyness' is conducted around 'clock time', Southerton's (2003) study is also related to the idea of the network society (Castells 1996), a period in which linear and measureable time is being replaced by flexibility and simultaneity as working times and spaces are increasingly flexible and deregulated (Garhammer 1995). In this sense, time moves from a collective experience to an individual pathway characterised by intense flexibility, choice and the absence of fixed institutional parameters as new ways of living create 'de-synchronised time paths' for individuals, eroding the distinction between past, present and future. This is similar to Giddens's (1991) 'reflexive project of the self' discussed previously and is also open to the same critique that the individual in this 'timeless time' is taken to be identity and culture free.

However, Barbara Adam (1998) takes issue with the dualism asserted between clock-time and 'timeless time', arguing instead that it is essential to focus on the complexity of time as lived and experienced. Although she suggests that technological transformation may well have altered experiences of time, at least for some people, she asserts the concept of the

'lifeworld' to describe heterogeneity of time and temporal simultaneity implicated in a multiplicity of times.

Henri Lefebvre in *Rhythmanalysis* (2004), examines the interaction between everyday life and the economic system from a Marxist perspective through his discussion of multiple times in terms of cyclical and linear rhythms (which can be nested within one another), highlighting the recognition of natural corporeal rhythms where the body acts as a 'point of contact' or 'metronome' (Elden 2004: xii). Following his work that described space as socially produced, Lefebvre examines the rhythms of urban space and the effects of these on individuals (who are also implicated in the reflexive process of rhythm production: rhythms are a point of intersection between time, place and the rhythm analyst (or energy) meaning that they cannot be objectively understood but are reflexively created). Cyclical rhythms are those that involve repetition and linear rhythms are flows of information. For Lefebvre (2004), time is polyrhythmic, incorporating diverse 'rhythms' which continually interact with one another to produce 'equilibrium'. Lefebvre continues:

'This human body is the site and place of interaction between the biological, the physiological (nature) and the social (often called the cultural), where each of these levels, each of these dimensions, has its own specificity, therefore its space-time: its rhythm. Whence the inevitable shocks (stresses), disruptions and disturbances in this ensemble whose stability is absolutely never guaranteed' (2004:81).

Lefebvre (2004) also argues that:

'Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body. Rational, numerical, quantitative and qualitative rhythms super-impose themselves on the multiple natural rhythms of the body (respiration, the heart, hunger and thirst, etc.), though not without changing them. The bundle of natural rhythms wraps itself in rhythms of social or mental function. Whence the efficiency of the analytic operation that consists in opening and unwrapping the bundle' (2004:9)

This is both of empirical and a methodological relevance to my work, empirical in terms of the interactions between different rhythms or temporalities, and methodological since rhythm analysis stresses that 'presence' is a temporal characteristic with affective and moral qualities that cannot be simulated by objects outside of time. Presence is always being in time, whereas the 'present' is a false representation open to commercialisation. These

ideas have implications for this thesis as 'presence' can be viewed as a psychosocial condition, making affect and temporality interlinked, as opposed to the 'present', which adopts a one-dimensional view, for instance by presenting a linear trajectory of student experience.

Influenced by the work of Lefebvre, Tim Edensor (2006) argues against linear descriptions that emphasise 'heroic' or progressive narratives in the time of the nation (for instance, Weatherell and Potter's (1992 in Edensor 2006) sense of progress and advancement) and instead focuses on everyday cyclical times and habit in national identity building. Edensor writes that: 'the narratives through which we make sense of the world are typically structured through different 'time maps'' (Zerubavel 2003 in Edensor 2006:527), suggesting that it is essential to examine the omissions and smoothing out that such 'time maps' might make. In order to examine the everyday production of national identity, Edensor posits four temporalities: first is the routine and official temporality of the state (such as school times or holiday periods); second is the temporality of national habits and routines, referred to as the 'national habitus'; third is the way that popular culture synchronises national time (for instance, meal times); and fourth are the serialized time-spaces of everyday activity.

Feminist Approaches to Time

Returning to my earlier point about 'timeless time' being identity-free, many feminist writers have argued that during modernity a particular 'linear' temporality was hegemonic, even though much lived experience was cyclical: feminine time was associated with reproduction and overlooked, whilst masculine time tessellated with production and was celebrated. The assumption was that time was linear and undifferentiated, but contemporary researchers are beginning to examine this in more detail and this is a key issue for this thesis, where time becomes linked to discussions of experience.

Lisa Adkins (2009) argues that, amongst feminist thinkers, there were two seemingly polarised but in fact complimentary responses to the hegemony of clock time. The first response was to 'stretch' clock-time in order to create ways that would afford women access to the making and owning of objective calibration, such as daily diaries that measured women's activities. The second strategy was to develop alternative accounts of time that focused on an embodied, lived, emergent universe of irreversibility. Such narratives tended to take 'experience' as foundational and in-depth interviews with marginalised groups became a primary research tool for this perspective.

Adkins (2009) argues that both of these approaches were inextricably caught up with clock-time and both sought to extend women into the future, either through incorporating them into the objective universe or by positioning them against it. This suggests - as Law (2004) argues - that, when the foundations of the social sciences lay unexamined, positivistic, empirical methods appear diametrically opposed to ethnographic, phenomenological ones. However, both strategies may in fact be facilitated and determined by clock-time.

In contrast to the idea of clock-time (although not necessarily excluding it), Adkins (2009) proposes the notion of event-time. Here, in the midst of a decline in shared experiences of work practices and the growth of individualised work time as labour becomes flexible and insecure, people create their own work patterns, and work-time and free-time become commensurate. For example, Adkins (2009) cites Thrift (2008 in Adkins 2009), who asserts that rather than being fixed in time, commodities are now a process of continual testing and redesign; this is the sense of the formative process as opposed to the formed product.

Thinking of temporality in this way suggests that rather than a separation of time and things or time and being, with time existing externally to the event, time and phenomena are intertwined as they unfold together (as discussed by Lefebvre above). Event-time in this sense represents an actualisation of time in practice (distinct from ideas of a 'network society', where time determines practice), and this alternative way of viewing time has implications for both the idea of a measurement orientated sociology and a neo-liberal and market-based system of value in higher education.

Acting as a critique of this market-based university system, and in a somewhat similar vein to Adkins' (2009) event-time, Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004:227) posit public time, which is a slow time that creates the conditions for long-term analysis, a proliferation of discourses and a questioning social engagement. Public time acts as the basis of justice and is the frame of civic education, promoting an active participation and critical engagement from students and allowing for spaces of resistance. This resonates with the idea of university education as a public good, as discussed by Cardinal Newman (1852).

Adkins' (2009) event-time goes further than this sense of public time, drawing on a situated feminism that complements Law's (2004) notion of social research. Event-time suggests abandoning the false dichotomy between positivistic and phenomenological research, the survey on the one hand and ethnography on the other (whereas a sense of public time and corporate time propose and sustain this division). For Adkins (2009), it is not a case of embracing or rejecting objectivist, 'realist' metrics or experiential, phenomenological

ethnographic accounts. Instead, a spirit of experimentation, qualification and re-qualification that recognises the performative, generative and situated nature of phenomena is essential to all forms of research. The implications of this approach for the empirical investigating and mapping of student experience can be seen in Nirmal Puwar's (2010) work on the sedimentations of space and attention to space as 'lived' as opposed to 'abstract'. Writing on the multiple layers of parliamentary space, Puwar (2010) argues that:

'While some voices fill the architectural volume of the buildings with speech that is both spoken and heard ... others are assigned the status of the 'hysterical' ... and 'noise' which is chaotic, wild and disruptive ... or 'noise' as turbulence and nuisance' (2010:299).

However, Puwar (2010) also shows how the hereditary and religious privileges that seem 'inbuilt to the design of the rooms' (2010:299) have been contested and undermined by occupations of the space by suffragettes: 'unheard political bodies can take root in the most coveted of polite society's digs' (2010:300). Puwar (2010) views her reading of parliament as one possible mapping and argues that:

'What we need are more research journeys, rambles and excavations from differently situated flaneurs, who look again at the monuments, murals, seats and the garret occupations yet to be found' (2010:311).

It is these senses of experimentation, contingency, co-construction, performance, anti-foundationalism and a notion of situating research that I carry forward into my work. This represents an alternative to market metrics and the NSS, whilst also recognising the way that my research is implicated in the creation of the object it purports to unveil. Related to this, Michelle Bastian (2012) conducted a scoping study around research into time and community and found that research highlighted the way that social exclusion can occur for not 'living, embodying or performing time according to normative models', showing how the use of time becomes a symbolic resource related to social capital and power (and similar to Darier 1998, discussed above). Bastian (2011), writing about the relevance of identity in the work of Gloria Anzaldua to a re-working of time, argues that dominant conceptions of linear time restrict the way that identities can be presented whilst a disjointed and multiple sense of time allows multiple histories to be spoken simultaneously.

Temporality, Mobility and Co-Presence

The notions of time as 'timeless' (Castells 1996) or time as 'process' (Adkins 2009) discussed previously become a point of intersection to examine time and space: in a moment when it seems that time has become so stretched that it obscures the notion of space then it is interesting to understand the attraction that co-presence holds for individuals. Urry (2002) argues that travel occurs despite new communication technologies due to the necessity for at least intermittent contact, or what Boden and Molotch (1994) describe as 'thick' co-presence, where language but also unspoken factors are vital for understanding and trust (see Putnam 2001). For Urry (2002), this shows how:

'Issues of social inclusion and exclusion cannot be examined without identifying the complex, overlapping and contradictory mobilities necessarily involved in the patterning of an embodied social life' (2002:255).

Such contradictory mobilities thereby necessitate examining the temporalities involved in social differentiation. Time and space is implicated in this co-presence as individuals must be physically present with one another, and this co-presence can also lead to other informal meetings which has shown to be positively related to mental health wellbeing (Granovetter 1973). The apparent necessity for co-presence therefore limits the ability of new technology to reshape temporal factors (which has implications for the use of virtual communication in higher education, discussed in the Introduction). For instance, Urry (2002) cites Thrift (1996 in Urry 2002) who argues that in the City of London the role of face-to-face communication is becoming increasingly essential despite enhanced mobility and information systems.

This suggests that corporeal mobility is linked to social capital and the more mobile an individual is able to be the greater their social capital. Therefore, conversely to Putnam (2001) who argues that it is necessary for individuals to spend more time locally in order to increase their social capital, Urry (2002) asserts that it is necessary to be mobile across broader distances for social capital to accrue: social exclusion results from limited mobility and co-presence is essential to social capital. However, this mobilisation and face-to-face contact, although essential, is increasingly transformed by virtual technologies embedded within it, so that:

‘Many community ties are complex dances of face-to-face encounters, scheduled get-togethers, dyadic telephone calls, emails to one person or several, and broader online discussions among those sharing interests’ (Wellman 2001:11 in Urry 2002:268).

Such issues of temporality, mobility, co-presence and multiplicities of times as traced by structural lines of class, gender, race and so on are highly relevant to the higher education sector since, as discussed in the Introduction (Chapter One), it is increasingly characterised by virtual communication, widening participation but also concurrently the rhetoric of student experience and the idea of the ‘universal student’.

Affect: Embodying ‘Student Experience’

Psychosocial work on affect is important in the context of this project as I examine the process by which affective experience, often impinged on by value (see Burrows 2012), circulates and ‘sticks’ to certain bodies (Ahmed 2004). This means that talk of feelings becomes embodied, mediating between the individual and the social (following Mills 2000 and the ‘sociological imagination’). Here, different matrices of value become internalised, simultaneously affecting and fabricating the body (Fanon 1967). However, studies of affect have not always been viewed in this light and in the same way that this chapter has argued that discussions of ‘experience’ have tended to naturalise differences between subjects, discussions of affect have followed a similar trajectory (for instance in terms of biological theories of emotion, see Tomkins 1962).

It is in this context that I draw on recent work concerning affect. I take as my starting point for this Burrows’ (2012) contention regarding the discomfort of the structures of feeling in contemporary, measurement-orientated academic life and I examine how this might also apply to students in higher education. However, whereas Burrows draws on the term ‘structure of feeling’ (see Raymond Williams 1977), I examine affect as a way of embracing a situated and located materialism and embodiment within research in higher education that understands ‘what is at work’ in student life (Dawney 2011:1), especially in terms of the concept of value. According to Leila Dawney (2011), such an examination asserts that:

‘What is at work ... resonates through bodies as a result of their historical imbrications of material relations’ (2011:1).

It is important to examine what ‘these resonations can tell us about those relations’, since objects of study are not originary or uncontested; they ‘resonate’ with the ‘material

regimes through which they come into play in the world' (Dawney 2011:1). It is these material regimes - underscored by a process of affective value – I am concerned to trace. Affect studies is an expansive and multi-disciplinary field that encompasses disciplines as diverse as cultural studies (Clough 2008) and neurology (Damasio 2004). Its key terms and perspectives are heavily contested and there is on-going debate regarding the differences between affect, feelings and emotion (Steve Pile 2010 attempts to tease these apart whilst mapping the terrain). For example, Brian Massumi (1988) invests in a distinction where feelings are 'personal', emotions are 'social' and affects are 'pre-personal'; pre-personal in this sense refers to affect as autonomous, circulating and not confined in a body, it is prior to the experience of it and so is pre-conscious. Similarly Damasio (2004), although not discussing 'affect', conceptualises emotion as 'the part of the process that is made public' and feelings as 'the part that remains private' (2004:27).

Therefore, whilst emotion has frequently been theorised as a personal experience, even if according to Damasio it is in part 'made public', affect is more typically seen as decoupled from individuals and as operating autonomously in the social world, where it can also 'stick' to bodies, become internalised and appear naturalised; see Ahmed 2004 or Fanon 1967, below. In this way, emotion has a subject and an identity position, whilst affect is a social as opposed to a subjective state. However, despite making this distinction it also appears that affect, feelings and emotion can be considered to be part of the same process. For example, Sianne Ngai (2007) argues the difference between them is quantitative as opposed to qualitative. Following this it seems unhelpful to create dichotomies and categories when using these terms.

In my work I follow Sara Ahmed (2004) in terms of attempting not to reify concepts by making distinctions between them. Consistent with my presentation of sociology as 'Live' (Back 2007), I aim to not make what Williams (1977:129) termed the 'basic error' of reducing the social to fixed forms. Therefore, instead of attempting to tightly define concepts such as emotion, feeling and affect as 'formed wholes' I am interested in examining them as 'formative processes' (Williams 1977:128) or, in other words, considering the effects that they have (Ahmed 2004). In this way I use these terms freely and interchangeably as opposed to adopting tight definitions of them.

To work with the excavation of 'experience' in terms of students in higher education, I draw particularly from Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of 'affective economies', based on phenomenology (Fanon 1967, Young 1980) and informed by feminist, queer and critical

race theory, in order to examine the political relationships between bodies and time (and space). For Ahmed (2004) emotions are not a private matter but rather they, or their objects, 'circulate between bodies and signs'. Put differently:

'Emotions are not simply within or without but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds' (2004:117).

Taking the example of nationalism, Ahmed (2004:119) argues that 'hate is economic', it is not found in one subject or object but works to create outlines of figures, aligning some individuals as within communities or spaces and others as outside of them. In this sense, emotions do work, they 'work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence)', thereby shaping bodies and worlds; for example, fear works to restrict some bodies – such as black bodies – through the movement and expansion of others (Ahmed 2004:127). In this way, 'the subject is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination' (Ahmed 2004:121). Certain emotions 'stick' to certain bodies and slide across others, shaping them, restricting or promoting their flow. This is not a system of 'emotional contagion' whereby emotion 'passes' between bodies in an almost causal way. Instead, Ahmed (2004) asserts that it is not that emotions circulate, but that the objects of emotion circulate; these objects are 'sticky' and 'saturated with affect' and their circulation transforms others into 'objects of feeling' (Ahmed 2004:11).

This approach to the cultural politics of emotion demonstrates how affect is essential for discussions of politics. Emotions are not simply private psychological events and the social structure is not free from emotions; rather, affect acts to shape bodies and worlds and the boundaries between them. For example, Ahmed (2004) shows how pain, which is often considered to be an intensely private experience, acts to generate the appearance of a bodily surface and make bodies available to others: the private and the public take shape through each other and also shape each other. This demonstrates how affect is both created and creative and also values emotionality in the reciprocal forming of the social world and is in contrast to the humanist desire to describe people's emotions (Pile 2010:7), or emotional geography's belief that emotions can be represented and that the body is the site of feeling (Pile 2010:10).

Affect, Capital and Value

Following Burrows (2012), I argue that the process of academic valuing has affective consequences: affect is performative. As discussed above, affects circulate and stick according to the way certain bodies are classified (Ahmed 2004, Fanon 1967). However, diverging from Burrows, I theorise this form of valuing as a situated process of social location that involves points of 'flow' and also 'stickiness' so that individuals are able to engage in the 'reflexive project of the self' that Giddens (1991) describes to some extent, but there are also constraints to this in the form of embedded social structuring. In this way, some students may be able to respond flexibly to the demands of higher education and other individuals are positioned in such a way as to be limited in their ability to do so, possibly resulting in negative affects. For many individuals there may be a degree of both flow and stickiness (Watson et al 2009). Relevant here is the relational work of Pierre Bourdieu and the way that social, cultural and symbolic capital both reflects and creates social positioning through value classifications. Robbins (2000) states that:

'The judgements of value made between our preferences within the cultural system affect our position within that system and have consequences for both our economic and our social position taking' (2000:32).

For Bourdieu there are three kinds of cultural capital - incorporated cultural capital (the unique dispositions of an individual); objectivated cultural capital (which is actively renewed between generations); and institutionalised cultural capital (with the ability to value individuals differently, such as educational institutions) – added to these is a fourth kind of cultural capital, social capital, which can refer to a 'network of bonds' the individual has (Robbins 2000:37). Derek Robbins (2000) defines 'concepts' for Bourdieu as:

'...Tools by which we define and classify phenomena. They do not have intrinsic meaning. They do not represent real things but themselves acquire objective reality as they function in helping us make sense of things and objects' (2000:25).

Bourdieu invoked a number of concepts relevant to the study of education, elaborated on below. For Bourdieu, an individual's background can be described as her 'habitus': relational predisposed knowledges and behaviours that appear 'natural' to her, or a system of taken for granted structures of thought through which individuals interact with their environment (Bourdieu 1990). It represents modes of thought and behaviour below the level of awareness and acquired over time:

‘The habitus, a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning which functions as a system of generative schemes, generates strategies which can be objectively consistent with the objective interests of their authors without having been expressly designed to that end’ (Bourdieu 1993:76).

The habitus for Bourdieu reflects a continual tension between production and reproduction:

‘There is a constant tension between the urge to create and the urge to conserve, between the tendency of the habitus to deploy objectivated cultural capital creatively or to be constrained and conditioned by the legacy of institutionalised cultural capital. In any society, in other words, there is tension between production and reproduction.’ (Robbins 2000:40)

The concept ‘field’ relates to the processes and structures of specific social situations; for instance, the university may have a very different ‘field’ to a football game. For Bourdieu (1993:72) the field always involves the concept of ‘struggle’ as new individuals attempt to gain entry to the field but the dominant ‘gatekeepers’ of the field attempt to protect the domain and keep others out; this process often happens in subtle ways. Furthermore, ‘the new players have to pay an entry fee which consists in recognition of the value of the game’ (1993:74), something that is easier for some individuals than it is for others:

‘When people only have to let their habitus follow its natural bent in order to comply with the immanent necessity of the field and satisfy the demands contained within it ... they are not at all aware of fulfilling a duty ... so they enjoy the additional profit of seeing themselves and being seen as entirely disinterested’ (1993:76).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe fields as spaces with boundaries that form distinct yet adjacent and related social worlds. Fields include the ‘rules of the game’ and implicit social processes that are imposed on those who seek to enter. When the habitus matches the field there is a sense of comfort and value; however, when the habitus and the field diverge it can lead to discomfort and a lack of a sense of value. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:127) write that:

‘When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world for granted’ (1992:127).

This shows how the dominant cultural conditions within a field can determine some bodies as valuable and others as less valuable depending on their capital, judgements that have affective consequences for individuals (Loveday 2011 and Lane 2012 also associate Bourdieu and the affect literature). Drawing from Bourdieu, and applying his ideas to higher education and social class, Reay et al (2005) argue that:

‘For many middle-class students who move in their world as a fish in water, going to, and choice of, university is simply what people like them do. Working-class students, in contrast, were driven by necessity, which made certain choices unthinkable for them. Primarily, choosing to go to university is not really a choice at all for the middle-class students. It is about staying as they are and making more of themselves, whilst for the working-classes it is about being different people in different places, about who they might be but also what they must give up’ (2005:161).

Likewise, Derek Robbins (2000) shows that, for Bourdieu:

‘The educational system itself is involved in endorsing pre-existent distinctions and in legitimating the notion that differences are the consequences of innate abilities rather than of differing social backgrounds’ (2000: xii).

Following this, Frantz Fanon’s sense of the value and valuing of bodies (in terms of a self-valuation and a valuation by others) as having affective consequences for individuals can be linked to Bourdieu’s concept of capital to examine how certain distinctions - as affects - ‘stick’ to particular bodies (not necessarily simply classed bodies, but all bodies who do not ‘fit in’ within the field of the university). Due to their social positioning in terms of habitus and field, some individuals encounter discomfort or negative affects and, as with the discussion of experience or time earlier, such negative affects are perceived to be natural and taken-for-granted features of those bodies and become embodied and performative (Fanon 1967) as individuals act in ways consistent with them. For instance, Iris Marion Young (1980) in ‘Throwing like a Girl’ discussed the way that women’s affective experiences of self-consciousness and cautiousness regarding their bodies led them to monitoring and curtailing the way they used them, constructions and performances that appeared ‘natural’.

In this way, affects are naturalised as opposed to being viewed as constructed according to their differential conditions of worth in a given field (Loveday 2011). These negative affects

are then held to be caused by individual qualities or issues (Fanon 1967; Young 1980) instead of being considered to be features of the social structure of a market-orientated higher education. For instance, negative affects amongst students in the neo-liberal university have come to be viewed as a problem with the individual: college counselling services are present to absorb and manage these individualised issues.

Therefore, when participants in this study speak of the negative affects of feeling, for example, lonely at university, they are describing the emotion but also the way that such negative affects become stuck to them; they are describing the process by which the reverse - being social and popular (or 'satisfied') - is valued and the way that due to the interaction between their habitus and their temporal-structural situatedness within the field of the university they are constrained and limited. The concepts of affect and value therefore become useful in thinking through the psychosocial, relational context of the individual and developing a material and embodied notion of student life.

It is also important to examine the notion of affect as performative in terms of metricisation. Arvidsson (2012) discusses branding and suggests that affect can be objectified through the process of value by measuring the 'General Sentiment'. In this way, Arvidsson argues that although measures of labour time are still relevant, alternative measures of value – such as consumer affect - are becoming increasingly important, leading to the objectification of affect. This is another sense of affect as performative: it is measured, objectified and then acted upon, for instance by students making choices based on 'satisfaction' ratings. This idea will be discussed later in the data analysis (see Chapter Seven).

Sara Ahmed's (2010) discussion of happiness that draws on black feminist and queer theory is relevant here. Ahmed (2010) argues that 'happiness' performs affective and moral work by directing people to affirm certain life choices and to reject others based on the perceived happiness associated with the choice. This suggests how the discourses of happiness and oppression are, in fact, entangled: it is possible to be happy but only if we follow the moral imperative to live our lives in the 'right' way and make the correct choices (in this case the moral imperative is to follow the consumer logic of 'satisfaction').

Ahmed (2010), citing figures such as the feminist killjoy or the angry black woman, shows how the pursuit of 'happiness' can lead to and can conceal social injustice and how challenging this situation can lead to 'unhappiness' (or the dissatisfaction that Collini (2011) writes about in relation to student experience). From this analytic perspective, the NSS, as

a consumer-guide to student satisfaction or happiness, might actually work to conceal and repress alternative opinions and perspectives. The 'satisfaction' that it purports to measure and perpetuate through allowing students to choose institutions where they will be 'happy' might actually lead to a longer term lack of fulfilment.

It is also interesting to consider the temporality of affect, which further illuminates the way that affect acts as a process and connects with discussions of time presented earlier, such as Lefebvre's Rhythmanalysis (2004). Lisa Guenther (2011) writes about shame (as discussed by Sartre, Levinas and Beauvoir) and the temporality of social life. Shame both operates as a mechanism of invisibility and exclusion from social life, isolating the individual whilst also leaving her with nowhere to hide (Fanon 1967). However, shame is also an ethical construct, exemplifying the individual's relationality with others and essential to the very foundations of inter-subjective life. Following this, a meaningful relation to time is developed through this situated (Bourdieu 1993) relation to others, who cause the sense of isolation (exclusion) or the sense of hope (relationality). In this way, the study of shame shows the way we are ambivalently entangled with one another: there is no societal place that is liberated from the potential adherence of shame but there is also no time without an investment in our freedom, which shame works to demonstrate.

Time is relational, neither objective nor subjective, and it resonates with the work of Michelle Bastian discussed previously. Therefore, time and affect are not an apolitical background to social life and nor are they separate from social life; they are constructed relationally and affectively, embodied and with their capacities unevenly distributed, shaping how we perceive and relate to others and ourselves as we also shape a shared sense of time and affect. I will take this idea up in my work through paying attention to the implicit and explicit temporal discourses of the participants.

Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead

In a higher education environment that is increasingly subjected to the economic and cultural transformations of the marketplace and where students are treated as consumers, neo-liberal rhetoric of 'choice' and 'satisfaction' dominates the measurement and valuing of the 'hybrid object' of student lives. As I have discussed, this has consequences for the slippage between 'satisfaction' and 'happiness' in discourse on higher education whilst the complex and frequently ambivalent affective topography of student experience in this climate (one that moves beyond the affective statements catered for by Likert Scale measures) is largely overlooked.

This is not to deny the importance of student 'rights' or student 'choice' and the idea that students should have a real input into the learning process is not something that I want to exclude; indeed, in critiques of the market-driven approach to education, commentators such as Paulo Freire (1970) have long argued for a collaborative approach to learning. This current research therefore aims to examine other ways of understanding student lives in the context of higher education that pays attention to the psychosocial nature of subjects and the relational context of experience. The next chapter will examine the methodology and methods employed in this research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

'To understand what a speaker says, a listener needs to know who is speaking' (Gee 2011:39)

This chapter describes the methodological framework used in this study that is sensitive to the positioning of the subject and the researcher and to the way that 'student experience' is produced and framed. As opposed to viewing students as disembodied rational learners, my methodological perspective aims to highlight the way that talk of individual experience is socially structured, particularly with regard to affect and time. To this end, my methodology assumes a relational and psychosocial subjectivity - Hollway and Jefferson (2000) - for both the researcher and research participants.

The methodological approach described in this chapter includes: focus groups; a feedback seminar (where participants also produced their own photographs); and an artistic collaboration which led to a novel way of mapping the university and resulted in the production of a short video (which is not included as part of this thesis for reasons of brevity and relevance). I used these methods to create an alternative cartography of student life that addresses the psychosocial perspective of ambivalent 'experience', which has been largely overlooked in the field of higher education studies (as discussed in Chapter Two).

In what follows, I discuss the methodological landscape for this project, which draws upon feminist and multi-sited ethnographic mapping approaches and creative and collaborative avenues. I provide methodological justifications for my choices of research methods - primarily focus groups and 'practice-led' or 'arts-based' approaches - and I situate myself within the research in terms of both the distance and closeness in the investigation and a continual shifting between these positions (an 'intimate distance' as discussed by Luckhurst 2002, see Chapter One: Introduction). I frame this sense of the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the research in terms of feminist discussions of distance and closeness (for instance, Collins 1986) and Yasmin Gunaratnam's (2003) concept of psychosocial space in the research encounter. For reasons of clarity, this chapter is divided into two sections: the first deals with methodology and the second focuses on method, although it is also recognised that many issues are shared and overlap.

Methodology

Partial Truths and the Psychosocial Subject

'Voice is the process of articulating the world from a distinctive embodied position'
(Couldry 2010:8)

In terms of methodology, Hammersley (2011) distinguishes at least three approaches to writing: methodology-as-technique, which involves attention to the research design and procedural aspects; methodology-as-philosophy, where the epistemological and ontological basis of methodology is examined; and methodology-as-autobiography, in which attention is given to the reflexivity of the researcher and her place in the research process (although this typology has been critiqued, not least due to its segregation of intertwined concepts and ideas). Therefore, although these approaches appear to be contradictory – for example, methodology-as-technique implies an objective, scientific observer whilst methodology-as-autobiography suggests a more subjective approach to research – I found that I employed all of these strategies during this project.

I argue that the separation of process and content in writing about methodology and methods (for example, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) in relation to interviewing) represents a false demarcation. Instead, I embrace Clifford's (1986) notion of 'partial truths', supporting a move away from representational validity as advocated by realist approaches that assume an 'out there' to be accessed by increasing degrees of methodological triangulation and sophistication (Seale 1998). My approach explores talk of student experiences as opposed to assuming a specific 'truth', which Strauss and Corbin (1990) write correlates well with qualitative methods, although it could also be applied in quantitative work. Therefore, whilst rejecting a model of research that diametrically opposes qualitative and quantitative methods, I draw on the strengths of qualitative research in this project in terms of interpretive complexity. The idea of 'partial truths' resonates with Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's (2000) conceptualisation of the research encounter, particularly relating to the idea of the 'subject' (a term used to refer to the way the person is theorised as opposed to suggesting 'participant'). For Hollway and Jefferson, it is necessary to adopt a critical realist view of the subject, which assumes that:

‘Though it is far from transparent, there is a relationship between people’s ambiguous representations and their experiences ... But, tracking this relationship relies on a particular view of the research subject: one whose inner world is not simply a reflection of the outer world, nor a cognitively driven rational accommodation to it’ (2000:4).

Furthermore, connecting with Lefebvre (2004) in *Rhythmanalysis*, this subject ‘cannot be known except through another subject; in this case, the researcher’ (2000:4). Hollway and Jefferson term this approach to the subject ‘psychosocial’, reflecting the way that inner worlds and outer experiences are intricately related but that one is not a clear and uncomplicated mapping of the other and subjects are not rational actors. In order to illustrate this partial tessellation between inner and outer worlds, Hollway and Jefferson invoke the idea of the ‘defended subject’ – the composite and often unconscious effect that defences against anxiety and other uncomfortable emotions have on people’s telling of their experiences. Therefore, whilst most survey research tends to assume a rational subject with an uncomplicated ability to express her opinions, Hollway and Jefferson highlight the situated and complicated nature of telling; Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003) also draws on this perspective in relation to topic threat:

‘I see the formal organization of the psycho-social spaces of research interactions as assuming compliant and ‘manageable’ research participants ... within my analytic approach, I see the effects of topic threat as sometimes serving to challenge the intrusive dominance of the formal prescriptions of research, through the power of research participants to consciously or unconsciously refuse information and/or conceal areas of their lives’ (2003:170).

This recognition of the psychosocial nature of research also has implications for my practices of reflexivity in research and for the data analysis, which will be discussed in more detail later. Reflexivity has been conceptualised by Oliver et al (2006) as a dimension: at one end of the spectrum is the idea that all data is co-created by the relationship between the researcher and the researched and at the other end of the continuum, reflexivity involves paying attention to the research and thinking through decisions (Woolgar 1988).

In this research I am closer to the first position described by Oliver et al (2006), that of the relational production of knowledge (following Macmurray 1957 and Ruch et al 2010), which involves recognising and trying to account for the affects/effects of oneself in the research process, although it is not necessarily a panacea to issues such as sameness and difference

between the researcher and the participants. To this end, my research is reflexive in a variety of ways, not least in its acknowledgement of the complexities and subconscious defences of subjects, both those of the participants and the researcher (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Gunaratnam 2003).

In addition, Bev Skeggs (2004) argues that reflexivity might be as much about the position of the researcher and the ability that she has to access 'ways of telling' as it is about uncovering the concealed or complex nature of knowledge production. With this in mind, although I discuss my position as researcher throughout the thesis I do not assume that this then nullifies the complexities of the data and, even though I highlight some research dynamics, these dynamics (and others) still exist and influence the project in a variety of (frequently unpredictable) ways. This issue of reflexivity in the research encounter is also intricately linked with my sense of mapping, which acknowledges a partial and situated, as opposed to panoramic and panoptic, approach to student experience.

Mapping Student Experience: Multi-Sited Fields and Participatory Approaches

'What you say to a stranger may, on many matters, differ from what you say to a friend, to yourself, to your wife or lover; also it may, and often does, differ from what you think, or from matters of 'fact' you are trying to remember or describe; or again from what you actually do' (Harrison 1947:21 in Back 2012:27)

The approach to mapping that I develop in this chapter is not the idea of maps that depict static entities through adopting panoramic or panoptic views. I argue that maps are specific constructions of the world – 'all images are partial' (Latour 2004:29) - that reflect on-going processes as opposed to latent quantities. Due to their constructed nature, maps have the potential to be enabling or disabling, depending upon what is emphasised or de-emphasised (Harley 2002). Therefore, I view maps as an intervention in social life as opposed to a realist representation of it, a sense of mapping that is essential to my approach and to a 'Live' Sociology (Back 2012) that makes use of 'inventive methods' (Lury and Wakeford 2012).

Maps do not have to be made by 'other people': people make personal maps of places everyday but many of these are not accorded the status of 'knowledge'. De Certeau (2000) provides one of the most well know ways of working against the map of the planners through the tactics people adopt in their use of space, which puncture the webs of power. For instance, he discusses 'Walking in the City' and the way that the strategies of planners

or institutions produce authoritative 'maps' but the tactics of the walkers at ground level are not fully decided by such organising bodies; instead they take shortcuts and make movements that can resist such structural determination.

Sandhu (2006:82) argues that the London A-Z means little to many graffiti artists who create their own maps of London in terms of alarmed doors, high window drops and breaking into buildings. Likewise, 'official' maps do not always relate to the place they propose to map and may even be misleading: many cities look 'neat' on a map but chaotic at street level. Similarly, many of the current 'maps' or 'mappings' of 'student experience' may bear little resemblance to lived experiences. In contrast to such mappings, I have attempted to sustain the notion of mapping as participatory and fragmentary through my choice and implementation of methods.

Therefore, my approach to mapping is to view it as a process that differs from traditional 'maps' in that its main concerns are movement, construction and partiality. I draw upon a sense of mapping as both an interventionist and collaborative process and I work with Marcus' (1998) notion of multi-sited ethnography to support this. Multi-sited ethnography examines associations and connections between 'lifeworlds' and 'systems', whereby the world system is not a holistic frame but 'between the frame and the framed, positions are easily exchanged' (Latour 2004:43). The aim of multi-sited ethnography is not to produce an omnipotent representation, but to follow fragments and the tracing of relations. For Marcus:

'Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography' (Marcus 1998:105).

As the ethnographer passes across sites (which may or may not comprise physically distinct locations) the identity of the ethnographer requires re-negotiation and continual attention must be paid to the reflexive self-identification and situating of the researcher. In undertaking this project I have also had to recognise that not everything can be mapped and it has been necessary for me to place boundaries around my research and to take responsibility for these inclusions and exclusions.

At times, I have felt that there is an 'implicit holism' (Candea 2009) in Marcus' (1998) multi-sited paradigm in its quest to make linkages and connections. However, any space could yield a million or more different maps and this research is only one version where a great deal has been excluded for the sake of what has been included. This draws on Cook et al's (2009) discussion of the 'un-sited field', in which the sense of a bounded location of fieldwork is relinquished in favour of the freedom for the researcher to be open and reflexive regarding her inclusions and exclusions.

I certainly experienced the field in this research as, at times and in places, 'un-sited' and its boundaries as constructed through a constant negotiation between my own theoretical and pragmatic concerns working together with the issues and restraints that the participants and locations gave rise to in the project. This recognises the difference between space, place and field whilst also bearing in mind the intimate relationship they have with each other. Student lives and experiences involved multiple local and global networks operating at both micro and macro levels. However, due to constraints in time and resources I had to be selective regarding which of these paths I could follow and, in giving attention to some, others have necessarily been inhibited.

Throughout my work I have been aware of the spirit of participation and collaboration that I hoped to convey. I am interested in mapping student experience not only as an exercise in academic sociology but also as an intervention into the social world following the ethos of a 'Live Sociology' discussed in the Introduction, Chapter One. This present project therefore aims to contribute to understanding and attending to what Les Back (2012:18) refers to as:

'Fleeting, distributed, multiple and sensory aspects of sociality through research techniques that are mobile, sensuous and operate from multiple vantage points', pointing towards a more 'artful and crafty approach to sociological research' (Back and Puwar 2012:6).

To this end, I develop a sense of collaborative mapping discussed by Hayden (1995:227), who asserts that mapping can connect residents to the urban landscape and create a stronger sense of belonging as part of the process of reclaiming people's space and history. Ingold (2000:219) defines this mapping process as 'wayfinding': it is situating one's position within the context of previous and different journeys made and refers to the process of making and remaking a sense of belonging.

Similarly Back et al (2005), in the 'Finding the Way Home' project, attempted to reposition the observer, moving away from an omnipresent authority towards a situated and contextualised collaborator. Young people from South London were introduced to a number of technologies, such as video cameras, audio diaries, photography, and standard interviews to allow them to relate their own lives and relationships to space and place within the city. This allowed participants to tell their own stories, to which social theory was added by the researchers.

This sense of 'wayfinding' or 'finding the way' reflects a Freirian (1970) action-research methodology whereby social research is explicitly recognised as an intervention in the social world and discussed as such, or Jane Seale's (2010) higher education 'voice work' project that adopted a participatory framework for researching, but also for empowering, students in higher education through their involvement with the project and the future connections and directions that it carved out for them. However, terms such as 'participation' and 'collaboration' are complicated, not least from an ethical perspective, and it is to this that I will now turn.

The Ethics of 'Participation': Interpretation and Concept-Building

Following Duneier (2000), I assert a participatory approach to this research and I aim for the participants' voices to permeate these pages as much as possible, not only in terms of the quotations used but also through the methods themselves, which were frequently collaborative. However, I also recognise that most participatory projects have an element of researcher presence and there is debate about how truly collaborative and participatory research can be. Berger-Gluck and Patai (1991:2) argue, with reference to oral history, that an oral story often becomes public in the form of a text by the researcher.

In addition, narrators may shape what they narrate according to what they feel is expected of them. Even if they do shape a story or image as they wish and find it an empowering experience, their control usually ends there and it is the researcher who creates the 'final' frame. The image of the participant never really 'speaks' when it is framed by the research narrative written by someone else and the very act of positioning something in an academic text will influence how it is interpreted by the reader. This is also the case with my research, where despite collaborating with individuals regarding the data collection methods, this thesis still presents my interpretation of events, written according to academic convention, and a participant or a collaborator may have produced a very different version.

Becker (1982) discusses collective activity in relation to art worlds, although this is also more broadly applicable. Becker (1982) describes how art works are always a product of collective activity, such as training, planning, gathering materials, creating, support activities, producing and publishing, and even viewing the work, all of which usually involve teams of people; these divisions of labour when producing art works are not natural, although some are so entrenched that we may regard them as such (1982:10).

However, artists are understood as having 'special gifts' and participants in making the art works believe that some aspects of this creation must be accomplished by the artist herself, whose intentions must then be adhered to. These are the activities that are given respect where as other activities, such as support or administration, receive less status. This could be viewed as the case with social research also, even most research that claims to be 'collaborative' or 'participatory'. It will usually be the researcher who produces the final frame and, for this reason, it has been important for me in this project to adopt a critical perspective and recognise my differences from the research participants and the power imbalances that this entails (whilst also being aware that reflexivity does not 'solve' these issues automatically).

Furthermore, Borland (1991) writes that when re-presenting material researchers might make conceptual and theoretical connections in the original information provided by the participant that the participant would never have made herself. For example, Borland gave a feminist interpretation to her grandmother's interview, which her grandmother vehemently denied, highlighting the tension between wanting to empower participants and also respecting their current worldviews and letting participants 'speak for themselves'. Borland chose to 'resolve' this dilemma by including her grandmother's response to her interpretation in the report of the research, showing how extending the conversation can allow researchers to negotiate issues of interpretive authority and also identifying the participants as the first audience for the work. I aim to both work alongside participants and preserve their accounts whilst also developing theories and concepts that may open up pathways for new and creative understandings to emerge.

In this process of concept building I attend to Dorothy Smith (1988:156), who argues that participants will have expert knowledge in terms of their own lives but that this knowledge may be framed by everyday language that also points towards structural issues that move beyond specific and individual experience (see also Hollway and Jefferson 2000, as discussed previously). This follows Gunaratnam (2003) who writes that 'if we wish to do

justice to the complexity of our subjects, an interpretive approach is unavoidable' (2003:3). Therefore both individual 'voice' and the broader notion of concept construction and social relevance can be attempted in research.

To some extent, this dual task of participatory approaches and concept building may have been more straightforward for me than it was for Duneier (2000) since he was working with homeless individuals, many of whom had little formal education, whereas the participants in my research already possessed an academic vocabulary. This served to minimise some of the difference between the participants and me and made my concept building seem closer to their world-view; nevertheless, this apparent 'sameness' between the participants and the researcher did not eliminate differences or issues of power and ethics and this is discussed more fully in the next section in relation to dimensions of distance and closeness.

Specifically in relation to collaborative research, Salazar (1991:109) argues that delusions of alliance threaten research much more than the problems of separateness do. Likewise, Stacey (1991:113) questions whether the appearance of a greater equality between researcher and participants actually conceals a greater exploitation since when there is a 'strong' relationship between the researcher and the participant there is a greater risk of betrayal or manipulation and the fieldwork represents a greater invasion and intervention into the lifeworld of the participant in which the researcher is much freer than the participant is to leave. Pointedly, the model of a distanced observer has been replaced by one of intimacy, partly because it is thought to produce 'better' results.

In addition, Patai (1991:144) asks whether it is honest to suggest that all research participants are potential intimates or friends and suggests that neither distance nor spurious mutuality are appropriate research models and that some form of separation or 'objectification' is both inevitable and desirable in research settings. This practice of reflexivity appeals for a detailed consideration of the relationship between the researcher and the participants in order to examine and make transparent issues such as power and privilege.

Research Relationships: Distance and Closeness

There are many examples of the 'stranger' or the 'outsider' in sociological literature. Simmel (1950) described the 'stranger' as neither an outsider nor an insider but as representative of the tension between these senses of distance and closeness and therefore as maintaining a unique position in relation to the group as a whole. Howard Becker (1966) also examined this tension between insiders and outsiders in an attempt at 'normalising' deviance and deviant behaviour. Lefebvre (2004) suggested that 'rhythms' are lived on the 'inside' and that they must have been lived to be understood but that they can only be analysed from 'outside'. These writers all suggest that the dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside' is not deeply entrenched but is mutable and permeable.

The sense of being on the 'inside' or the 'outside' became very important for a number of feminist researchers such as Oakley (1974) or Stanley and Wise (1993). These scholars argued that by being an 'insider', women feminist researchers had a privileged ability to access 'inside' knowledge and information when working with women research participants and they could establish a more 'equal' relationship with them, along with certain responsibilities towards that group. These approaches suggest that being an insider has some unique status in terms of research (even when this might prove problematic, such as allowing aspects of the research situation to be 'taken for granted') and that it is diametrically opposed to the position of 'outsider'. Collins (1986) complicated the sense of insider and outsider by adopting an intersectional understanding of multiple variables of difference - such as class, race and sex - and by describing the 'outsider' within: the possibility of being 'within' in terms of certain characteristics but remain an outsider in terms of other aspects

These ideas relating to being an 'insider' and an 'outsider', or of distance and closeness, became essential for me in my research since I was variously positioned in this project. I acted as a student, which at times, gave me a sense of being an 'insider' since the participants in this research were also students. For example when discussing Woodlands, one participant commented: 'I think it's quite sort of traditionally 'studenty' in a way if you know what I mean...' (Jacque, Subject J, Full-time), highlighting the taken-for-granted assumptions that she may have assumed existed between us as students. However, I also operated as a researcher within the project, which could inform a sense of being an 'outsider'. I am a postgraduate student and this gave a certain sense of closeness with respect to the focus groups carried out with other postgraduate students and also of

distance when working with undergraduate students. I had a sense of being an insider when undertaking certain focus groups, such as those comprising sociology students, but an outsider in other areas of the research, such as the occupation since I had not previously been actively involved in student politics.

Furthermore, this sense of 'insider' and 'outsider' could shift in individual focus groups depending on the topics being discussed. In one focus group at the occupation a participant commented 'shall we tell you about the occupation now?' (Jazmine, Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time). This statement acted in a sense to renew my status as 'outsider' in the group (in which at other points in the discussion I had felt very much an 'insider') through the participant asking to 'tell' me about something that I was considered to be 'outside' of. In this way, I often felt that my status within the focus groups as either 'insider' or 'outsider' interacted with what Goffman (1959) refers to as public or 'front region' and private or 'back region' presentations of self.

However, this interaction was not necessarily simple in terms of my 'outsider' status leading to 'public' presentations of self by the participants and my 'insider' status leading to private presentations of self from the students. In the example from the focus group above I felt that my status of outsider in relation to the focus group at that moment did correlate with a public persona being displayed by the participants as they began to speak about the occupation in a way aligned with promoting and publicising it. My outsider status at times also allowed participants to take a greater control of the group and, on other occasions, I felt that my status as an 'outsider' allowed participants to explain things in greater detail than they might have in groups where I was viewed as an 'insider' who already had that knowledge, perhaps allowing the participants to invoke private presentations of self in a deeper way through these explanations and reflections.

Likewise, student participants seemed to draw on my position of researcher and perceived links that I had with staff at the university in order to use the groups as a mechanism to give feedback. Participants frequently asked me if I would be relaying comments back to the staff at the university, and such questions tended to precede various observations or complaints regarding the course structure or the difficulty of navigating the university for some students:

Eva: There's so much information in the first few weeks and you kind of get swamped ... I hope that this sort of thing gets fed back... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

I found that participants were able to use the research encounter to voice agendas in complex ways and this also interacted with my status as an insider or an outsider, or being both an insider and an outsider simultaneously. For example, when I conducted the discussion groups in spaces that students were familiar with the participants were already in one type of 'role' (Goffman 1959). The students at the occupation frequently adopted a political persona, emphasising the positive aspects of student life at Woodlands and the 'links' and sociality that they were aiming to 'defend'. In contrast, the students who participated in the discussion groups in seminar rooms either immediately or shortly after their lectures or seminars had finished seemed to be in a course-related role. These students seemed more focused on communicating the difficulties surrounding their specific courses with members of staff at the university and, to this extent, emphasising their experiences of loneliness and isolation. However, these differences could also reflect the way that focus group participants were keen to make connections with one another, for instance the students in the occupation were not studying the same courses and so the politics of the occupation was their point of commonality.

These various co-ordinates within the groups led me to thinking of my participation not only in terms of 'inside' and 'outside' as conceptualised by previous research. Instead, I experienced dynamic dimensions of distance and closeness that had to be worked with and worked upon and that were open to change at any moment. This distance and closeness, or intimate distance (Luckhurst 2002), could at times be explicitly related to social differences, particularly of age, gender and ethnicity between me as researcher and the group members (as described above), but this was not always the case. In addition, the focus groups were complicated further by the presence of a co-researcher, an MA student who was of a different ethnicity to me, and who was sometimes closer to the status of the student participants than I was. Such complexity in research transgresses a simple identity politics or analysis of power relationships. Instead, I view identities and power as continually shifting and constantly constructed in the research dynamic.

Temporality in the Research Encounter

In addition to these senses of distance and closeness, it is also important to consider issues of temporality in the research setting. The participants in the research may have felt variously distant from or close to certain topics discussed according to the temporal and spatial positioning of the focus groups or the practice-led research method. For instance, one focus group was conducted on the same day that students were receiving their first

formal essay mark and feedback. This timing had an *affect* upon the topics discussed as it appeared to make the boundaries between the students and the university quite stark and highlight to them just how non-collaborative their education appears to be; to this end the participants talked about the process of marking work and the sense of their education as being non-collaborative at great length.

Value and measure are discussed in the Introduction (Chapter One) and Literature Review (Chapter Two). However, it is important to note here the way that essay marks represented another form of official indicator for the students, which they talked about as reductive - although not in an unproblematic way - of their actual experiences of study. The various 'official' practices and procedures of student life appear to 'smooth out' accounts of student experience and student value (this is, of course, not always the case) but also leave students with few opportunities to assert alternative perspectives (although, as discussed in Chapter One, student and staff movements are challenging this). Furthermore, the focus groups were conducted in the Spring Term, between the Christmas and Easter breaks, meaning that students reflected on items relevant to this term or the holiday breaks and perhaps overlooked issues that may have been more important to them in the Autumn Term (but it is important to also recognise that the talk in the focus groups did also at times traverse different temporalities, with the past and the future being discussed in addition to the present).

The focus groups also took place in a crucial political moment at the university with the announcement of higher fees and a student protest in support of lecturers at which groups were also conducted. This created almost a 'before' and 'after' temporal landscape to the research, with the idea of higher education before the fee increase announcement and higher education after, which interacted with the individual biographies of the students in multiple ways. Francesca Polletta (1999) explores the form and substance of 'free spaces' of collective action and protest and argues that:

'They are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the crucial challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilisation' (1999:1).

Free spaces encompass dense social networks with intersections of ties and conceptual spaces that allow radical identity formations and mobilisations to occur. The student occupation at Woodlands had a number of such spatial-temporal qualities that are present in this research. The practice-led research occurred in the Summer Term, perhaps eliciting

a different affective response from students as they were coming towards the end of the academic year. In this way there was a temporal and affective ebb and flow in university life that the positioning of the research methods highlighted. All of these temporal-spatial issues and others, particularly individual factors that cannot always be accounted for, would have impacted upon the way students spoke about their experiences in higher education.

Yasmin Gunaratnam (2013) discusses the temporality inherent in focus group research in her study of British Bangladeshi mothers and intimate citizenship in East London.

Gunaratnam argues that the participants' flexible and frequently ambivalent temporal schemas allowed them to combine a predictable temporality of racism with the unpredictable nature of the London bombings in 2007. In this way, temporal ambivalence becomes a tactic of agency and a means of coping with the insecurity of threat.

Of relevance here, Gunaratnam also describes the way that the temporality inherent in her method of focus groups both transmitted and fashioned the research problem of intimate citizenship through the paradoxical movements between the intimacy of the polyphony of the women's voices and the distancing and ambiguities of simultaneous talk with its power to make public and also disrupt the practice of focus groups. As Gunaratnam points out, simultaneous talk is not necessarily commensurable talk and may disguise difference between participants, but through its inaudibility it makes visible the nature of research as the origin of the research object. This then points towards the way that the temporality of methods is implicated in the production of the research and can be seen in the current project as various temporalities collided – the particular moment in higher education, the time and places of the focus groups and individual temporalities, including my own – in the creation of this thesis.

Temporality has additionally been important in terms of my relationship to this research. The writing of this thesis has taken place over a considerable length of time. Whilst Marian Pitts and Anthony Smith (2007) refer to the classical model of research that begins with a literature review and follows a linear route through the data analysis and towards the conclusion, this structure has frequently not resonated with my project and I have moved in and out of various parts of this research at differing times, experiencing an ebb and flow of distance and closeness between the data, previous studies and my own framing of the thesis through the writing.

Methods

Focus Groups: Meaning in Action and Action Research

The application of focus groups to this research could be said to stem from the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967) and ethnomethodology, which viewed the social order as created by speakers. I have chosen to use focus groups in my research for two main methodological reasons: their use in feminist research because of their claimed advantages of producing contextualised, complex, relational and naturalistic data (Wilkinson 1998); and their use as a method of action research (Watts and Ebbutt 1987), allowing for public participation in the research process. My research has also involved a process of testing such key claims about focus groups, examining issues such as the ability of focus groups to decrease the power of the moderator and focus groups as a participatory and consciousness-raising method.

Through a meta-analysis of definitions, Wilson (1997) argues that the majority of focus groups share features such as comprising a small non-threatening group, lasting for around one to two hours and establishing a safe environment that encourages group interaction and the consideration of different points of view to take place. In addition to this, Kitzinger (1994) states that:

‘The group is ‘focused’ in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity, such as viewing a film, evaluating a single health education message or simply debating a particular set of questions’ (1994:159).

By drawing on group interaction as an essential element of the data, focus groups avoid assuming that the individual is the appropriate unit of analysis (Wilkinson 1998). This sense of the interactive construction of meaning relates to a relational as opposed to individual view of self (Gergen 1985) and draws on Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) understanding of the active interviewing process (which also applies to focus groups) as a reality-constructing and meaning-making occasion. However, Silva and Wright (2005) argue that focus groups can exclude, conceal and assert differences and distinctions between participants and between the researcher and participants:

‘To believe that people simply have opinions that they can display in talk is to take an essentialist epistemological position’ (2005:4).

Silva and Wright (2005) argue that expressing opinions is a skill that reflects existing experiences of education and privilege. For this reason the person who is talking in a group and the social and cultural position of the individual is essential to any interpretation and analysis of the data. For instance, in mixed gender groups the men tend to dominate the discussion (this also happened to some extent in one of my focus groups). Therefore, the structural locations of participants can affect their reactions within focus groups, often in complex and non-straightforward ways. This suggests that focus groups may not necessarily represent an empowering method (Marshall and Rossman 2010) as status differences between participants become replicated within the research. In my study status differences emerged between mature students and other students, male students and female students, postgraduate students and undergraduate students, first year and subsequent year students, and working-class and middle-class students; this is unlikely to be an inclusive account.

In this way, although I was working with university educated participants, I certainly found power differentials within the research. Not all participants were able to express their opinions equally and some participants who were themselves very knowledgeable about focus groups actually took on the role of moderator at times by making statements such as '[this is] my last point before wrapping up or I will have been talking for too long' (Martin, MA Subject A, Full-time). Many of my participants appeared to be 'hyper-aware' of the dynamics of the focus group due to their in-depth knowledge of research methods.

This hyper-awareness enabled certain participants to exert control within the group and structure the conversation in ways that less knowledgeable or confident participants were unable to do, suggesting the possible recreation of pre-existing hierarchies (especially gender relationships). Nevertheless, the interaction in the groups also frequently appeared to be very naturalistic (this was especially the case where the participants knew each other beforehand) and the focus group research was, perhaps, more naturalistic than many other methods such as one-to-one interviews would have been.

Furthermore, the fact that participants were able to take control of the group discussion is also an advantage of focus groups in terms of democratising the power relationships and potential differentials between the researcher and the participants (Johnson 1996) and allowing topics of conversation to be introduced that I had not directly asked questions about (for example, loneliness and isolation, or virtual technologies); this is consummate with a feminist, participatory ethics (Wilkinson 1999). However, participant control of focus

groups is not necessarily always a positive aspect of the method as it can represent power differentials and hierarchies, such as gender, or attempts at status equivalence through the erosion of the methodological expertise of the researcher; it was essential for me to be aware of this. Focus groups can also be used as a consciousness-raising technique and this was important for this project. Padilla (1993) based his work on Freire (1970) and used focus groups as a method of empowerment. Padilla (1993) states that:

'By critically examining through dialogue the problematic aspects of their own lives, the subjects are able to gain the critical understanding that is necessary to identify viable alternatives to existing social arrangements and to take appropriate actions to change and improve their own lives' (1993:154).

Michelle Fine (1992) used this approach to research adolescence and sexuality, giving a communal and political basis to what could otherwise be understood to be an individual issue. I found the use of focus groups as a consciousness-raising strategy to be both successful and challenging. During the discussions a number of participants made remarks that suggested that they had come to think about things differently from being in the group. For example, when discussing difficulties at university, one group who were all studying for Subject J (a postgraduate professional qualification) commented that:

Susanna: ...I think maybe there should be like a rep for Subject J possibly, I've never thought about this until this discussion but maybe there should be someone who addresses Subject J things... (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: Yeah within the whole kind of university... (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: Yeah just a spokesperson because you know you have these people who want to be elected and a lot of the things they're saying don't really have, I don't feel, much relevance to me or to the course... (Subject J, Full-time)

Similarly, another group all studying the MA Subject A, when discussing loneliness at the university in general and the problems they had encountered with building relationships within their cohort, remarked that:

Eva: I did notice in our groups that people would often sit by themselves to begin with in the year, we've kind of merged together now, but I think it did take a while for people to integrate together, even just in the lectures (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: Yeah you're right... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

All: Long pause

Amelia: I think we should arrange to meet over things like food ... and drink ... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

All: Agreement and nodding

Eva: Yeah, I think we should (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: That would be nice (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: We need to put dates in the diary... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

This shows how, at times, the focus groups in this research did have a consciousness-raising effect and how, following Donald Bligh et al (2000), discussion in groups can help to develop values and motivation regarding specific topics. The method therefore became an important tool in an interventionist and participatory mapping of student experience as some participants were able to begin to overcome their structural isolation by realising that others experience similar exclusions (Wilkinson 1998). Nevertheless, it is not known if any of the suggestions had any consequences for subsequent meetings or action. It is possible that the groups were more cathartic than transformative and it is therefore important not to overstate their potential for participatory politics in this research (Bloor et al 2001:98).

Despite the apparent consciousness-raising potential of the focus groups in this study, it is also the case that students are frequently approached to take part in group discussions as part of what Batchelor (2008) refers to as the over-canvassing of student opinion. This could be a problem for this research and it could occasionally take quite a lengthy explanation from me to reassure participants that this project was not driven by an ethics of market-research. There was apathy from some students regarding participation in the focus groups for this reason. One potential participant gave me her email address and said that she would be genuinely interested to talk about these issues on a one-to-one basis but that she was sceptical about focus groups as the method was frequently used by university departments to gain student opinion.

In addition to this potential 'over use' of focus groups amongst the student population, other well-documented problems with employing this method include that they are not useful for quantification (the overcoming of the quantitative/qualitative debate is discussed in the Literature Review, Chapter Two), comparisons or generalisations. 'Sensitive' material may be lost in focus groups if participants are unwilling to share with one another, although

the social support of a group can also help participants feel more confident in sharing (Wilkinson 1998:119). Nevertheless, despite these potential disadvantages to focus group research they enabled me to examine meaning in action from a perspective of action research and were therefore considered to be a suitable research method for this project.

The Practicalities of the Focus Groups and the Feedback Seminar

I undertook a total of seven focus groups in the Spring Term 2011 and one feedback seminar in the Autumn Term 2011. The groups contained between two and six participants, with 28 participants in total, four of whom were male; four of the groups were inadvertently female only. All of the participants were students at Woodlands at the time of taking part in the research. A summary table of the participant information is presented below (Table 2) and further details are in Appendix One. The information is made anonymous in order to respect the confidentiality of students and university departments. Sarah Elsie Baker and Rosaline Edwards (2012), with the help of experts in research methods and early career researchers, reflected on the question 'How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough?' and answered 'It depends', on the type of project, time, resources and issues such as saturation. I felt that the seven focus groups in this research allowed me to gain a depth and breadth of data whilst still allowing for careful analysis given the inevitable constraints of time and resources.

Group	Participant Information	Subjects Studied (Anonymised)
1	Katherine, Eva, Amelia, Martin	MA Subject A
2	Jacque, Sam, Susanna	Subject J (Postgraduate Professional Qualification)
3	Britta, Phil, Cate	BA (Hons) Subject B; BA (Hons) Subject F
4	Sara, Kyla	BA (Hons) Subject A
5	Beatriz, Debbie, Jazmine	MA Subject B; BA (Hons) Subject D
6	Masie, Steph, Liz, Erika, Lydia, Katie, Lila	MA Subject G
7	Arian, Paul, Andrea, Lucinda, Karen, Helen	BA (Hons) Subject D; BA (Hons) Subject F; BA (Hons) Subject C; BA (Hons) Subject E; BA (Hons) Subject H

Table 2: Focus Group Composition

At the beginning of each group I collected basic demographic information although I did not collect details relating to social class or ethnicity and so I have had to infer this from my own perceptions, which is problematic and unreliable. Reflecting the way that researchers cannot always fully control the composition of focus groups due to the necessity to respond to the needs of participants and locations (Marshall and Rossman 2010), the groups in this study tended to be opportunistic and based on circumstances as opposed to the ability to pre-plan group characteristics.

Although literature suggests that focus groups are typically ‘consisting of between six and eight participants’ (Bloor et al 2001:26), or four to twelve (Wilson 1997), the group that contained only two participants involved the discussion of a sensitive topic that could potentially involve high levels of emotion for the participants. Renzetti and Lee (1993:5) state that sensitive topics involve threat to participants in terms of unwelcome consequences of participation in the research. Since the two participants in this group had experienced similar circumstances in the course of their studies a small group was used to minimise any potential harm resulting from participation in this research. Furthermore,

focus groups with female participants (which this one was) may benefit from limited numbers, as this has been posited as better reflecting the often intimate nature of female friendships (Bloor et al 2001 in Mackenzie 2012).

Five of the focus groups were digitally recorded. One of the remaining two was not recorded due to a technical error and the other one was not recorded as participants were concerned about issues of anonymity. I relied on my field notes for the analysis of these groups. The feedback seminar was not recorded. Refreshments were provided for all groups and all participants were thanked for their participation and de-briefed at the end of each focus group. I acted as a moderator for five of the focus groups and the feedback seminar and as an assistant moderator for the remaining two, which a postgraduate student collaborator moderated. This strategy (which was not entirely successful, mainly due to a lack of interest from other student collaborators) was intended to make the project as participatory as possible and to begin widespread dialogue around the issue of 'student experience'.

I initially attempted to use a self-recruitment method whereby I advertised the groups in emails, letters to specific groups of students, such as those with children at the nursery, and posters around the university, but this proved to be an unsuccessful method of obtaining participants. I therefore relied on an opportunity sampling method (by the student collaborator or myself approaching groups of students) or by using a snowball sampling method (whereby students or staff recruited participants to the groups) as discussed by Bryman (2001). These techniques were not used to obtain a representative sample of participants and the results from this study do not purport to be directly generalizable to the wider population. The difficulties with recruiting participants may have led to an excess of students drawn from my own department, since my networks were based there.

Before the recording of the focus groups began, all participants were given an information sheet to read (see Appendix Two) and a consent form to sign (see Appendix Three) which detailed aspects relating to their participation and confidentiality. However, since some focus groups were carried out in a student occupation of a university building, a number of participants did not wish to sign the consent form for fear of later being identified as involved in the occupation; verbal consent was taken. This follows Coomber (2002), who states that although signing a consent form may suggest that participants understand the consequences and implications of their participation, it can also by its very nature reduce confidentiality and anonymity. This was something that students in the occupation felt

very strongly about and I accepted their verbal consent as equivalent to a signed ethics form.

Contact details such as email addresses were obtained from those participants who wished to provide this information and transcripts of the discussion were sent to them so that they could make further comments if they wished to. However, very few students chose to comment on the transcripts, perhaps because they felt they had been able to talk freely in the focus groups or maybe due to time constraints or lack of interest. The structure of the focus groups followed Breen (2006 in Mackenzie 2012): a group welcome, topic overview, ground rules, ice-breaking activities or questions, and discussion based on the topic guide.

I (or the student collaborator) briefly introduced myself and the project and then each participant was asked to say her or his name and give an interesting piece of information about her or himself to act as an icebreaker and to stimulate group cohesion (Fern 2001), although the ice-breakers were not always entirely successful in promoting discussion and could lead to turn-taking and nervous laughter from the participants. The project was introduced as staff-student collaboration at the university with the aim of getting more people involved in the project. However, this also had consequences for the data gained and for my position as researcher and I believe that this strongly influenced the topics that participants discussed with me, especially the students at the occupation.

The focus groups had a topic guide (see Appendix Four), which was developed following the pilot focus group. This guide was not rigid and groups spent more or less time on each section of it, however it was used in all of the groups as a way to focus the conversation (although groups also discussed many issues that were not on the topic guide). The pilot focus group used a vignette to help concentrate the group's efforts on the issue (Bloor et al 2001). However, this was discarded after the initial group as it was time-consuming and did not appear to be helpful. The topic guide adopted a funnel design (Marshall and Rossman 2010), whereby as the group progressed I changed from positive and wider to narrower and more sensitive topics, although the groups finished with more positive topics to ensure that the participants felt safe when leaving the research situation.

The groups lasted for between 40 minutes and one hour and 20 minutes. I transcribed the focus group recordings in full, and analysed the data using the software package NVivo, based on a thematic analytic approach. I also wrote field notes following each group and I transcribed these and added them to the focus group transcripts where appropriate. I noticed that participants, especially in the focus groups who had not previously known each

other, tended to turn-take when responding to questions instead of engaging in a more 'natural' group narrative. This, at times, made the data appear more like individual interview transcripts than as capturing the social context of meaning and it led me to reappraise my technique. To remedy this issue I spent longer at the beginning of each group introducing the project, explaining the nature of focus groups and performing ice-breaker exercises.

Nevertheless, I continued to experience difficulties, particularly with heterogeneous groups, and this follows Bloor et al (2001) who suggest that diverse groups may not produce in-depth conversation. This tended to result in focus group extracts that appeared to be very 'complete' and lack some of the qualities of natural language such as interruptions, reflecting perhaps more of a seminar group than a focus group. In some ways this highlights some of the main themes of this thesis: the way that participants appeared to be continually moving between a distanced and more formal way of talking (as they might experience in seminar discussions) to trying to connect with one another and engage in a greater sense of closeness.

The most 'successful' focus groups, in terms of the conversational depth generated, were conducted with participants who had pre-existing relationships with one another (although the 'risk' of such groups in terms of research is that they may be less likely to express taken for granted opinions, making interpretation of the data more complex; Marshall and Rossman 2010). These groups often had the ability to generate a great deal of expressed affect especially in terms of sadness and shame, which was often implicated through silences (Brannen, Lewis and Nilsen 2002). I was at times able to record this in my field notes. The differences between pre-existing groups of students and those who did not previously know each other highlights my perhaps naïve assumption that the role of 'student' and the discussion of 'student experience' alone would give individuals in the focus groups a sense of homogeneity, meaning and closeness.

Following the focus groups I conducted a feedback seminar with students on the MA Subject A course in order to enhance the analysis (Bloor et al 2001). I presented a vignette from my focus group research and the students discussed this and also added to the data in novel ways by carrying out mini-ethnographies of the university, such as taking their own photographs and capturing twitter conversations. All participants at this stage of the project were asked for their permission for their work to be included in my research and signed consent forms. The feedback seminar confirmed and elaborated upon many of the

themes that had been discussed in the focus groups. I did not digitally record this seminar but I wrote field notes immediately afterwards and included these notes in the thematic analysis of the focus group findings.

Data Analysis

I used a thematic analysis for the focus group data using NVivo to develop and code themes. This involves perceiving 'a pattern, or theme, in seemingly random information' (Boyatzis 1998:3) and I adopted a data-driven as opposed to theory-driven approach to the coding and resembles Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach or analytic induction as described by Martyn Hammersley (2010). Various writers conceptualise the analysis of qualitative data as occurring in stages. Burns and Gove (2002) discuss the stages as description, analysis and interpretation and Boyatzis (1998) writes about sensing the themes, using the codes reliably, capturing the essence of observations, and interpreting the information in a way that contributes to the development of knowledge.

I found that as I coded and analysed my data I moved between these various stages and I occasionally re-coded or added segments of text to an additional code even when I was in the process of writing-up the results. This approach was time-consuming as it meant constantly returning to the data. However, it maintained a degree of 'openness' and 'flexibility' that Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue is essential in qualitative data analysis. In reporting the findings of the focus groups, where possible I have used lengthier quotations than might typically be employed when reporting interview material. I have done this in an attempt to preserve the context of the speech and the sense of group meaning. However, this has not always been possible or necessary and, to a large extent, I have relied on my personal judgement regarding this matter as informed by previous research (such as Wilkinson 1998, who argues for the advantages of this style of reporting).

Daniel Oliver et al (2006) discuss the 'Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription', highlighting the way that transcription is a central part of qualitative research and form of representation; as such researchers must reflect carefully on their decisions as opposed to merely viewing it as 'a chore' (Agar 1996:153 in Oliver et al 2006:1). According to Oliver et al, transcription can reflect naturalism, where language is viewed as reflecting reality and transcribed verbatim – such as in conversation analysis - or de-naturalism, in which language constructs reality and idiosyncratic elements of speech can be removed in transcription.

These positions are ends of a continuum, with a variety of approaches in-between. I have opted for a transcription style closer to de-naturalism in that I am still interested in accurately transcribing the data, but this has less to do with the idiosyncrasies of speech and instead reflects 'the substance of the interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation' (Oliver et al 2006). This relates to the use of a discourse analytic approach, and highlights the focus that this project has on the meanings as opposed to the mechanisms of talk.

Discourse Analysis: Talk as Experience

'Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct and constitute them' (Fairclough 1992:3)

Thomas Csordas (2008) writes that 'the filaments of intentionality that crisscross between and among us humans take sensuous form in language' (2008:118). I draw on this sense of language as material and with substance in relation to this research: 'the word is indeed made flesh and dwells amongst us' (Lecercle and Riley 2004:46). I read talk of student experience in this research as neither subjective and mentalistic, nor as objective and behavioural, but as communications that are performative and that can be explored and mapped. Therefore, I attempt not to take such discourse at face value or, conversely, to abstract it from the contexts in which it has sense-making connections. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) write that:

'Survey research interviews ... where answers can be quantified on a Likert Scale are so prevalent that their capacity to produce evidence is taken for granted...' (2000:7).

However, this approach 'fails to address the way in which respondents' meanings are related to circumstances' (2000:8) and leads to a decontextualisation of discourse, which the coding of any qualitative responses exacerbates. My research aims to act as a counterbalance to this rational approach to the subject by applying the analytical framework of discourse analysis to the data. The definition of the term discourse can be slippery but Hollway and Jefferson (2000) write that discourse:

'Refers beyond language to a set of organised meanings (which can include images as well as words) on a given theme ... The term 'discourse' has been used to emphasise the organised way in which meanings cohere around an assumed central proposition, which gives them their value and significance' (2000:14).

To this end, I am particularly interested in examining the way that talk works to construct, enable and constrain 'experience'. Consistent with this is discourse analysis, which views talk as social and as taking place within a context as opposed to viewing discourse as conveying a message in a transparent way (Billig 1987). The context of the talk may place certain normative requirements on the speaker (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000) and acts to shape, enable and constrain the options available to her (Taylor 2007) as she concurrently uses and creates language (Wetherell and Edley 1999). This shows how discourse analysis does not reduce a subject to linguistics but explores how discourse acts to 'institute, solidify, change, create and reproduce social formations' (Wetherell and Potter 1992:2).

Discourse Analysis in Practice

The practice of discourse analysis is often related back to the discourse theory of Foucault (1977), who described his approach as archaeological as he advocated uncovering the meanings of discourses in everyday practices, such as mental health settings. This approach rejects a naïve realism that accepts empirical evidence as unproblematic (Billig 1987, Fairclough 1992) and focuses on the way that empirical evidence is always produced in a context, not only the immediate site of its creation but also the societal and ideological background in which it occurs; to overlook this may act to misrepresent the meanings of participants, as discussed in a previous section of this chapter (Oliver et al 2006).

Rebecca Rogers (2011) discusses the application of critical discourse analysis to educational settings. She argues that critical approaches to discourse analysis understand that inquiry into meaning is also always an inquiry into power. Rogers points out a variety of approaches to discourse analysis: systematic functional linguistics (Fairclough 2003); critical ethnography of communication (Blommaert 2001); and sociocognitive studies (van Dijk 1993); however, she cautions against a strict categorisation, asserting that there are many points of commonality and convergence. Accordingly, in this project I have drawn my methods from a wide range of approaches and I have adapted them to this study, although I am concerned mainly with discourse as a social practice and the situated context of talk and also the post-structuralist concern with the way that subjects themselves are constituted in discourse:

'To the extent that a representation is regarded as realistic, it is because it is so familiar it operates transparently' (Shapiro 1988:xi).

Sara Mills (2004) writes that discourse analysis is concerned with examining language in the context of power relations and the production of knowledge as opposed to focusing on the formal, abstracted qualities of language. Mills distinguishes between two approaches to discourse analysis: the first focuses on the organisation within a piece of text; and the second relates the text to broader social structures whilst also being self-critical in terms of its claims to 'truth'. The former approach is discourse analysis (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), where the functional units of conversation, such as saying 'anyway' to signal a transitional moment, are described and analysed. This concerns what the participants do with words more than what words actually mean in any given context. A second variety of this approach goes further and is practised by social psychologists such as Wetherell and Potter (1992) and Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2000), who apply post-structuralist theory to talk through the medium of discourse and conversation analysis.

The latter approach, which pays greater attention to issues of power, is critical discourse analysis and includes writers such as Fairclough (1992), who analyse texts from a political perspective and are more influenced by Marxist linguistics and Foucault than the discourse analysts are. Nevertheless, all of these approaches differ from traditional linguistics in that they analyse language in use as opposed to concentrating on its abstract formal properties. This therefore draws from a philosophical tradition of writers such as Wittgenstein (1967), who argued that a meaning of a word can only be discovered in terms of its socially shared use in language or 'language games', thereby going beyond a positivistic representation of reality and arguing that all truth claims are contextual.

In this thesis, I am particularly drawing on the sense of discourse analysis developed by social psychologists such as Wetherell and Potter (1992). They aimed to counterbalance the sense in Foucault of discourse as abstract and causal by arguing that discourse is a social practice. In their study of racism, rather than assuming one homogenous discourse on racism, they were interested to chart the way the group of participants discursively managed racism, specifically the mechanisms through which racist ideas could be expressed without the speaker being considered racist through invoking abstract as opposed to personal evaluations.

Wetherell and Potter (1992) also proposed an alternative understanding of the subject in, for instance, attitude research, as they highlighted how the scales that underpin survey research fail to account for the variability of thought, language and action. They suggested that people are not carriers of inner biased attitudes and representations but they provide

context-dependent categorisations. Important in my research is Wetherell and Potter's (1992) notion of variability as a tool to aid discourse analysis: examining patterns of variation and consistency in the form and content of participants' accounts.

Critical discourse analysts such as Fairclough are also interested in such post-structuralist questions but they apply a wider analytical framework and more critical perspective to texts (Mills 2004). For instance, Fairclough (1992) studied dialogues between doctors and patients and examined the way that different discourses can clash (the technological rationality of the medical model can clash with the lifeworld view of the patient). This shows how social relations are not merely one discourse or another but are constituted by overlapping, disjunctive and competing discourses; there is no one interpretation of a text but that units within a discourse can be differently interpreted.

Jan Blommaert (2005) notes five principles of critical discourse analysis (which I have found useful in my analysis): first, it analyses what language signifies to those who use it; second, language operates differently in different contexts and therefore analysis must be contextualised; third, the varieties and nuances of language must be examined; fourth, people do not communicate freely but are constrained by their frameworks of communication as influenced by their background; and fifth, communication events are influenced by external structure.

I have also found Paul Gee's (2005) approach to discourse analysis to be important since it describes how social relationships and identities are constructed through communication. Gee uses 'discourse' to refer to language in use and 'Discourse' to refer to a socially enacted identity. Gee's 'seven building tasks' aid the analyst in constructing meaning from a set of discourse patterns. The tasks include: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems and knowledge. Each dimension has a set of associated questions, such as to discover the situated meanings of the words in the situation (Rogers 2011).

Following this discussion, it seems that there are two main approaches to discourse analysis, or critical discourse analysis, which have developed from different academic backgrounds. The first approach, which is aligned more closely with the social psychologists discussed by Mills (2004), is the sense of construction, variability and function in language. The second approach is the issue of power and constitution as found in Foucault and Fairclough. Both of these perspectives argue against a realist conception of

language and examine the process of meaning-making, but from different perspectives and to different ends. I will be adapting these approaches to the context of this research.

Discourse Analysis in Educational Studies

Other writers have adopted a discourse analytic framework to educational research. Guadalupe Lopez-Bonilla (2011) examined narratives of experience by Mexican high-school students facing expulsion. She found that 'not belonging' may arise as a consequence of lacking the necessary resources (social languages, skills and knowledge) and the identities to fully participate within the specialised domains of school. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1994:9 in Lopez-Bonilla 2011) have argued, for working-class children:

'The divorce between the language of the family and the language of the school only serve to reinforce the feeling that the education system belongs to another world...' (2011:48).

Lopez-Bonilla takes this further and suggests that not only do some students not have access to the linguistic codes of teachers, students are also deprived of ways of seeing the world from particular standpoints; for instance they describe subjects they fail in as 'otherworldly'. Kate Brooks (2008) also conducted a discourse analysis on students' talk about their experiences, this time at university, following one-to-one interviews with participants. Following the analysis of the transcripts, Brook asserts four 'learning modalities' or 'publically acknowledged ways of living at university' (2008:36) that structure students' discourses, including a 'consumer' modality and a 'slacker' modality. Duna Sabri (2011), whose work is discussed in the Literature Review (Chapter Two), also drew on a critical discourse analysis method when researching official documents in higher education.

However, discourse analysis has been criticised for assuming that powerful participants simply dominate discussion in straightforward ways and for suggesting a consistency of variables such as gender, ethnicity and class across contexts (Mills 2004). It is also argued that it tends to elide the position of the speaker with that of the analyst and merely produces an analysis of the key terms within the discussion. However, Gee (2011) counters this by writing that the terms flow from the data, not from the researcher, and it is also useful to invoke the idea of the psychosocial subject, as discussed previously, to keep in mind the complex power shifts between participants and researchers and the dynamic identities of participants in research.

In this thesis, I aim to combine different aspects of approaches to discourse analysis in order to create a conceptualisation of talk of student experience that is interpretive and respectful to the participants (Oliver et al 2006) whilst at the same time it does not take talk at face value but looks for the relations of power, ideology and meaning construction that are implicated when groups speak together. This also tessellates with my use of Hollway and Jefferson's (2007) defended psychosocial conception of the subject, which examines how participants position themselves in wider discourses.

Dialogic Approaches to the Data

Consistent with my view of talk and experience as dynamic, relational and continually constructed, following Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) I adopt a dialogic approach to the different forms of data produced in this project. I have attempted to put different aspects of my data into conversation with one another, for example by situating the practice-led research with the focus group quotations, previous literature and other reports and projects produced within Woodlands and examining their meaning together.

These other reports include the Woodlands Learning Enhancement Unit Annual Learning Technology Survey (Kear 2013) and the Departmental Student Co-Ordinators (DSC) Annual Group Project Reports (2013), a collection of four undergraduate and three postgraduate reports into 'student experience' at Woodlands (see Appendix Five for further details) where student representatives (who have requested anonymity and are therefore referred to throughout this thesis by their group identity or title of the report) investigated and reported on issues using mainly survey and interview methods. Similar to the research in this project, these reports provide more questions than answers and must be read in nuanced ways; as highlighted by some of the postgraduate contributors to the DSC Projects (Postgraduate Group One):

'We encourage reflection on both positive and negative aspects [of student experience] but, perhaps understandably, it is when students have had problems that we are most in demand. Our experience is then somewhat skewed, we hear the anomalous stories, the anecdotes that testify to an outdated and bureaucratic system, the stories of 'incompetence' and 'disorganisation'' (2013: unpag).

It is therefore essential to bear in mind the conditions of production of such data (as has been discussed previously with relation to my own research): those students who may have had more negative, or more positive, experiences may be more likely to respond to such

studies, as suggested in the quotation above. Recognising the situated nature of research and its conditions of production whilst placing various sources and projects in conversation produces a dialogic work that participates in a continual conversation with previous literature and, in this project, with itself, through the discussion between the various types of data collected and drawn from. This also fits with Clifford's (1986) sense of partial truths and the exploratory and open-ended nature of this research.

'Are Academics Megalomaniac Sociopaths?' Arts Based Methods

I have drawn on creative approaches in this research as a form of participatory intervention in the social world and a mapping of it in Marcus' (1998) sense. Raymond Williams (1982) writes that relationships in the social world are often deeply embedded in forms of art: art can be used to form the basis of social change and the ability of art to express shared yet contentious understandings makes it a method of implicitly or explicitly seeking to redefine social power. Nirmal Puwar and Sanjay Sharma (2012), drawing from the UK Mass Observation work in the 1930s, argue for the benefits of 'curating sociology' in terms of developing 'Live Methods' and the 'mutations' involved in creatively engaging with the social world through collaborative projects and exhibitions in a way that is 'alert to other ways of telling about society' (2012:44).

In this way, art can challenge hegemonic ways of understanding the world and creating new ways of thinking visually could transform modes of interpreting and constructing our reality. For example, Patricia Leavy (2008) writes that arts based research - or practice-led research (Frayling 1993) - allows questions to be explored differently, or new questions to be posited, and it also means that diverse audiences can be reached (although this is often an ideal yet to be realised given the pressure to present in scholarly journals). Therefore, arts based research, due to its expressive characteristics, may be especially good at accessing multiple viewpoints and temporalities (Marcus 1998) and transforming the way we see the world. Nevertheless, practice-led research has not been widely used in social scientific inquiry.

The British Sociological Association (2004) urges sociologists to 'protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy' and to 'ensure that the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of research participants is not adversely affected by the research'. Due to the nature of my research, which resulted in participant-created photographs and a mapping of the university that drew on creative approaches, these directives are examined here in terms of visual research. One ethical issue pertinent to the

visual research in this project is that images can radically change as they cross boundaries; once a photograph is created it is an object in the world with a 'career' (Appadurai 1988) that has a history involving a number of people in its production and it is embedded in a particular set of social, cultural and economic relations. It is necessary to be explicitly aware of this embedded nature and the way an image might be re-contextualised: images always permit recoding.

Les Back (2007) argues photography is not only about fixing and controlling subjects and to theorise it as such misses the slippages and dramas on either side of the lens. Back offers a different sociological perspective on photography that involves neither 'de-coding' the images for notions of class, privileged viewing, or the context of its creation, nor using it purely as realist evidence in scientific research. Instead, Back suggests that the photograph can be used as a form of dialogue between the researcher and the researched, allowing for a greater democracy within the research process and an understanding of non-verbal experiences.

My approach to the images produced in this research has been to attempt not to fix their meanings in a rigid way but to display them alongside the text and approach them from a discourse analytic perspective. Following Prosser et al (2008:20), I have been aware that participants often draw upon their own ethical codes when producing and censoring photographs and may not take a photograph of a part of their lives they do not wish to reveal or speak to the camera in a way that they feel does not represent them (participants may also 'edit' photographs before showing them to the researcher, for instance by deleting images they do not wish to become 'public'). This highlights the agency of the participants and suggests that a single narrative of surveillance or appropriation is not sufficient for examining visual research.

One aim of my project was to act as an intervention and I was therefore interested in taking part in collaborative research and activities with other students at the university. Attempts to work collaboratively with others were at times successful and at other times quite unsuccessful despite various emails and meetings between us. There are various factors (such as timetabling or the difficulties involved in realising ideas) why some such attempts did not go beyond the initial stages of discussion. However, in this section I will describe one collaborative endeavour that was efficacious.

In early 2011 a group of staff and students met to discuss ways of re-mapping the university and, following this meeting, I sent speculative emails to some of those who had

participated asking if they would like to begin working together on these themes. One of the respondents was Karen, an art student at the university, and we decided to begin collaborating together in order to 'map' the university by working within and between our respective disciplines: sociology and art. In the Summer Term 2011 we positioned 12 boxes around the university that asked questions such as 'what is one question or curiosity you have about Woodlands' and we provided slips of paper and pens so that participants could respond to the questions and then post them into the boxes. In total we collected 142 responses.



Figure 1: In the Library, 'What is One Curious Question You Have about College?' (Researcher's Image)

These responses have been used as the basis for a short video (which has not been included here, as mentioned previously). In this project I have placed the responses in 'conversation' (following Bakhtin 1981) with the focus group extracts. The box responses were frequently framed as questions and although the focus group data does not specifically address these questions many of the excerpts do touch on the same themes and the questions can be seen as ways to concentrate and dialogue with the focus group responses. This conversation is also one of differing temporalities since the box responses were collected in the Summer Term and the focus group data was collected in the Spring Term, contexts that give a very different texture to student experience.

The method of data collection that we devised produced a 'mapping' of the university in two ways: first in terms of the responses received and the issues forwarded; and second through a consideration of the places in which the boxes were tolerated and those in which they were removed by security. This gave a sense of the physical spaces in which students have a degree of control and those others that they are expected to merely move through, relating to the participant photography - see Figures Four and Five - discussed in the Data Analysis Chapters. For instance, my field notes indicate the way a security guard suggested to us that:

'It's different if you have the official clearance. If someone touches your boxes, we will watch out for them on the CCTV and stop that from happening. Anything you do in the university - videoing, drama - you have to go through the proper procedure. That's how it is with risks. You have to go to your departments and talk to the administrator about your idea or your project, get the forms, get clearance. Then they would be official and no one would touch them'.

There were a number of questions raised by this practice-led research. Since the responses were anonymous, the method can be seen to reduce the level of topic threat (Renzetti and Lee 1993) and to this end some quite controversial statements were received that may not have been mentioned in the focus groups (for example, 'are academics megalomaniac sociopaths?'). Participants may have therefore felt able to express themselves more freely, much like when undertaking an anonymous survey. However, as has been argued in relation to survey methods in the Introduction and Literature Review, the box experiment offered a limited technique as it is not possible to know the relational context of the responses or the characteristics of the person who gave it. The statements become detached and disembodied as differences were flattened out. For this reason it has been important to recognise the specific constraints of this data and to position it within the context of the project as a whole.

Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead

This chapter has considered the methodological issues and the methods employed in this thesis. I have described the methodological reasons for choosing the methods that I did, including my relational psychosocial approach. I have explored the sense of 'mapping' invoked in this research, linked to the ideas discussed in the Introduction and the Literature Review, and I have situated my methods in terms of previous literature regarding them. The following four chapters will now concentrate on the analysis of the data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

Everyday 'Student Time' in Higher Education

Introduction

'I've Got So Much Work to Do'

This chapter examines the affective experiences of students in relation to the temporal structures, continuities and 'dis-junctures' in higher education. Although, according to the NSS, student 'satisfaction' for degree courses in the UK seems to be 'higher than ever' (Marszal 2012), current studies also indicate that many students experience emotional distress in higher education (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011, Chapter Two). The NSS narrative – despite being broadly 'affective' in terms of asserting a linear Likert Scale of satisfaction and dissatisfaction - may obscure the emotional diversity, breadth and complexity of such experiences.

Likewise, the 'Student Academic Experience Survey' report (Bekhradnia 2013), by the Higher Education Policy Institute and consumer group 'Which?', found that although students are now paying more money to attend university, this is not reflected in an increase in facilities, contact hours or time they spend studying, resulting in a recorded 'dissatisfaction' amongst students. This is in contrast to the findings of the NSS. However, as with the NSS, this survey collapses discrete experiences into a measure, or commodity, through the blending of different variables such as contact hours, time spent studying and 'satisfaction'. Such blending creates a version of student experience lacking in detail and texture through the reduction of complex and - as is shown in this research - frequently ambivalent experiences to linear scales of one-dimensional affect.

The following data analysis chapters will present evidence from my study to challenge the inherent market-driven narrative of student experience, where time and affect are both presented as linear and 'rational'. Temporality is conceptualised as 'progression' through the education system towards the labour market. Affective experiences are reducible to individual rational choice with resulting categorical outcomes on a Likert Scale of one to five points, which are subsequently ranked, producing value, and circulated in what seems to be treated as if it were a free market of perfect competition in higher education (Verran 2012).

At the very heart of what has been termed this neo-liberal discourse of students and university life is an approach to the subject as a rational learner, reflexively able to

construct her own identity and future (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2000). Through my conceptualisation of individuals as relational and psychosocial subjects (Ruch et al 2010; Hollway and Jefferson 2000), I aim to highlight the omissions of market-orientated measures that create a limited version of 'student experience' as a 'hybrid object' that passes through a number of technologies and sites of production (such as the NSS or KIS) and which has affective consequences for those with different experiences, especially for those least able, or least willing, to act as rational learners in a neo-liberal knowledge economy.

Previous studies into student experience that consider factors relating to time and space have often been concerned with the management of time (or space), such as the numbers of hours spent studying, or places where studying occurs. For example Bekhradnia et al (2006) measured student experience in this way, using a survey approach to examine factors such as how long students study for or how frequently they attend the library (see Chapter Two). The problematic of this chapter is how to move beyond an analysis of the apparently 'neutral' medium of clock time and space to begin to examine the rhythms and multi-dimensionality of space and time concurrent with individual affective experiences. Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) state that clock time involves 'dis-embedded metanarratives of progress' accompanied by 'the ever finer rational calculation of time' (1994:13).

This suggests that time is an abstract, neutral and progressive phenomenon that encompasses a linear past of memories and a future that can be rationally planned for. As highlighted in the Literature Review, I situate time as multiple, over-lapping and frequently dis-junctive. Not all students experience higher education as a unidirectional temporal flow of forward movement. For some students, the progressive market-driven discourse is difficult to engage with and alternative, typically marginalised, rhythms are important when describing their various experiences.

Zerubavel (1979) conducted a study of hospital life using ethnographic methods to explore how the communal organisation of daily routine and practices framed individuals' experiences of time. He discusses the pace institutional time; for instance the rhythmic adherence to rotas, mealtimes and medicine times determine the texture of the everyday. The coherence of the hospital relies on these collaborations. However, Lash and Urry (1994) describe a de-regularization of such processes in postmodernity, where work times are increasingly scattered, flexible and individualized. Shifting temporalities without a

notion of shared time makes organising social life increasingly difficult (Woodman 2012) and contrasts with Zerubavel's (1979) examination of institutional times, pointing to the existence of distinct experiences of temporality.

In this chapter I aim to conceptualise time and space as also personal phenomena as opposed to relying on the sense of the 'universal student' or emphasising the mind at the expense of the body. I situate individual biographies in their broader conditions, paying attention to both individual and institutional rhythms, the way they converge and also create dis-junctures with one another and the differential impacts that this has on individual students based on their 'locatedness' and life circumstances. The apparent separation of student experience into something that happens only at university obscures the important connections between social relations in various spheres and the lifetime consequences of this, for example in relation to gender, or to being a mature student (see Michelle Bastian 2011). A linear conception of time can restrict certain identities and forms of cultural life.

This chapter explores such issues in terms of the way that different timescapes (Adam 1998) and rhythms of time, such as public and private, interact in higher education, particularly as mediated by the factors that temporally structure university life such as timetabling and holiday periods. When examining time and space it is also important to bear in mind that the focus groups in this research were themselves conducted in very different spatial-temporal contexts - both Bakhtin's (1984) 'carnival' of the student occupation, in terms of its ability to subvert and emancipate, and the more 'everyday' (Felski 2000) student life - and are also implicated in the production of the research problem. Resonating with work by Yasmin Gunaratnam (2013) discussed in Chapter Three concerning the experiences of British Bangladeshi mothers and intimate citizenship in East London, I am also interested in the mechanisms through which the temporality inherent in the focus group method used in my research both reflected and created the concern of this chapter. For Carol Greenhouse (1996):

'The narratives are inseparable from the formulations they communicate. That is, time and space are principles of both narrative organisation and social organisation simultaneously...' (1996:45).

The approach to temporality that I am adopting follows Lefebvre (2004) and Edensor (2006), as outlined in the Literature Review. I am interested in the 'polyrhythmic' and multiple times of both cyclical and linear rhythms and the way that these 'time maps'

interact and collide in student experience, often in disjunctive ways. Discussing environmental disaster and degradation, Barbara Adam (1998) writes that:

‘Time becomes a quantifiable resource that is open to manipulation, management and control, and subject to commodification, allocation, use and abuse. Emphasis is placed on visible materiality at the expense of that which is latent, immanent and hidden from view: the bulk below the surface remains inaccessible’ (1998:11).

It is this bulk of inaccessible time where Adam locates the majority of environmental problems and, likewise, it is the area that I am interested in exploring in relation to student experience. This is time as a lived process as opposed to a static product (the event time of Adkins 2009). My aim is to develop a notion of ‘student time’ as grounded in the ‘everyday’ and based on the way that this issue was conceptualised by the students in the focus groups whilst paying attention to the differential positions that individuals occupy with relation to this sense of ‘student time’.

Temporality and the Everyday

‘The content of the notion of daily life expands or contracts according to one’s definition’ (Felski 2002:607)

The realm of the ‘everyday’ and the temporality associated with it is nebulous (Scott 2009) and has been conceptualised by some writers as being transformative and by others as referring to the more mundane, routine or residual parts of life. Based on Marx’s notion of transformation as emerging from a non-economic realm, Lefebvre (1984) and also De Certeau (2000) emphasise the heroic quality of everyday life and argue that the everyday world is a site of spectacle with the potential for special *affects* and experiences. However, for some researchers, the festival or transformation cannot be regarded simply as part of the everyday. Hugh Mackay (1997), discussing three differing approaches to everyday life, argues that one sense of the everyday - what he terms the ‘anthropological’ perspective - describes everyday life in terms of:

‘...The humdrum, the routine, even the drudgery ... it encompasses our taken-for-granted routines, that which we repeat daily, as distinct from the exceptional or sacred interludes in these’ (1997:7).

Likewise, Tony Bennett and Diane Watson (2002) suggest that:

‘Everyday life is just that: how we get along on a day-to-day basis. As such, the concept of the everyday implies a contrast between some kinds of days and others – between weekdays and weekends, for example, or between the rhythms of regular working life and the occasions when these are punctuated by special events, holidays or celebrations when everyday time is suspended’ (2002: x).

According to this account, the everyday excludes conviviality and festive qualities. Rita Felski (2000) also asserts that the focus on transformation in the everyday by writers such as Lefebvre and De Certeau fails to convey ‘the very everydayness of the everyday’ (2000:80). Similarly, Bennett and Watson state that everyday life, in contrast to being heroic, refers to ‘the daily lives of ordinary people’ (2002: x). Felski (2002) argues that particularly modernist conceptualisations of everyday life are frequently intertwined with ideas of gender, such as women’s lives as representative of routine and men’s lives as reflective of change. Nevertheless, Felski (2000) does not agree with Mackay’s (1997) anthropological approach that everyday life must be confined to the mundane. Instead, Felski argues for different temporalities to be regarded as interrelated and everyday life to be viewed as internally complex, involving both repetition and change: ‘the content of everyday life is extraordinarily varied’ (Felski 2002:614).

Felski therefore moves away from the definition of everyday life as being placed in rigid or dichotomised terms, such as the residual being separated from the ‘special’. Instead she suggests that everyday life is complex and combines both change and stasis. This sense of everyday life as inter-woven, textured and complex is essential to the analysis in this chapter and to my notion of ‘student time’ as I consider a variety of temporal structures that interrelate, often grounded in various linkages, detachments and dis-junctures that may be partial in nature. Continuing the theme of disrupting binaries in the everyday, Raymond Williams (1958) adopts a material perspective to the cultural realm, seeking to equalise the way that working-class and middle-class lives are interpreted. Felski (2002) makes a similar point in relation to gender, asserting that:

‘The experience of moving between the registers of the everyday and the extraordinary is surely shared by all human beings, not just some’ (2002:617).

Raymond Williams in ‘Culture is Ordinary’ (1958) argued for a more egalitarian way of understanding everyday life - particularly working-class everyday life – in a way that

equalised the relationship between working-class and middle-class culture through paying attention to everyday life as both 'a whole way of life' comprised of 'common meanings' and concurrently as creative and dynamic. Williams demonstrates the seriousness of working-class culture, in contrast to the way it is frequently misrepresented and marginalised (as it often is today, for instance in the 'chav' stereotype) and struggles against the idea of middle-class culture being the primary site of aspiration for all individuals.

The importance of ordinary culture in William's work, and the textured nature of the everyday in Felski's conceptualisation, challenges the dominant discourse of student progress that focuses on a linear conception of temporality as progress. This is to treat the everyday as situated as opposed to a one-dimensional backdrop to experience, excavating it as opposed to naturalising it (Smith 1987, Gardiner 2000). However, this is not to argue that everything can be included in the everyday. Felski (2002) states that 'it makes no sense to polarise the everyday and its other' (2002:616) although 'to deconstruct an opposition is not to do away with a distinction' (2002:617).

Furthermore, Alberto Melucci (1996) argues that the everyday can be transformative, but it is not in and of itself heroic. The everyday is not necessarily inclusive of everything and the distinction between the everyday and some aspects of the carnival can still be made. Rather, in Gestalt fashion and following Raymond Williams, the total of the 'minute web of times' contains the potential to create something 'greater':

'Daily experiences are only fragments in the life of an individual, far removed from the collective events more visible to us, and distant from the great changes sweeping through our culture. Yet almost everything that is important for social life unfolds within this minute web of times, spaces, gestures, and relations. It is through this web that our sense of what we are doing is created, and in it lie dormant those energies that unleash sensational events' (Melucci 1996:1).

Everyday Time in Higher Education

Rossatto (2004) links temporal factors to affect in education studies through a study of optimism. He argues that the major temporal factor is blind optimism, which exhorts individual hard work over collective action, negating the importance of social movements. There is a hidden curriculum of blind optimism in the academy, leading to a 'banking' notion of education and a disguised frustration experienced by students, leading to the idea

that the more time you spend working the more successful you will be and excluding students from questioning how they use and conceptualise time.

Much recent research has examined time pressure and the difficulties of balancing 'work' - the first shift - and 'life' - the second and third shifts - (Hochschild 1997) and efforts currently centre on individualised pathways of labour and leisure due to an increasingly non-standard work time (Southerton 2003), often by using a 'time allocation' or 'capability' approach (Burchardt 2010). I am particularly interested in the way in which these variable patterns of work and leisure impact upon the affective and everyday lives of students. For Michelle Bastian (2012), time is socially constructed and therefore learned, it is at once real and also imagined (Rossatto 2004), influencing social and temporal interactions.

Students come to university and to the focus groups with individualised ideas of time based on their backgrounds and previous experiences, although it is likely that there will also be some similarities due to them having chosen to come to higher education, success in previous academic institutions and so on. This relates to Hargreaves (1994) idea of the 'boundless self': success may be framed in terms of ability to adapt in the face of constant change. In this way, those students who are able to adapt to (or who already tessellate with) the temporal structures of the university may be those who 'succeed' in higher education. Woodman (2012) writes that youth (and by implication, student life):

'...Is popularly associated with relatively more leisure time with friends than at any other point in the life course' (2012:1075).

However, students must increasingly engage in a combination of study and paid work and their daily schedules are becoming progressively more variable and individual (Woodman 2012). The temporal variability that students experience is also likely to be greater at Woodlands due to its arts-based timetable (with relatively few timetabled hours), and also in contemporary times, as temporal pathways become more individualised and students (perhaps especially 'non-traditional' students) mix study with paid employment and family responsibilities.

Oechsle and Geissler (2003) comment that little research has been conducted into the way that unpaid work or personal commitments structure everyday life, perhaps due to the structural dominance of the occupational realm. It is also likely that students who are situated in certain structural positions have the largest burden of navigating various temporal structures, leading to experiences of particular affective landscapes for them. In

this way, with the increasing flexibility of work patterns and the blurring of the public and private time, attention has turned to the complex management of the relationships between different time structures. This affords the opportunity to develop a notion of student time that is not based on the male 'standard' biography or neoliberal ideas of linear progress. Student time appeared to involve idiosyncratic combinations and management of study, work, sociality, activities and responsibilities.

The temporal framework of higher education appeared to be flexible but binding and participants attempted to manage competing obligations. Oechsle and Geissler (2003) write how the female participants in their study either linked to a career, linked to a partner, or attempted to engage in a combination of linkages. These linkages and detachments could be both material and affective and were not polarities but involved various partial positions. In the focus groups in this research, all of the participants appeared to be participating in the third option by attempting to maintain links with study and other areas of their life to a greater or lesser extent.

This strategy allowed for a 'busy' use of time (which appeared to be an important moral conceptualisation for the students) but also led to a complex interconnection of different time structures and a continuous rebalancing of temporal demands, which were frequently dis-junctive (especially for certain students) in ways that both reflected and created positionalities for participants. Student time transgresses a strict gendering of time-space, with the masculine time of linearity and production and the feminist time of cyclical reproduction. Instead, a number of different timescapes (Adam 1998; Lefebvre 2004; Edensor 2006) combine in student time and must be navigated both personally and with reference to those of others.

Women, frequently engaged in both production and reproduction, often experience a clash between linear and cyclical temporalities. On the one hand they are expected to take much of the responsibility for caring and on the other they are expected to conform to the time demands of paid work, which is disciplinary in its temporal expectations (Hochschild 1997). Picking up on the way that social actors experience and invest differently in time, Michelle Bastian (2012) argues that individuals may fall outside of shared social life for not 'living, embodying or performing time according to normative models' (2012: unpag). Such a view is also suggested by Carol Greenhouse (1996) who, as Yasmin Gunaratnam (2013) highlights, argues that:

'Time can be a tool for managing social differences through the production of commensurabilities' (2013:8).

Put another way, if individuals cannot conform to dominant time frames then they may be excluded or marked as different through their incommensurability. This challenges the sense of 'timeless' time (Urry 2000) as discussed in Chapter Two and aims to re-situate and re-embody time, arguing that linear time is not a natural phenomenon that merely forms a background to social life but is an active construction that often works to negate difference whilst those who do not perform to the standards of such time experience the 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2007) of not conforming.

Seepage and Continuity: Non-Linearity in 'Student Time'

'Why am I working here on a sunny day?' (Box response)

This section turns to an analysis of everyday patterns in higher education in the form of temporal and spatial structuring of the day to day, week to week and year to year: holiday dates, work placements and course beginnings and endings. Whilst a market-orientated approach to education tends to view university life as a linear and progressive experience for students, this section seeks to highlight the way that within this sense of 'clock time', the universal time of industrialism, there is a layering of 'event time', where time is viewed as performative, situated and 'unfolding' (Adkins 2009). Many participants in this study struggled to find alternative discourses to the neo-liberal idea of progress when discussing time and appeared to feel marginalised if their experiences could not be encapsulated in terms of linearity but instead appeared to collide or be dis-junctive.

Participants studying for Subject J (a postgraduate professional qualification) discussed the temporal factors involved in postgraduate study and found that the vocational element of their course acted as a spatial and temporal axis, which had implications for their emotional experiences at university. When discussing the stress and intensity of the Subject J course, these students remarked that:

Susanna: Well it kind of comes in waves, like when you're at [placement] that's really hard-core because it's like having a normal job only more difficult because you're new and that so when we're in [placement], university doesn't really figure because we have contact with our... with a tutor and we're doing work but we're never here or anything... (Subject J, Full-time)

Co-Researcher: ...Would you choose to do it part-time if you had the chance?

All: No, no...

Susanna: ...No I wouldn't, just because it kind of drags it out... obviously some people have to, like financially... (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: If you've got children... (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: Yeah if you've got children, if your circumstances... (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: It's a good option... (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: Yeah it means that it's open to like, because often quite a lot of people do it like being in a career and the change from their career, so they might be a bit older, like not just out of university or something, but no, I'd do it full-time, even though it is ...because it is stressful but it's only for one year (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: Yeah... (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: If that, so it's worth just getting it done, it's quite short at the end of the day... (Subject J, Full-time)

Experience as coming in 'waves' - a cyclical temporality - whilst also being linear – 'it's only for one year' – gives the vivid impression of distinct temporalities interacting continuously, both as measurable units that can be calculated in advance - for instance, the course length - and also as affective dimensions that might have a certain degree of unpredictability. These affective dimensions are suggested by waves of stress - or 'hot spots' (Southerton 2003, discussed later) - occurring at various points throughout the course, such as when the students are on a placement. Such a conceptualisation of time is divergent from the emphasis on linearity and progression in market-driven narratives of higher education. Following Lefebvre (2004) and Rhythmanalysis, the social, the physiological and also the biological are characterised by separate 'rhythms':

'Each of these levels, each of these dimensions, has its own specificity, therefore its space-time: its rhythm. Whence the inevitable shocks (stresses), disruptions and disturbances in this ensemble whose stability is absolutely never guaranteed' (2004:81).

In addition to the structuring of experience as 'waves' according to work placements, the spatial-temporal division between public and private realms, inherent in conceptualisations of 'clock time' (Adkins 2009), was not always evident in this current research as highlighted by the Box response above, 'why am I working here on a sunny day?'. For instance, even though it is a sunny day (perhaps even a 'holiday'), the student is still working in the library, recalling Lash and Urry's (1994) notion of disorganised capitalism as opposed to industrial capitalism, where individualised instead of common pathways are etched through time and space. This theme was picked up in one focus group when the participants were discussing the way that their course fits into their lives. The conversation moved to students' experiences during the holiday periods:

Katherine: The conflict comes, we were talking I think at lunch time, about how for me the timing of the course and when assignments are due in, because I've got a family, that's actually quite difficult because it means that some of my most intense work is actually over their school holidays and that really does cause conflict and because like at Christmas, I'm the focal point for Christmas, our home is, the whole extended family comes to us for Christmas so that was really difficult because we had two big assignments due in after Christmas and that's probably been the biggest conflict... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: ...You could sense that slightly in your emails because, it was quite interesting, when I was emailing you before Christmas they were very responsive emails, over the Christmas period there was like one word, oh no, it's two - 'bog off' - something like that (MA Subject A, Full-time)

All: Laughter

Katherine: But it's like now we're coming again to the Easter holidays and there's no way I'm going to have all these three [assignments] sorted by then - unlike some people... laughs - um but again, so there's guilt, I do feel guilt, you know, I feel 'why am I doing this and putting my family through this as well' and saying 'you can't talk to me, I'm doing this studying, go away, shut the door'... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Although the university holidays do act as a form of structuring for Katherine, this is not necessarily in terms of the division between the public and the private worlds (Lury 2002) since the institutional time of the university appears to seep into and interweave with

Katherine's home life in ways that she describes as creating 'conflict' and 'guilt'. Instead of a clear division of public and private spheres, as suggested by Celia Lury (2002) in relation to 'boundary work' shaping everyday life between different realms such as home and work, the holidays seem to create an affective structuring for Katherine. Festive periods become times of stress and frustration due to the porous boundaries between the different temporalities of work deadlines and family responsibilities meeting one another in acute relief. The porous boundaries discussed in the focus group appear to be in contrast to the separation of public and private realms. Lury (2002) cites Nippert-Eng (1996) describing how breaks allow individuals to assert a division between home and work:

'Whether for coffee, lunch or vacation, any formal break in the workday or work year provides an opportunity to demarcate public and private time. In fact, it actually encourages us to do so...' (1996:91).

However, when this separation is not possible, the stress and frustration due to the colliding of 'times' is similar to Dale Southerton's (2003) notion of 'hot spots', where a multi-layering of distinct tasks and times combine together, often in conflicting ways, and create a feeling of 'harriedness' (busyness and anxiety) for the individual attempting to manage them. Also implicated here is Mary Holmes' (2002) discussion of the gendered nature of time and her assertion that 'women have no time':

'Women's engagement in time-giving and generating means they also lack control over time as a resource within male-dominated capitalist society...' (2002:41).

Arjun Appadurai (1990), in his article 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' examines different landscapes, including: ethnoscaples, the global movement of people; technoscaples, the influence of global technology; finanscaples, the global nature of finance; mediascaples, narrative accounts; and ideoscaples, ideologies and counter-ideologies of movements. Appadurai argues that the relationship between these landscapes is disjunctive and unpredictable since they are subject to their own conditions whilst also interacting with one another: global flows 'occur in and through the growing dis-junctures' between them (1990:301). For Appadurai:

'Global cultural processes today are products of the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference on a stage characterised by radical dis-junctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these dis-junctures' (1990:308).

Some students in this project appeared to experience a series of temporal and spatial dis-junctures that, at times and for certain individuals, led to a psychosocial sense of *dys-ease* within the university. For instance, in the case of Katherine, even though she attempted to boundary her public and private time, for example by not responding to emails during holiday periods, she found that she was unable to fully prevent the institutional time from seeping into her home time and vice versa, such as when she talked later in the group about caring for her unwell child during term-time affecting her ability to complete assignments. Dis-junctures and incommensurability between such temporalities were expressed with feelings of conflict, frustration, guilt and stress for Katherine (although embedded within this was a sense of ambivalence since Katherine also talked about the way the flexibility of higher education allowed her to manage her time to accommodate her family in a way that full-time work did not; this issue is explored later).

Following this, Hinton-Smith (2008:67) describes research by Acker (1980) and Edwards (1993) that discusses the idea of the university and the family as 'greedy institutions', showing how demands from both arenas must be juggled for student parents as each makes insatiable demands on commitment (student parents have a particularly high non-completion rate, Hands et al 2007). Edwards (1993) states that both the university and the family are task-orientated as opposed to time-driven institutions where tasks must be completed regardless of the length of time taken and this can add to the pressure of balancing dual demands.

It seems that Katherine felt it was difficult to 'build bridges' between the spheres of home and study in a way that allowed her to keep the domains separate but also compatible (Oechsle and Geissler 2003). Katherine's experience also relates to what Dale Southerton (2003) terms the narratives of care and convenience. Southerton argues that an idealised past can lead individuals to feel guilty if they seem to be compromising the care of interpersonal relations such as children in order to submit to temporal structures such as the university or work. The degree to which people are likely to or find it necessary to compromise care for convenience and the anxiety they experience when doing so is likely to be linked to social distinction and capital (Bourdieu 1993).

Southerton (2003) adopts a time allocation approach and suggests that busyness, or what he terms 'harriedness' (which includes a sense of anxiety or worry) results from the need for individuals to co-ordinate timetables with other people, thus creating 'hot spots' - where work is undertaken - and 'cold spots' where time was spent with significant others.

Such 'time squeezing', necessitated by temporal alignment, leads to a felt degree of anxiety. Southerton draws on time budget evidence to support his claim, which shows that people in the United States had more free time in 1995 than in 1965 but also felt more harried.

Southerton describes how harriedness can be averted by imposing personal order on social networks (for example, a doctor in his research was able to impose her schedule on that of others and so reduce her feelings of harriedness) or fixed points such as mealtimes can be used as structure but only if all are able to abide by this. Harriedness was also minimised for those without significant responsibility for co-ordinating the activities of others (for instance, individuals with no dependents or caring work to perform). Therefore, it is not necessarily due to increased work and consumption that harriedness occurs, but due to the inability to co-ordinate schedules, with less harried individuals having the ability to assert more control over their time.

Not all participants in this research were part of what Woodman (2012:1087) calls this temporal 'precariat' of feeling a lack of control over temporal structures: a few participants had more autonomy over their time, similar to the doctor in Southerton's (2003) research. For example one male mature postgraduate student had few caring responsibilities and the ability to control his paid employment by undertaking consultancy work when he wanted to; or the undergraduate students in the focus groups at the occupation, most of whom had few responsibilities and who had time to engage in other activities and socialise (this will be discussed later).

'Real Life Gets in the Way': Student Time and Other Times

'Why is the university so elitist for some causes? Why do they discriminate against those who have to work or have outside commitments that interfere with study...?'

(Box response)

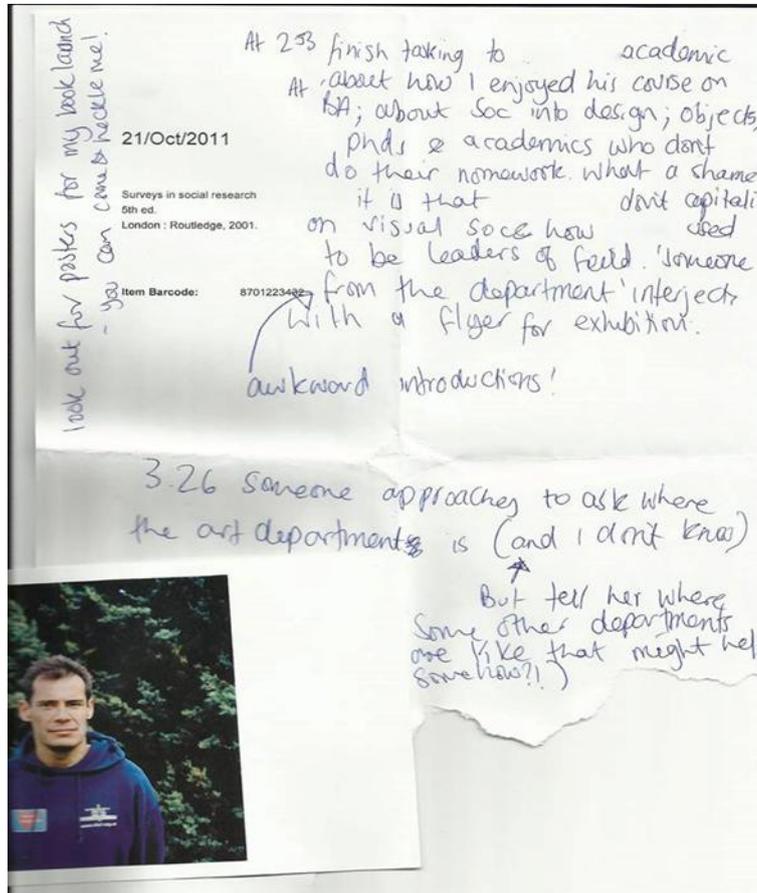


Figure 2: A Student Day (Feedback Seminar Participant)

The above photograph (Figure 2: A Student Day) was discussed in the feedback seminar as depicting the student's day. This is a powerful representation of a felt time that is non-linear, non-rational and an interweaving of complex elements in terms of study, conversations, personal reflections, chance encounters, interjections and planning. In addition to this interweaving of temporalities, important linkages – and temporal disjunctures - with others or with the labour market that had to be negotiated by students included visiting partners, childcare, caring for a disabled mother, voluntary work, paid work, visiting partners overseas or watching television with family. The stresses experienced in these negotiations suggest that, as mentioned above, many students in the focus groups experienced a lack of autonomy over their time in some respects and had to

manage these non-linear, divergent or conflicting time frames in ways that are not typically recognised by a rational conception of student experience.

This section continues to examine the way students discuss their temporal experiences, particularly when they are not 'linear', or when aspects intervene, interrupt, or collide with the institutional time of the university. Many participants talked about such interruptions as a disruption to their experience and talked about balancing work and other commitments as being highly challenging. Participants appeared to strive to achieve a linear temporality in their studies, although this was not always possible. For instance, one postgraduate focus group commented that:

Eva: I think for a lot of us we've left other things to do the MA so there are other people on our course who are still working more than most of us are I think. I left my job and I do get some money from my family and things to do the course I would like to be able to work because I did try and do some part-time work but I found that I then just got overwhelmed by the workload of the Masters so actually it has pretty much kind of taken over my life, I mean there are some other social things I do and personal interests that I have and follow up but in terms of fitting in I would like to be able to work more but I've decided that up until probably mid-May it doesn't make sense (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: I definitely find with the, I get stressed when I don't have enough time to do the MA when I worry because... I do voluntary work on Wednesday mornings that's fine but I've also had a lot of doctor's appointments and stuff this term which has taken up a lot of time travelling to and from but I also have to look after my mum who's disabled, um, a fair bit and of course I still want to keep up with seeing my friends to a certain degree as well because I don't want to be completely cut off and isolated so I find it's been quite a difficult task to balance being able to get enough time to do work and quite often I don't have as much time as I would like to have because unfortunately your real life just gets in the way it's just something you have to deal with but I have realised that's when I get stressed so I have made quite a lot of efforts to try and make sure that I do have chunks, long chunks of time because you need a lengthy period you know you can't just dip in and out for half an hour or an hour really, you know you need a set time to sit down so that's been quite a challenge... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Study was constructed by this focus group as lots of work which then equals large quantities or 'long chunks' of time and also stress. The participants in the above group left other commitments so that they could as completely as possible focus on their studies and they appeared to view external obligations such as doctor's appointments or caring for relatives as taking up time. This is a similar construction of time to that discussed by Tania Burchardt (2010), who adopts a capability approach to time, income and substantive freedom whereby the interaction of time, human and social capital and responsibilities is examined to produce income-time combinations that provide a measure of each individual's substantive freedom. Factors such as having low educational qualifications, having more or younger children, and being single or disabled were found to generate a smaller capability set in terms of a lower number of income-time combinations.

The students in the above focus group discussed having been able to leave jobs to study almost exclusively for the qualification. Related to employment whilst at university, Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) cite Moreau and Leathwood (2006), who found that for many individuals, having a job restricted students' ability to participate in extra-curricular activities and Humphrey (2006), who argues that working part-time can lead to a reduction in coursework marks. Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) suggest that there is a structural distribution to employment whilst at university, since students from working-class backgrounds have a greater economic burden and therefore are more likely to require paid employment whilst studying.

Where students do work, certain jobs (working-class jobs) are unlikely to help students develop the middle-class cultural capital that most employers are seeking following graduation and working-class students tend to be employed in unskilled jobs (Greenbank 2006 in Greenbank and Hepworth 2008). Middle-class students have contacts and networks that can aid them in finding middle-class jobs (Moreau and Leathwood 2006), creating advantage. For instance, one student in the MA Subject G focus group spoke about how she felt her part-time work disadvantaged her on the course:

Lila: I have to work eight hour shifts at [a fashion retailer] and I do think that puts me at a disadvantage to other students who aren't working those hours. It adds to the stress and makes it difficult to fit the work in (MA Subject G, Full-time)

Based on the way that students discussed 'student time' it seems that one element of the way the students talked about it led to the construction of time as capability whereby the fewer interventions they had into their time the more able they felt to be successful in their

study. To some extent this is a reflection of a 'universal student time', highlighted by the middle-class single male student who can devote all of *his* time to study. It points to the way that students attempt to manage interrelated but often colliding and dis-junctive time structures. This way of talking about student life may also be an artefact of the focus group situation with participants using this form of talk about problems and difficulties as a way of increasing social affiliation with one another and regulating the social differences between group members through constructing common ground (Greenhouse 1996).

Participants also discussed maintaining their relationships as a dis-junctive intervention or interruption of their student time and they could feel guilty about engaging in such activities, even though many students also recognised that relationships and friends were necessary for them to feel emotionally well (similarly to Amelia saying 'I still want to keep up with seeing my friends'). This highlights the difficulty of linking to the life courses of others for students, perhaps due to the lack of temporal synchronicity of individualised lives (Woodman 2012). One student (MA Subject G, Full-time) commented that:

Erika: My partner still lives in the US and it's difficult to fit in spending time with him so I can feel that our relationship suffers more than it should. I don't like taking time away from studying but sometimes I just have to go and see him because it's what we both need (MA Subject G, Full-time).

Likewise, in a different focus group it was discussed that:

Eva: I started a relationship which is long distance relationship as well so I spend a lot of time going up to [Another City] and that's sort of my time off but at the same time I feel bad that I'm not working when I'm going to visit my boyfriend and that isn't great either (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Relationships were almost considered to be things to be 'fitted in' or participants would feel guilty about taking 'time off' to spend with family or friends. This also highlights the importance of spatial factors to temporality in a society where individuals are often geographically dispersed and time must be spent travelling between different locations in order to maintain relationships (Urry 2000).

Returning to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), an individual or group's ability to manage time appears to increase or decrease with the level of cultural capital accumulated. Like Willis (1981), working-class children find working-class jobs as due to having fewer hopes for their future and instead learning to labour. Those students who appeared to have a

greater degree of 'substantive freedom' (a greater income to time ratio, Burchardt 2010) and who had more control over their time were either able to devote more time to study or to engage in various pursuits to increase their cultural capital. However, it is important to note that external responsibilities, such as children and childcare, can act as motivating factors in completing a course of higher education (Callender and Feldman 2009). Furthermore, Schuller et al (1999) highlight the often supportive nature of families in relation to study, in terms of shared financial and childcare responsibilities, proof-reading and technical help. Families can be both supportive and present temporal challenges. It is also essential to remember that productive time management can also be a classed skill, with private schools often instilling routines and self-planning into students.

Student Time as Flexible Time

Despite the difficulties, differences and negotiations involved in student time, there was also the sense in the focus groups that certain students enjoyed and benefited from what they viewed as the flexible and adaptable nature of student time since, as they discussed, it made a number of their lifestyle choices more possible than if they were participating in the labour market. This was much more the case for students who were studying academic as opposed to vocational subjects with a work placement option. For example, the MA Subject A group commented that:

Eva: I quite like the flexibility so like I've had people come and stay for, like friends come and visit me and stuff, and in one sense like if I was working I probably would have taken holiday but also, you know, if there's a day here or there where anything's happening or, you know, you can see family, or like I can go to [Another City] for a long weekend and not have to be back on a Sunday night and stuff like that, so in terms of the lifestyle that's quite nice being able to choose when you do studying and other things (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: It's a massive, massive, factor I love it I'm not a nine-to-five person at all I don't mind working on Sundays or whatever but as long as I can choose when I work, it's brilliant... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: ...I have liked the flexibility, and it's worked out quite well that my son's decided to be the illest he's ever been this year and I've not had that pressure of 'I've got to be at work, what am I going to do?' and I can't keep taking annual leave and that kind of thing, so that's worked out quite well... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Following this, there appear to be dual aspects to the nature of student time in that it is both felt as demanding and often dis-junctive by the students but also it allows for interruptions and interventions in a way that the organisational time of the labour market may not always be able to accommodate without significant prior management, for example taking time away from paid employment for a hospital appointment. However, this flexibility of student time was both talked about by students as being positive in terms of their lifestyles but it was mainly spoken about in negative terms with students being uncertain how to structure their time (this point is discussed later). In addition, interruptions and interventions into student time were viewed as highly stressful events that students felt could disadvantage them on their courses.

The above points to a paradox for students: a separation between some students enjoying the flexibility of student time and benefiting at moments from their ability to adapt to circumstances in their lives, whilst also talking about the nature of this time as stressful with an inability to co-ordinate or control it. Partly this sense of stress and busyness may be the way that students construct student time in talk and provide it with a moral dimension in terms of being seen to be working and engaging in worthwhile pursuits whilst also being stressed and busy: emotional states that may be viewed as being moral and 'worthy'.

The students in these focus groups all had a degree of optimism with regard to time, even if it was a blind optimism that emphasises individual hard work and the 'banking' notion of education (as discussed by Rossatto 2004). Perhaps these high levels of optimism were because I did not talk to students who had decided to terminate their studies (the students in the research who had intermitted had decided to return), although that would have been interesting to do. This form of optimism created an engagement with the temporal structures of the university but in a way that did not allow for transformative possibilities. In the occupation there was more of a sense of time as transformative and not instrumental, perhaps because due to the individual biographies of these students and the fact that they had a greater degree of substantive freedom (for example, none of the students at the occupation discussed having caring responsibilities) with which to engage in such activities.

Continuities and 'Carnival' in Student Time

Certain students did not appear to experience such degrees of temporal 'dis-juncture' in higher education but instead discussed student time as having a continual nature and spoke about this apparent ceaselessness in a positive way. This was especially the case for students in the focus groups conducted at the student occupation and may reflect the way that these participants were more likely to emphasise sociality since the situation was based on the creation of 'free spaces' (Polletta 1999), connections and networking. It may also be suggestive of an undergraduate as opposed to postgraduate experience of university (although there were undergraduate students in the focus groups outside of the occupation and postgraduate students in the focus groups inside of the occupation). Following a discussion of a 'typical' day, the student participants in one occupation focus group began to talk about the difficulties of their day:

Britta: Just time, just time like, everything goes so fast and there just aren't enough hours in the day to do the amount of reading and stuff that's required, plus all of the other stuff that's really interesting about Woodlands, all the different campaigns and groups and stuff going on... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Later in the discussion it was mentioned that:

Britta: ...Yeah, there just aren't enough hours in the day... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Cate: It's just like huge with so much amazing stuff going on, it's wicked, but it is upsetting because sometimes you're like 'oh there are like eight amazing things', like some wicked talk or some brilliant march or some really good music event and they're completely different things and they're all like things that would be the highlight of my week but they're all on the same day and you're like 'Argh!' (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Britta: ...Yeah, it doesn't feel like it's a week or a weekend, it's just completely continuous... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

For these students, who gave their time to the student occupation and to the focus group yet concurrently discussed not having enough time to fit everything into their lives, higher education appears to be viewed as a somewhat relentless sociality, almost without

boundary, which was exciting but could also be stressful in its incessantness. This description relates to Bakhtin's (1984) characterisation of carnival when he writes that:

'During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the experience of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants' (1984:7).

The ceaseless experience discussed by Britta and Cate is almost diametrically opposed to the way that some students, such as Katherine, talked about student time. Both Britta and Kate and also previously Katherine commented on the demands of higher education being at times overwhelming and unrelenting, but Katherine highlighted the dis-juncture and seepage between her studies and her home life, whereas Britta and Cate emphasised the continuities they experienced in terms of study, talks, campaigns and socialising. It seems that multiple axes of spatial-temporal structuring exist at the university, some of which create various difficulties, exclusions and separations for those whose biographical details may not allow them to 'fit in' with the continuous rhythm of the workload or social life, for example, for those students who have family responsibilities during the holidays. The focus groups suggested that this could lead to the experience of particularly difficult and different emotions for such students.

Although the higher education sector may focus on rhetoric of equality and inclusion through initiatives of widening participation (Bratti et al 2008 examined this particularly in relation to Italy), the spatial and temporal structuring of institutions, specifically in terms of linearity, may systematically disadvantage certain students. Such students may be multiply separated and excluded from higher education, often in insidious ways, through their difficulties with conforming to the various spatial and temporal demands and structuring of the system. These students may experience the burden of confronting and managing multiple layering and dis-junctures of time in a way that a focus on progression and linearity within the field of the university does not acknowledge.

The Moral Imperative to be 'Busy'

Students in the focus groups discussed the practicalities of their temporal experiences in a number of ways. As examined in more depth in following chapters, participants talked about feeling that they did not receive sufficient 'contact time' - specifically face-to-face contact time - from the staff at the university and they frequently mentioned feeling lonely

and isolated. However, in terms of examining how students spend their days, there appeared to be a discourse diametrically opposed to the idea of loneliness: one of study, other activities, being busy and feeling stressed, which configured certain high-velocity temporalities of belonging in student time.

On one level, this appears to be in contrast to the idea of participants wanting more contact time at university and the frequent sense of loneliness and isolation in the focus groups and highlights the complexities of the psychosocial subject (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) and also the use of talk within the focus groups as a vehicle for affiliation amongst members, with discussion of negative affect, such as loneliness and stress, creating a paradoxical sense of intimacy amongst participants. For example, in one postgraduate focus group, which had emphasised loneliness and isolation (MA Subject A, Full-time), there was subsequent discussion of a mixture of studying and other activities throughout the day:

Researcher: In order to get a sense of student experience and how you spend your time could you tell me about yesterday for you?

Amelia: I fell asleep at the library ... and Eva messaged me on Facebook telling me to wake up (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: Yeah, I studied from home for a couple of hours in the morning and then I went to [A Central Library] and met Amelia and did some work there in the afternoon (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: I came in at nine and, um, went to the library, did some computer work as well, met with Steve [tutor], Matt [tutor], and Matt set me a few tasks around putting together a bid for ESRC funding, met Michelle [tutor], went back to the library and worked on this wonderful [project] task that we've got to do that's grinding a few of us down at the moment (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: I didn't do anything related to studying yesterday because I've got a sick child at home so I was dealing with him and feeling guilty and thinking 'why are you sick when I've got so much work to do (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: I did a bit of voluntary work yesterday I got up really early, I must tell people I got up because I was really proud of myself for doing it I got up at 5.30am to go and work a shift at Childline, so I spent an hour on the phone talking about suicide and an hour talking about penises and then went to work at the library and

did more stuff for university that's why I fell asleep but I felt good for doing that
(MA Subject A, Full-time)

This quotation is interesting in terms of examining the way that students talk about their everyday experiences of time. The participants appeared to be constructing a moral sense of time, where virtuous time is based on self-improvement or voluntary work and if other things are included that appear to be more self-indulgent or not concurrent with 'university time' (such as Katherine caring for her unwell child, or Amelia falling asleep in the library) then there is a feeling of guilt or shame. A Protestant ethic of time asserts that time should be used wisely thereby resonating with Hochschild's (1997) analysis that time is becoming increasingly dominated by economic ideals. Likewise, Darier (1998) argued that being busy has become symbolic of a valuable life in and individualised neo-liberal contemporary society. For instance, Amelia at first discussed having fallen asleep in the library but then later qualified this by saying that she had fallen asleep because she got up early that morning to do voluntary work. Katherine had been unable to do any work but felt guilty about spending her day caring for a sick child, which is a different temporal experience to that of studying.

There is also a sense that these feelings of 'guilt' that certain students experience regarding engaging in activities other than study or 'self-improvement' reflect the way that certain individuals, such as those with jobs or childcare responsibilities, are positioned as not 'measuring up' within the university. This relates to Stephanie Lawler (2005, 2008) and the way that the working-class are 'othered' and viewed as not participating in middle-class and neo-liberal narratives of self-improvement, which is then considered to be an individual responsibility. Lawler (2005) writes that:

"Class' is rarely explicitly invoked in contemporary expressions of disgust: instead, the 'disgusting' traits are presented as the outcome of individual or family pathology' (2005:437).

This structural positioning then becomes internalised (Fanon 1967) as a feeling of guilt or shame (or disgust) at not measuring up to certain standards within the field of higher education. Student time has a moral dimension where time must not be seen to be 'wasted' or used inappropriately and this is accompanied by feelings of guilt (which may be gendered since it is still women who undertake the majority of childcare and housework, Hochschild 1997, and also classed). The tension between working and relaxing and the

moral imperative of busyness was evident in another focus group which emphasised guilty feelings:

Sara: I found like in, particularly in my second year, that I wasn't spending time with family or friends, I was on the computer at seven o'clock at night when really I should have stopped for the day and spent some time chatting with my friends or my family but instead I was sitting in the computer room on my own doing my coursework and I just thought that, you know, life in general isn't just about studying, you gain knowledge also just by interacting with your friends and family and I kind of put that on the backbench and just sort of ignored it, but it's not until this year that I realised actually you've got to have a balance, but then it's really hard because you kind of get tutors saying 'you should be doing this' and 'you should be doing that', 'there's this essay in' and you've got to do it, but at the same time I'm at home and I'm sitting down at the dinner table with my mum and dad and they're like 'oh, just watch East Enders tonight' and I kind of think I'd really like to just do that and in the end I do and I feel better for it actually ... Was it really bad to take half an hour out of my studying? And I think it's of benefit actually (BA (Hons) Subject H)

Sara was from a fairly working-class background (as discussed in another focus group extract where she describes her style of dress at home as 'chavvy', see Chapter Seven). Relating to the moral imperative for self-improvement in student time and the way that not all students feel they can 'fit in' with this, despite attempting to do so, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) write that:

'When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world for granted' (1992:127).

Following this, Reay et al (2005:161) argue that going to university is about 'staying as they are' for middle-class students. For working-class students such as Sara, university time imposes temporal demands of commensurable conformity upon her that create a dis-juncture with her home life, such as watching East Enders with her parents (just as the clothes she wears to university are dis-junctive with those she wears at home). However, there is also intricacy to Sara's comment that goes beyond a working-class 'lack' since she is a student in a university department where popular culture is a site of academic

engagement and recuperation of cultural value; this adds complexity to the conceptualisation of a simplistic relationship between class and academic study.

Student time appears to be both flexible but also something that must include 'worthwhile' pursuits and activities. Time is malleable but also fixing in certain ways and must be 'used' appropriately. Sara felt guilty watching East Enders, which may also be a type of working-class guilt or 'disgust' since this popular soap opera may be contrasted with the intellectual pursuit of study or other 'moral' activities. Sara appeared to feel that it was necessary to justify watching the programme by saying 'it makes me feel so much better', suggesting a feeling of guilt or shame. One participant at the occupation contrasted his experience with what he considered to be a 'myth' about student time:

Phil: Since coming to university I've realised there's this massive, massive myth about students sitting around eating Pot Noodles and getting baked bean stains down their shirt. Average student day is a hell of a lot of reading. You can't slack at university, that's been the key of my second year and I think even my first year, you know you can't slack at university and hope to pass ... There's lectures, seminars, you know, sometimes if people haven't done the reading then seminars can be a bit desolate. So yeah, lectures, seminars, a little bit of chill time maybe, scrounge a 'rolly' from someone and go to the Student Union (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time)

Within this quotation is the idea that students cannot 'slack' and still pass their courses, although Phil also states that people may not do the reading for seminars and so they can be 'desolate', suggesting that some students are in some ways 'slacking' or not completing work. It is not necessarily the case that students must work hard in order to pass their courses (compare this to, for example, the way that the postgraduate students in the focus groups reflected on their undergraduate days at university in terms of partying and getting drunk) but Phil, like the other students discussed in this chapter, constructs his time at university as involving hard work and a variety of activities. In part this may be due to the composition of the focus groups: it is likely that the students who wanted to participate in the focus groups were the more 'conscientious' students, or students who did want to structure and fill up their time or gain different experiences, which may then lead to a very specific and idiosyncratic construction of time in talk.

The constant busyness that students mention in their discussions of student time can relate to the quantification not only of time but also of affect. Busyness can be measured

temporally according to hours and minutes but it is also increasingly measured physiologically and psychologically in terms of stress. For instance, in relation to healthcare workers, Sherman and Pross (2010) argue that busyness can undermine an organisation and individual efficacy through increased stress levels. This suggests that within the neo-liberal discourse of university life, with temporal discourses of blind optimism (Rossatto 2004) where individuals must strive to work hard and achieve, not only does time become increasingly quantified but affect also becomes something that is measurable and regulated (although often overlooked, especially by discourses of student progress).

In the focus groups in this study, busyness and stress that focused on self-improvement were talked about as being positive and morally desirable. However, as discussed previously, a different form of busyness, where timeframes such as medical appointments, paid work, a desire to watch soap operas on television or childcare intervened into student life, were considered to be detrimental and reasons to feel guilt or shame at having to engage in these other realms. Such 'disruptive' temporalities appeared to lead the individuals involved to become desynchronised with the temporal demands of the institution, configuring feelings of not belonging. Yasmin Gunaratnam (2013:8) discusses such de-synchronisation from linear time when referring to one of her participants wearing the hijab:

'Ameera's body when marked by the hijab is not allowed to become part of the familiar and synchronised motility of life on London's roads. Her visibly inscribed body becomes a body out of place by virtue of being thrown out of linear time, disrupting the smooth workings of the world around her' (2013:8).

Managing Student Time

Many discussions in the focus groups concerned students attempting to create a structure within a frame of multiple temporalities, perhaps by way of making their bodies commensurable with the moral sense of time discussed above. Participants often commented on feeling unsure about how their time 'should' be used. This may be due to the non-standard occupational day for students and the fact that they must manage their time in frequently individualised ways. The field notes I recorded from one focus group (MA Subject G, Full-time) highlight this:

Many participants had spent time studying in the library, looking for books (which it was mentioned was frustrating because the library was quite small and there were insufficient texts). Participants reported studying around 4-5 hours per day as a maximum. One participant compared this to her day before beginning the MA when she was working and she would work 10 hours per day. Time was a major issue for many participants, in terms of how long to study for, how to manage time and balance other interests with studying. Participants mentioned finding it frustrating to know how long to study for, which texts to read, how much work to do, whether to follow their own interests in terms of reading or if it was better to stick to set texts.

For many students in the focus groups, structuring time was a point of uncertainty, which could lead to frustration or insecurity in terms of feeling they had no guidelines for what they were doing. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) are relevant here in terms of being 'a fish in water' but also the way that some students may feel like 'fish out of water' in relation to study. The above focus group was comprised of mainly international students and this underscores the additional pressures that may occur for such individuals, both cultural pressures surrounding adjustment and adaptation and also in terms of co-ordination of administrative requirements such as study visas (visually depicted in Figure 3: Mobile Communication, Chapter Five). As Derek Robbins (2000) comments:

'The educational system itself is involved in endorsing pre-existent distinctions and in legitimating the notion that differences are the consequences of innate abilities rather than of differing social backgrounds' (2000: xii).

One student in the above focus group discussed changing the rhythms of when she studied to fit in (or become commensurable, Greenhouse 1996) with what she perceived to be the UK norm of studying during the day as opposed to late in the evening, which she was used to previously. Furthermore, the flexibility of student time and its potential for both dis-juncture and continuity appears to lead to it having a highly constructed nature whereby students report studying for around four or five hours per day as a maximum but this figure is in some ways arbitrary as it aligns the quality of work produced with the quantity of time spent studying (again, reflecting a discourse that intellectual pursuits are 'measurable' and resonating with a modular 'banking' approach to education where time spent studying is equal to 'credit points'). The students in the focus groups spoke about developing various

structures as a means to managing their time; the MA Subject A group (Full-time) suggested that:

Amelia: I found a really good way ... to make sure that when I was working, I had periods where I didn't feel guilty not working, so that's why, and I know you laugh at me, but that's why I write down the amount of hours I work in a day and schedule them in because then I know when I've done them that's fine, I can then relax, and on the weekend I can relax because I know I've clocked up X amount of hours which I feel happy with and that's just a coping way of work, of dealing with all of it, otherwise I think I would be madder than I am, so... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: I tried to do that but then other things get in the way and then you haven't spent enough hours in the day and then I'm beating myself up for thinking 'Argh, now I'm two hours behind' and then the next day something else happens and I'm three hours behind and then it's like 'I'm never going to get these assignments done' even though we've still got four weeks to go because I haven't done the right amount of hours so it can be difficult and a dodgy way to do it... If I've worked on it, I've worked on it... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: Yeah, it's like if I feel like I've done enough or I feel like I've made progress it's easier to relax at the end of the day. If I've had quite a good day I can actually switch off and just whatever, but if I feel like I've been distracted, or if I've set myself like four hours straight but then I end up doing the hovering or whatever, then in the evening I'll think 'oh maybe I should just do a bit more' ... Yeah because it is like, it's not like when you're at a job and you're being paid for the hours you're there, so it's all down to you isn't it? And you get out what you put in. There are deadlines so it's like well it doesn't really matter if you've done an amount of hours if you still feel like you're behind in terms of how far you need to be to get that done then, you know, but at the same time I find it hard to judge, some days I feel like I'm on top of it all and it will get done, other days I feel like there's no way (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: I have days like that and I have other days where I've got a clear day but I just can't get down to the work, I'm just not motivated, the last thing I want to do is look at data or something, it's like this is not inspiring me and I go and do a chore and think I'll be alright, but no... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: But then I think you have quite a good approach, which I've kind of used a bit, which is like when you can't look at one thing anymore, because I would be like 'right, I'll get that done and then I'll have time to work on that, and that will give me enough time to do that', but actually, if you do a bit of everything, although it can be a bit confusing, but then if you get sick of one thing basically you can kind of focus on another thing (MA Subject A, Full-time)

This extract echoes the discussion in the MA Subject G focus group where student time was compared with work time and found to be difficult in terms of students judging how many hours of work to put into something. However, to some extent this appears to be a quantification of a qualitative experience since students fail or pass their courses in terms of the quality of their work and not necessarily the amount of hours that they have spent doing it; whilst quality of work and quantity of time may well be related, it is not a perfect correlation.

Instead, this quantification of experience appears to meet a desire to structure and manage time and to not feel guilty about having time away from work; it also reflects the 'banking' notion of education discussed above (Rossatto 2004), which encourages the quantification of academic labour through the credit point system. This quantification is then quite arbitrary: participants discuss working for two hours or setting themselves four hours of work, but this is a constructed sense of how much work they need to be producing.

Quantification then allowed the participants to 'feel good' about having completed the work, which again relates to the moral sense of time developed in these focus groups. There is a discourse of time as being equal to success: 'you get out what you put in' as Amelia comments. The students in these focus groups talked about feeling that they 'should' be doing a certain amount of work and then they would feel 'behind' or 'ahead' based on whether or not they had managed to achieve this. However, the amount of work that they 'should' be doing seems to have been set by them. It is also interesting to examine the type of activity that is included as 'studying' and the way that students appeared to attempt to develop strategies to avoid the feelings of guilt discussed earlier. For instance:

Amelia: I found the book that we got recommended by, the Becker book, 'Writing for Social Scientists', was really helpful because it was things like don't expect what you're writing to be perfect first time because if you expect that, if you expect it to

be brilliant, of course it's never going to be like that because if it was you'd never start because it would be an impossible task (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: Mm (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: So realise that writing is a process of going through editing and editing as well, and that's fine, and that's good and saying that, you know, everyone's got their own little ways of working you know you might need to have certain pens or you might want to have a certain type of paper or you might need to have a clean space to work in so you might need to make sure the house is tidy first, that's OK, that's part of the whole process, it's preparing yourself for it, it's not the negative thing that we think about it, so now when I am tempted to go and do something like clean the bathroom beforehand I might think 'OK well I'll do it, but that's not necessarily a bad thing' and it's just part of the whole... writing isn't just sitting down at the desk bashing out words it's the whole approach to it I think as well, and reading that definitely massively helped and holding on these snippets of information has helped to keep me going through the bad dark days... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

All: Subdued laughter/agreement

These discourses of student time seem to suggest that for the participants in these focus groups, time was experienced as a something to be managed, both symbolically through the way they represented it and constructed it in the focus group discussions and also actually in terms of their daily schedules. Student life is comprised of multiple and often conflicting or dis-junctive times that are frequently given the impression of being simultaneous, perhaps because individuals manage (or struggle to manage) the complexities, expectations and differences inherent in such 'systems' of time (Jurczyk 1998).

Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead

The concept of student time has been developed and discussed as both binding and flexible, with the experience of frequent dis-junctures between linear time and interventions or collisions into this temporality from other rhythms and timescapes. These intrusions appeared to be most keenly felt by those students who were not already synchronised with the temporalities of the university.

In this research, students who appeared to find synchronisation with the temporal demands of higher education most challenging were women, working-class students, mature students and those with caring responsibilities. This chapter has shown how temporality in student life consists of a variety of different rhythms and imperatives – for instance the necessity to be ‘busy’ - that must frequently be managed by individuals, in contrast to any sense of the universal student framed by a background linear time. The next chapter will focus more specifically on student time and virtual technology.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS

Virtual Affects

Introduction

'You do Feel Remarkably Out of the Loop'

In this chapter I continue to focus on the temporal dimensions discussed by students in the focus groups, paying particular attention to the way that the market-driven emphasis on linear progression in higher education and multi-sited configuration of the hybrid object of student experience can lead to the marginalisation of some individuals and different experiences within the university. The suggestion of universal linear progress in what are frequently termed neo-liberal discourses of higher education assumes an individual that is free of identity, capable of moving through a 'timeless time' (Urry 2000) and fashioning the self in accordance with the imperative to be 'busy' (Darier 1998, discussed in the previous chapter). It also assumes a rational subject, free of the defences highlighted by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), see Chapter Three.

Having discussed the affects associated with the multiple layering of student time and the way it is experienced as textured and complex by many participants, necessitating skilled management, this chapter focuses on some specific factors that (re)-shape the temporal and affective landscapes of higher education for students: the increasing use of virtual technology in higher education and also minimal timetables for students (particularly postgraduate students) that, frequently aided by a modular 'banking' approach to study (Freire 1970), allow them to engage in paid employment or meet family responsibilities whilst studying. As discussed in Chapter Three, temporality was inherent in the focus group method used and the discussion situation was implicated in the way that students talked about their timetables and virtual technology as a way of forming connections and affiliations with other group members.

The expansion of economic and educational services into the evenings and weekends has acted to reshape structures of time that had previously supported social life (Garhammer 1995; Lury 2002). With the spread of work and consumption over greater parts of the day and week – with the aid of virtual communication - it is becoming increasingly complex for individuals to manage and combine home, paid work and social interactions in terms of scheduling (Woodman 2012). The Annual Learning Technology Student Survey at Woodlands (Kear 2013) found that 30% of students accessing the VLE (Virtual Learning

Environment) did so via either smartphone or tablet and 75% of students accessing the VLE were using some kind of mobile device (including laptops). The report argues that technology must increasingly be geared towards:

‘...Catering for a more diverse and time-poor student demographic, where learning will increasingly happen ‘on the go’ (Kear 2013:5).

The ability for students to study ‘on the go’ both reflects and is aided by a modular and ‘bite-size’ packet approach to learning, where degree courses can be divided up into easily accessible ‘chunks’, such as modules that are temporally consistent with multiple temporal and spatial interventions into student life. Shown by the inclusion of this topic in a report intended for use by Woodlands, the university is aware of many of these temporal and affective issues and their consequences facing students, yet ‘at the heart of the system’ is a linear conception of time that emphasises straightforward progress and ‘banking’ through the educational system. Furthermore, such bite-size knowledge may be easier for certain students (time poor but technologically able) to access, however following debates it may not necessarily prove to be ‘satisfying’ for them (Collini 2011; Ritzer 1998). Anthony Giddens’ (1984) concept of locales is also relevant to this chapter. Giddens (1984) states that:

‘Locales refer to the use of space to provide the settings of interaction, the settings of interaction in turn being essential to specifying its contextuality...’ (1984:118).

Locales can be a variety of different places but do not only represent a physical setting; they also refer to the people present within them and the forms of communication between them. Giddens lays great importance on co-present communication, or ‘pure relationships’ (Palackal et al 2011), although he also recognises that other methods of communication can mediate locales, such as information technology (Thrift 1996). However, such technologies can facilitate the ‘absent presence’ discussed by Gergen (2002), where one may be physically present in one location but mentally and emotionally absent and absorbed elsewhere through the use of technology, which is pertinent to the increasing use of web-based or blended learning in higher education. The idea of locales and co-present communication or ‘pure relationships’ is key to the discussion in this chapter concerning the ‘intimate distance’ (or ‘absent presence’) involved in minimal timetables and the progressive use of virtual technologies in higher education with the associated affective impacts that this has for students.

Virtual Technology

'How does one study using electronic books?' (Box response)

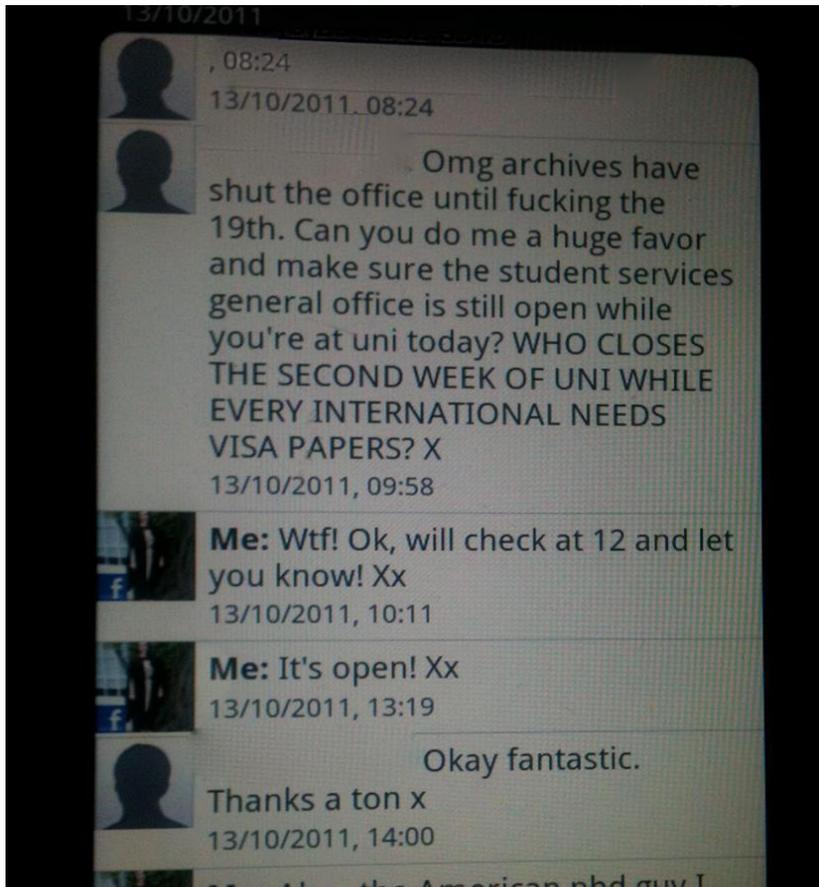


Figure 3: Mobile Communication (Feedback Seminar)

Recent authors have linked technological organisation to loneliness. Richard Stivers (2004), echoing Weber (1947), asserts that the extreme rationality of technological societies leads to loneliness since institutions and organisations are governed by abstract and impersonal relationships. Likewise, Sherry Turkle (2013) suggests that people are increasingly acting without face-to-face contact. Although new technology promises closeness - and it does provide this in many cases - it also leads to isolation and dissatisfaction, creating a path that must be navigated between intimacy and separation (or what Turkle refers to as being 'alone together'). These ideas are connected to the growth of neo-liberalism within education (Holmwood 2011), or 'selfish capitalism' (James 2008) and the increasing use of electronic communication in universities (Ritzer 1998).

Face-to-face contact with others and co-presence is desirable for many individuals and writers suggest there is a 'compulsion for proximity' (Boden and Molotch 1994). Urry (2002) asserts that in order to build trust with others and maintain relationships there must

be at least intermittent face-to-face contact between individuals where they are physically co-present with one another and can benefit from features such as non-verbal communication. Nevertheless, despite the apparent necessity of physical co-presence and although people may be in increased contact now than in the past (online), regular face-to-face contact with others is becoming more challenging (Southerton 2003; Woodman 2012), highlighting paradoxical boundaries between the real and material worlds. This necessity to manage time in higher education is likely to be particularly prominent for students in the transition from school or further education to university, which is characterised by standardised and inflexible timetabling (Woodman 2012) that allows a common time frame in the lives of students, or for mature students beginning university or returning for a postgraduate qualification following standard working hours.

Ani Wierenga (2009) highlights that interactions based on trust – which necessitate face-to-face contact for their development and fulfilment – are essential to young people in terms of allowing them to imagine possibilities for their futures and to manage difficulties and challenges in their present lives. Although virtual communication may provide an additional sense of ‘togetherness’ it cannot replace physical co-presence. Similarly, Hilary Lawson (2008) discusses the importance of group life on the identity of young people in educational contexts.

Rachel Thomson et al (2002) explored young people’s transitions into adulthood, including family and education, in terms of ‘critical moments’. Such periods in a person’s life are increasingly recognised to be heterogeneous, interrupted and prolonged over an extended period of time. Nevertheless, a variety of ‘protective factors’ can insulate individuals from ‘critical moments’ and these include integration, friendship and living on campus in the case of university students (Cate Holdsworth 2006). Although there may be an interjection of social class in these findings (students from lower social classes frequently choose to - or have to - live at home), Richter and Walker (2008) argue that integration and friendship is more important than social class is in this instance, resonating with Vincent Tinto’s (1975) early studies (Chapter Two) and suggesting that co-present communication (Urry 2002) is an important component of university experience for many students.

Relating to co-present communication in higher education, the HEFCE policy document ‘Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through the Use of Technology’ (2009) argues that technological developments can be used to support institutions in achieving their key strategic aims including efficiency (cost and time effectiveness), enhancement (improving

processes and outcomes) and transformation (changing processes). The report suggests that:

‘Our primary focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching drives our approach. Technology can support this enhancement goal, and is therefore a factor in development of effective learning, teaching and assessment strategies. Innovative developments in technology will only be relevant if the enhancement of learning and teaching is the core purpose’ (2009: Paragraph 33).

In this way, the collaborative and even radical potential of technology appears to be overlooked in favour of an approach that supports institutional and market-driven goals of teaching and assessment. There are increasing opportunities for ‘blended’ learning in higher education, a combination of online learning and face-to-face contact (HEFCE 2009). Sir Michael Barber (2013), education adviser for Pearson, discusses the ‘threat and opportunity’ that online courses could present for the UK's universities, as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provide unprecedented access to courses from prominent institutions, potentially leading to universities being ‘unbundled’ as research and teaching could be provided by separate institutions. This project does not specifically address these issues but it is important to bear in mind the rapidly changing context in which the research takes place.

Although new technology is increasingly important in higher education, a number of writers argue that face-to-face contact between academics and students remains an essential component of university life. The report ‘Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World’ (Committee of Inquiry 2009) explored the way that students benefit from direct and unmediated contact with staff and peers. Technology in this instance acts as a complement to co-presence with others but it does not appear to be able to replace it. Madge et al's (2009) research reached similar conclusions, although it is also important to consider the long-term success of the Open University, founded on principles of meritocracy by sociologist Michael Young and based on often minimal face-to-face contact.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have been increasingly drawn upon in UK higher education. Browne et al (2006) suggest that this is especially the case, both for staff and student use, at the ‘new’ universities. However, the literature regarding student use of technology can be conflicting with contradictory evidence. For instance, Deepwell and Malik (2008) found that students had generally positive experiences with virtual learning, whereas Concannon et al (2005) argued that students were unenthusiastic regarding this

tool. Urry (2002) writes that digital sociality or virtual travel results in the dematerialising of the need to travel and conquering time and space; virtual communication has at least in part replaced co-present interaction with new modes of connection between nearness and remoteness:

‘Virtual travel produces a strange and uncanny life on the screen, a life that is near and far, present and absent, live and dead. The kinds of travel and presencing involved will change the character and experience of ‘co-presence’, since people can feel proximate while still distant’ (2002:267).

However, Urry (2002) states that even inside virtual communities, co-presence is vital since people do occasionally meet and this can reinforce the ‘magical’ bonds created. The VLE plus associated email and other information technologies are becoming an important means through which students in higher education communicate, learn and discover information about their courses (Persell 2002). Persell (2002:71) connects this development to Ritzer’s (1998) ‘McDonaldization’ thesis (discussed in Chapter Two), which contends that ‘the purpose of rationalization [in higher education] is profit maximization’ thereby challenging the historic mission of education.

Persell (2002) argues that information technologies can contribute to this bureaucratisation and profit maximising drive in higher education (although institutions such as The Open University challenge this conception to a large extent). However, she also states that ‘digital technologies can provide opportunities to challenge a ‘packet’ conception of knowledge, and they offer the potential for everyone to become knowledge creators to some degree’ (2002:73). Therefore, digital mediums can also be used to create openness in education, as reinforced by programmes such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) online learning environment, MITx, which aims to make MIT courses available free online to anyone in the world (although there is a charge for ‘formal’ qualifications). Although endeavours such as this help to support the public notion of education as a social good as opposed to a market-orientated product, Persell (2002) argues that the use of digital technologies in many cases reinforces:

‘The fast-food mode of delivering nourishment [which] clearly affects the nature of the food offered. It becomes standardized and predictable...’ (2002:76).

In addition, the sense in which information technology may uphold the public nature of education by offering free and accessible courses does not necessarily conterminously

create the conditions under which students feel 'part of' a university. Many aspects of learning may be almost impossible to replicate online, such as the physical experience of living on campus and face-to-face informal discussions; education becomes 'less of a social institution and more of an industry' (Persell 2002:77), although this is not necessarily a negative thing in itself and it is interesting to consider why the function of education as a social institution appears to be so important.

Nevertheless, this section seeks to examine the issue of electronic communication less in terms of education as a public or private institution and more in terms of the implications that the spatial and temporal organisation of technologies such as the VLE has for students' experiences of university. Castells (1996), examining global trends relating to working patterns, states that:

'The number of working hours and their distribution in the life-cycle and in the annual, monthly and weekly cycles of people's lives, are a central feature of how they feel, enjoy and suffer' (1996:439).

In this way, the time-spaces of higher education, as mediated by virtual technologies, are likely to impact greatly on the affective experiences of students at university. In fact, highlighting the affective experiences of an over-reliance on information technology, the DSC Annual Group Project Report Postgraduate Group Two (2013) found, following a survey method, that at Woodlands students believe that 'there needs to be more face-face communication, not just via email' (although as discussed in Chapter Three, it is essential to recognise the specific conditions of production of this report material).

Intimate Distance: The VLE

The VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) and the way it is capitalised on by staff and students varies dramatically between different departments at Woodlands (as evidenced by the DSC Annual Group Project Report 2013, Postgraduate Group Two) so it is important not to overstate the generalizability of these findings; nevertheless, it is hoped that tentative links can be made. The VLE can be conceptualised as an 'abstract system', following Anthony Giddens (1990), equating higher education with a social system (with individuals interacting with one another and enacting and performing social structures through a continual monitoring of their own actions) and then the VLE as a disembedding mechanism that allows higher education to span across space and time. For Giddens (1990), symbolic tokens, for instance money, and expert systems, which are technical

systems that organise the social and material world are both disembedding mechanisms; together these are known as abstract systems.

Abstract systems are governed by 'faceless commitments', replacing social integration with system integration and necessitating a level of trust as face-to-face interaction is absent. However, 'trust here is vested, not in individuals but in abstract capacities' (1990:26). Individuals must not only trust one another, for instance in whether or not the correct information is posted on the VLE, but must also trust the system as a whole that it is not malfunctioning. The issue of trust is connected to the issue of ontological security and the way that external changes in a system can threaten individuals' sense of trust and confidence. This is intertwined with the idea of existential insecurity since abstract systems, through putting rules in place, take away an individual's responsibility for moral thinking. Although the VLE may struggle with 'intimacy', the sense of distance it provides can offer protection against difficult engagements or 'troublesome knowledge' (Meyer and Land 2005).

This lack of trust can be seen in the way the participants in the focus groups describe a sense of disorientation regarding the VLE, although the abstract system continually interacts with the positioning of the student within the wider social system of higher education so that those participants who are already embedded in the system also find it easier to feel ontologically secure in their use of information technology. In this way, it can be argued that the relations of symbolic, social and cultural capital within the university are mediated by the VLE, which acts to both sustain and challenge them. It sustains relations by allowing those students who are already embedded in higher education to enhance their position in terms of continuing studying and communication with their peers across space and time; it challenges such relations by allowing students who may not otherwise be able to complete work (for instance, students with children) the opportunity to access the university largely away from the campus, although this can have affective consequences for them.

Student life, as moderated by information technology, seemed to have a number of different temporal and spatial qualities and associated difficulties in terms of managing this for participants. Virtual communication was particularly pertinent to discussion in the postgraduate focus groups, perhaps because they tended to rely on using it more than undergraduates did due to living further away from campus and peers, and due to the nature of their timetable by which they were often only at university one day per week or

were frequently on work placements in the case of Subject J (a postgraduate professional qualification) students.

Under such circumstances, virtual technologies interacted with other structuring aspects of higher education such as the timetabling, enabling a certain relationship between students and the university and perhaps, at times, heightening a sense of students as being separated from the institution or at other times allowing for greater closeness. In the feedback seminar discussion regarding the alienating experience of relying almost solely on virtual communication by postgraduate students at the university, one participant commented that:

Kay: I'd like to take a photograph of the Woodlands email system and use that to show my experience here. It's such a bad font, it's so unappealing, and it just makes me feel completely alienated, especially with all the spam from the department; it detaches me from the university although it's also the main way that I communicate with people at college (MA Subject A, Full-time, Feedback Seminar Participant).

This statement highlights the dual quality of electronic communication as described by Persell (2002) in terms of its simultaneously enabling and disabling aspects; the university email system both allows students to communicate with others, and may even be the principal way that they do this on occasion, whilst also constraining that communication to some extent since it does not provide much of the 'face-to-face' contact that students argued they would like to experience more frequently. 'Spamming' was also an issue picked up by the DSC Annual Postgraduate Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Two (2013), where the email communication system was additionally discussed as currently limited due to its design and navigational features.

Ambivalence towards the VLE, as suggested by Kay, was also reflected in a survey of students at Woodlands conducted by the Woodlands Learning Enhancement Unit (Kear 2013), a department providing guidance in relation to learning and teaching. The survey (comprised of Likert Scale responses and brief qualitative feedback) found that when students answered a number of questions regarding the VLE, such as 'it enhances my learning', 'it is frequently updated' or 'it is easy to navigate', the most frequent response was 'neither agree nor disagree', suggesting a sense of apathy or ambivalence regarding the virtual technology. Qualitative responses were similar to Kay's assertion, for instance: 'it's [the VLE is] clunky, poorly laid out and not at all intuitive' or 'the look is clunky and old fashioned, a bit like Cefax' (Kear 2013).

Likewise, in relation to electronic submission of coursework and feedback, 69% of respondents wanted to submit work electronically, with reasons such as flexibility or allowing more time for paid work or study being cited. However, simultaneously, students were concerned that such methods could be more 'impersonal', 'because handing in is a ritual that should end in the pub!' (Kear 2013), which, although it is a somewhat ethnocentric statement, (see the discussion of issues related to alcohol consumption and student life in Chapter Seven), it also suggests how the convenience of the VLE can change the spatial-temporal, relational and affective landscape of higher education through altering its practices. Receiving feedback electronically was considered beneficial in terms of access but detrimental as it could 'result in less engagement with markers or tutors' and 'restrict communication between lecturers and students' (Kear 2013).

Squeezing and Stretching Higher Education through Information Technology

Further to the aspects of the email system that Kay described as leaving her feeling 'alienated', the reliance on information technology also appeared to systematically alienate certain students, particularly in this study mature students returning to education who do not feel confident with information technology. Katherine, a mature student, was in this position:

Katherine: I'm not very confident with IT so to be looking at something and it doesn't look the same on my screen I'm like 'Argh, what have I done?', 'Who do I ask?' (MA Subject A, Full-time).

As remarked on by Persell (2002) an additional labour is created around the use of information technology; Persell (2002) discusses this in terms of practical issues but there is also the sense of an emotional labour in the quotation from Katherine as she struggles with her concerns about virtual technology. The same postgraduate focus group expanded upon this sense of the frustration that they experience with information technology when discussing challenging aspects of being at the university:

Amelia: Quite often you'd realise that you might have been left off an email about something and it was only at the end of last term or beginning of this term that I realised I hadn't actually logged on to the MA Subject A section of the VLE ... I had got the dummies guide through to doing it but I didn't realise that right at the very bottom of the very last page or whatever was it actually gave you a list of what you need to sign up for so there was a lot of information that we were hunting for ages and ages ... and our lecturers would say 'well it's on the VLE' but I was like 'it's not on the VLE' and then realising that a lot of us were missing these different modules as well so only getting half the information through, well it's difficult of course to know what you're not getting... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: The dates for lectures have been wrong on the VLE haven't they? They've contrasted with the paper information on the reading weeks (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: Yeah so people have done the wrong reading for the weeks and then booked holidays for the wrong week (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: People have booked holidays for the wrong weeks because actually we're meant to be in university but on one thing it says it's reading week and that kind of thing's been a real frustration and challenge on the VLE we're not and that kind of thing's been a real challenge and frustration and adding to the stress that didn't really need adding to I guess (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: It's all part of feeling out of the loop isn't it? (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: Mm... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: You know when you are only in one day a week you are a bit dependent on those kinds of communications and the course booklets and things like that and you can be thrown by it... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: It's like yeah, just think of it more as like a game of you know to see if you can manage to figure out what it's actually trying to say rather than what it's actually saying, you know, rather than see it as a step-by-step guide it more just points in the general direction it might be and then it's up to you to see if you can solve it or not... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

It is interesting to note that the students refer to the sense of being 'thrown' by relying on electronic communications, highlighting the manner in which university can be experienced by students as not being collaborative and participatory in terms of being constructed without their involvement (Freire 1970). This finding is broadly similar to research carried out at Woodlands by the DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Two (2013). The report details the way that postgraduate participants did not feel aware of the events at Woodlands and, as discussed above, felt 'out of the loop'; when suggesting potential departmental improvements, one postgraduate student in qualitative comments as part of a survey in the report commented that:

'Communicating information well in advance (not on the day of a meeting/event, for example), making sure students know exactly when and where orientation meetings are (again, well in advance), and making sure students are receiving reminders for abnormal meetings, such as dissertation meetings. I have often felt like VERY important information (such as registration for all courses), is communicated in a very unimportant way, and rarely with reminders. The seriousness of various aspects of our course are very poorly communicated, and lots of us as MA students feel out of the loop constantly because there is no proper system in place to let us know what to expect, and when/where' (2013: unpag).

This quotation is suggestive of a general sense of disorientation and being 'out of the loop', similar to the sense of being 'thrown' by an education system over which students appear to feel they have little real control (despite being canvassed for opinions; Batchelor 2008). Nevertheless, although the students in this research tended to describe the use of e-learning as a 'top-down' experience, this is not always the case and certain aspects of virtual learning, particularly relating to MOOCs, have been described as being based on connectivist principles of peer distributed networks and shared knowledge, creating more lateral relationships (Universities UK 2013 'Massive Open Online Courses: Higher Education's Digital Moment?'). The above focus group excerpt also resonates with Woundhuysen (2002) who writes that:

'For students at the electronic McUniversity, there is more labour to do around IT, but an ever greater proportion of that labour is devoid of academic benefit. Self-service in a supermarket or in a McDonald's outlet is not the same as eating the food. By the same token, students who spend a lot of time fiddling about with the poor interfaces and compatibilities that surround IT will be dumbed down by the process' (2002:87).

It is Woundhuysen's (2002) contention that, instead of spending time studying or discussing issues with other students or tutors, the 'McUniversity's' reliance on digital communication means that students spend an increased amount of labour time servicing this technology. This can then lead to a progressive disorientation, frustration and feeling of isolation amongst students. Nevertheless, this also appears to represent a somewhat romanticised view of the university as a social institution that leaves electronic communication in some way lacking; positive student experiences with information technology were also evident in these focus groups and will be discussed later.

Giddens' (1990) notion of an abstract system is relevant here, where the VLE becomes a disembedding mechanism that allows higher education to traverse space and time but that also represents a faceless commitment that at once must be 'trusted' and that can reduce individual moral responsibility. However, the lack of a degree of trust that the participants expressed in the VLE suggests that they may not feel confident with this form of blended learning and may experience a degree of insecurity as a result, making the position of certain students (for instance, those who must rely most acutely on virtual technologies) psychologically difficult.

There was also a sense in which the student comments about the VLE could be viewed as an artefact of the focus group method, whereby an emphasis on virtual communications appeared to form a focus for students' complaints. For instance, Pakkanen (2011) examined indirect complaining in learning groups and found that affiliation could be an important reason for the complaint, upholding the function of complaining as essential, in addition to the content of the complaint. Complaints can be against self, others or the situation (Wolfe and Powell 2009). Complaints can serve multiple functions; for example, they may be affiliation building as suggested previously but they can also be cathartic, act as excuses, express superiority by degrading others, a request for recognition, or a call for action (Kowalski 1996; Wolfe and Powell 2009).

This affiliation process shows the students attempting to associate with one another and highlights the way in which the content of the discussions may be a product of the focus group situation. Wolfe and Powell (2009) speak about the positive effects of complaints when 'students complain about a class as a way of establishing camaraderie' (2009:14). Therefore, the way that many of the postgraduate students discussed information technology in these focus groups appears to reflect a conversational style of 'complaining', suggesting the way that the responses are to some extent a possible product of affiliation building processes within the focus group situation. In this way, complaints could be viewed as a way of making and sustaining affiliations in this project, creating a sense of closeness between the participants through the discussion of the distancing aspects of technology.

Information technology could also act as a way to compound a sense of disengagement for students from the university. In a focus group with undergraduate students who had intermitted from their studies the previous year, and so were already in one sense separated from the institution and from their peers, the respondents discussed feeling disorientated at university and elaborated on this in terms of the use of virtual communications to complete the NSS:

Kyla: I also felt, particularly, you know, because I deferred and came back, that I almost had a disadvantage to other students... um... particularly with the student survey that they had this year, I wasn't able to log on to the system because technically I'd logged on last year or something but I hadn't actually filled it out or anything, but because I'd been logged as a student last year I couldn't access it and I really wanted to, you know, give my opinion this year about what happened because last year I only came for three weeks and then deferred. So I really wanted to sort of share my experiences of completing my third year as a deferred student but I wasn't able to... (Third year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Sara: Yeah, I wasn't able to either because I was a deferred student as well and I had the same trouble logging on and it wasn't as if they tried to overcome the problem either it was just sort of accepted that you wouldn't be able to fill out the survey you just had to get on with it. They didn't sort of try and resolve the problem either, so they're not gaining the opinion of a deferred student, you know they presume that you're at university, it's a three year degree, and you're going to do it in three years, and that's the opinions that they're getting and that's the

experiences that they're looking for. It's almost as if they're trying to omit a not such straightforward case ... so it's quite manipulative really because they're only gaining the experiences of those who have just come and done it for three years straight, whose experiences are more than likely be a lot different to those who have been more complicated and taken longer to complete the degree (Third year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

For these particular students who were already separated from the university, the use of information technology appeared to heighten their sense of this disengagement from higher education. The NSS did not appear to recognise non-linear student experience and the use of information technology as a way to complete it does not allow flexibility regarding individual circumstances. It is this ambivalent distance and closeness that is also suggested in the quotation from the feedback seminar participant at the beginning of this section: the sense of 'detachment' heightened by the VLE and what were perceived to be non-user-friendly features, whilst at the same time relying on it as the main mode of communication at university. A complex relationality can therefore be observed between intimacy and separation and one way to understand this can be through Gillian Rose's (1993) concept of 'paradoxical space':

'Spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside – are occupied simultaneously...' (1993:140).

Plurality and contradictions are inherent in such spaces. It is not necessarily that new technologies are solely responsible for this paradoxical effect since in a large part the context in which they are employed is already established: conditions such as the compression of the student week into one or two days spent at university so that paid employment can also be undertaken, or the necessity of many students to live geographically removed from the college. It seems to be the case that due to factors such as student or 'consumer' demand for courses or structures that allow maximum flexibility (such as to continue in paid work or work part-time), higher education becomes reliant on digital technologies, which both reflects and creates an altered sense of time and space at the university. Woodhuysen (2002) writes that:

'Electronic transmission alters the time and space around higher education dramatically and in postmodern style...' (2002:85).

For postgraduate students at least, the working week is 'squeezed' into one or two days of 'contact time' at university and also 'stretched' indefinitely as digital communication allows students to work at any time. This led to what appeared to be a number of layers and waves of time with placements, holidays, coursework deadlines, and the digital access as a layer permanently over the top. Added to this were various peaks and troughs of pressure, events, or external times impinging on the university (Southerton 2003, see also Chapter Four).

Students in the focus groups also discussed the positive aspects of communication technologies, with undergraduate students remarking on the beneficial elements of communication technology much more frequently than postgraduate students did, who tended to emphasise the negative aspects. In a discussion about the resources in the library, where students were commenting that there were not a sufficient number of books, one respondent (a student who had intermitted and had already described how she worked from home for the majority of the time since she felt separated from her peer group at university) said that:

Sara: Something that I've found really useful with, like, the library, because I live at home and if I'm at home and need to be essay writing I don't particularly want to come to Woodlands just to get one book out, I've found the, um, e-books on the library catalogue very, very, good so I think that maybe they should make more use of that resource possibly because I find that really accessible and it makes my learning so much easier (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Information technology could be used to both connect students who were separated from the university to the institution, at least along an academic dimension in terms of accessing books, if not in a social sense or in respect of completing the NSS as Sara discussed previously. Likewise, the sense of electronic communication as being 'quite good' was discussed in the MA Subject A focus group who pointed out the difficulties with the VLE at the beginning of this section. However, despite the fact that it was 'quite good', this miasmatic layer of connection to the university did not appear to be a substitute for face-to-face contact and students in the focus groups discussed how although communication through email can be 'good' it is still isolating and it does not replace co-presence with other students.

Such potential for information technology to increase seepage between home and work boundaries (for instance, Sara working from home) has also been discussed in relation to

female academics with young children and the increasing use of virtual technology in academia. Jan Currie and Joan Eveline (2010) highlight both 'work intensification', where the academic workload becomes more extreme, and 'work extensification', in which the workload is extended into other areas of life, such as the home, through the employment of information technologies. This porousness was described by the academics as being both beneficial in terms of finishing work but simultaneously detrimental to their home lives: 'a blessing and a curse' (2010:1).

In this way, it seems that it is possible for students to 'study' using electronic books, as asked in the Box response, at the beginning of this section concerning 'virtual affects'. However, this experience of studying using electronic books is not necessarily the form of contact with the university that students value. Erika (MA Subject G, Full-time) made this point by arguing that although email communication between her course peers could be useful at times, it also made the experience of studying seem more disconnected than more face-to-face contact might.

'You Really Are on Your Own': Postgraduate Student Time

The QAA (2013) sets out various 'benchmarks' regulating the achievement that is necessary to be awarded a postgraduate qualification, including teaching, assessment, knowledge and the attributes of graduates. However, it is a university decision in terms of how to achieve the structuring of courses. Most appear to opt for a modular approach and minimal teaching timetable supplemented by the use of virtual technologies, partly due to student demands. In this research, the way the postgraduate courses were structured appeared to create various spatial-temporal separations from and connections to the university for students, frequently augmented by virtual technologies. Following a discussion of a lack of social contact with one another and the (over)-reliance on information technology to communicate with their peers, the students in one focus group commented on the fact that their formal timetables were now over and that they would have no 'structure' in place during the summer months of their dissertation:

Martin: ...It's an odd feeling, to some extent, the way it's structured and the way it's organised, and I will feel quite lost after today on one level unless I do actually organise it to meet up with people (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: Also from now as well because we're just doing our dissertations, which I know is part of the, like that's how things are, but it means that you're not even able to

discuss like which bit are you up to now or do you understand this, it's like you really are on your own and it's like if there was just one day a fortnight or something where you get to come in and it's structured and there'd be someone, you know, something, it would be a little bit easier I think, it does just feel like 'go on then, good luck' (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: Yeah (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: They should have some dissertation workshops or something next term to feedback to each other because although we're all doing different things there's still probably similar difficulties and challenges (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: Yeah (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: It's useful getting input isn't it? And just thrashing out ideas with each other (MA Subject A, Full-time)

The group's prediction of feeling 'quite lost' when the teaching timetable finishes points to the way that students in this focus group spoke about the institutional time of the university as being beneficial in terms of providing a structure to their studies and creating opportunities for meeting with others and discussion, making organising such encounters a much easier task. For these students it seems that there is a degree of tension between commitments outside of the course (as described in Chapter Four), completing the qualification and 'progressing', but also another form of education where discussion and the 'thrashing out ideas with each other' mentioned by Katherine is important, something which the students discussed as not being possible by electronic communication. The focus group situation to some extent represented such dialogue and it opened up exploratory possibilities, such as the idea of dissertation workshops.

The daily timetabling of the university acted as a form of temporal and spatial structuring for students. The focus group discussions suggested that the timetable, especially for postgraduate students, facilitated when the respondents would be at university and also to some extent moderated other activities that they could partake in outside of their class times. Following a discussion regarding the perceived lack of contact time with the university and the difficulty these students had with joining extra-curricular activities related to the institution it was commented that:

Martin: I didn't realise at the time of applying and coming here that it was actually one day a week, I know it's one day a week actually in university and the rest of the week you do spend some time trying to come in and out, but one day a week - which is helpful on one level because you can organise the rest of your week - also actually leads to you being remarkably out of the loop and isolated on occasion... you feel quite dis-jointed from everything else that's going on... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: Yeah, I mean when I first signed up because it was a taught masters, a one year full-time taught masters, I expected there'd be a lot more lectures and direct communication with tutors or workshop situations and seminars so that it was a more social experience that it has been. For me it has felt really lonely, which has been quite tough (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: ...I think it's like you know for me personally I can kind of feel relieved when the one day a week is like cancelled or something because I think 'oh there's enough to catch up with other work' but then come the following week I'm really, like, pleased to come in again because I've missed it because it is like, it breaks it up a bit and you get to have a bit more contact and it's a bit more sociable, otherwise it's really isolating and I think even if the two courses were on two different days it's kind of structuring your week a bit more, it's having the contact... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: That's the thing, because we are in for one long day we end up kind of running errands and stuff during the breaks, seeing people and tutors and so on, and because we all live so far away from each other, so I don't really... like on your undergraduate you would socialise a lot with people on your course, but we hardly ever, we don't really see each other outside of university and I think that's not helped by the fact that when we come in we're literally just working all the time and then everyone just kind of disappears off on the breaks and everyone disappears off straight at the end and while we're on the course it's actually really, really, nice to see people but we just don't get to see that much of each other... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Referring back to this point in the same focus group, Martin commented:

Martin: ...It's not to say that people haven't tried to, you know, said to me 'are you going for a drink afterwards?' but if you were here more regularly you'd almost fall

into that kind of a routine, do you know what I mean? ... Whereas on a Thursday you've tried to arrange something at the end of the day you know what I mean, and I've literally said 'well I've already got something arranged' and I felt, regrettably I've had to go and do that, whereas I'd have quite like to have gone for a drink, do you know what I mean? But I hadn't necessarily thought that was what was going to happen so I didn't kind of see that I was free after the day, do you know what I mean? (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Amelia: Yeah (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: So some of those, what I thought the student life bit of it would be, I haven't really kind of experienced or felt particularly fulfilling on that level... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

In a paradoxical way, students find it both helpful and difficult to attend university on only one day a week. It is useful in terms of allowing participants to organise their week and catch up on work, suggesting that it is instrumentally beneficial for them. However, the participants are also acutely aware of the disadvantages of this arrangement in relation to contact and having a 'social experience', to the point where Martin describes socialising with peers as something that necessitates planning for. The group spoke about the 'pattern' of student life, whereby they are not accustomed to sociality being part of their experience of university and so they find it difficult to participate in such experiences when the possibility does occur. Furthermore, this appeared to be a taken for granted, chosen and expected aspect of postgraduate life, as one participant in a focus group at the occupation remarked when discussing social experiences at university:

Beatriz: I'm a Masters student so I have to say, like most MA students, I don't participate too much in the active side of the university (MA Subject I, Full-time).

In this way, ambivalences and complexities can be said to characterise 'student experience', where the independence of postgraduate study and a minimal approach to timetabling and university commitments is both appealing (intellectually and also practically) but simultaneously difficult for some students, who discuss loneliness and the desire for more social contact with peers and tutors. Following this, it seems that the temporal organisation of the university in terms of minimal timetabling and virtual technologies propels some students into a mechanistic, or abstract (Giddens 1990), relationship with the institution (Castells 1996), even when the institutional intention may be to 'widen

participation' or to 'maximise student satisfaction' by operating courses that allow students to engage in paid employment or family responsibilities in addition to the requirements of study. Student experience as a hybrid object (Luckhurst 2002) therefore becomes produced through the intersection of a variety of actors and interests, such as the university, social policy and the students themselves.

New technologies in part make this paradoxical space of ambivalence possible and also may compound the effect of the isolation and loneliness that students experience. The notion of the 'dumbing down' of student experience is critical here, although not necessarily in the sense of a reduction in academic standards (that has been argued for elsewhere; for example see Claire Fox 2002) but in terms of a gap between the way that some students talk about wanting to experience university in terms of sociality and the way that they actually do experience higher education in relation to high levels of isolation and loneliness (discussed in greater detail in the following chapters). The overriding impression from the discussion groups was that participants appeared to feel that they were missing out on an essential part of the meaning of 'student life':

Martin: ...We kind of come together on a Thursday and then go away again and that isn't how I remember student life and I don't think that student life is just about kind of coming in and doing the work and then going away again. I think it's part of, this is part of student life, it's about sitting and having the opportunity to have a dialogue and discussion about things not necessarily even related to the course and I've learnt bits about some of you today that I didn't know previously ... It's quite an alienating feeling to a degree (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Eva: Yeah (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Martin: So you know, you get on the train and you go home again, and then you come back the following Thursday... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Singh and Cowden (2013) write that:

'For us, the reductionism of these approaches [market-orientated perspectives] represents yet another dimension of the new poverty of student life; which is not just about being materially poor, but about the intellectual poverty of a pedagogy which fails to give students the opportunity to be intellectually provoked, pushed and challenged' (2003:2).

It is important to highlight that although there were no part-time students in the focus groups in this research, this section is also relevant to part-time study. There has been a recent stark decline in the number of part-time undergraduates at university, with a 40% reduction since 2010 (National Union of Students 2013), perhaps due to the introduction of higher fees, and this has raised concern regarding the rhetoric of widening participation since it is part-time students who tend to come from non-traditional entry routes and backgrounds (although around one third of part-time undergraduates are already graduates).

Few studies have been conducted into part-time study and those that have tend to relate to funding and cost. In fact, Gorard et al (2006) write that such students have been almost absent in research and policy considerations. In addition, part-time students may not consider themselves to be students due to other aspects of their lives being more dominant (Schuller et al 1999), leading to a problematic absence of student identity (the full-time Subject J students in this research also talked about not considering themselves to be students due to work-placements and not socialising at university). Gass (2007 in Callender and Feldman 2009) conducted a case-study of one mature part-time female student and found that travelling over 50 miles to university twice a week plus childcare arrangements severely curtailed her day and constrained her experience and participation within the university. The burdens of time management and dis-junctive temporal frames over which an individual has little control may fall particularly heavily on such students. The DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Three (2013) includes a case-study of the experience of one part-time postgraduate student (one of the report's authors). The student states that:

'As I am part-time, I only take one module a semester, and so in my first semester at Woodlands, I only had one class once a week. Luckily ... our class happened to fall on a Friday which meant the majority were happy to continue socialising into the afternoon. I made firm friendships during this arrangement, but since starting my second semester, where I find myself in a smaller, less sociable class, which incidentally falls on a Monday when I believe less people are inclined to want to go to the pub or for lunch after class, it has definitely made it harder to interact socially outside of the classroom walls. Many people on the course suggested that the problem of community might be down to the fact we don't have a communal area to hang out, but as a part-timer I don't think that would have helped me, as

the main problem affecting my sense of community is that I haven't the time to spend at Woodlands in order to improve my community spirit' (2013: unpag).

This student appears to experience conflicting time-frames including study and work - she writes of having three part-time jobs in another section of the report - and a sense of being temporally de-synchronised from the university. Such de-synchronisation can be aided but also exacerbated by the reliance on virtual communications as it reduces the need for co-present interaction with others and to some extent allows for such de-synchronisation and individualised pathways through higher education to take place. The excerpt also highlights the affective impact that timetabling decisions have on students, with a discussion of the way that the one class a week this student attends felt more sociable when it was held on a Friday than on a Monday.

One other interesting thing to note about the above discussions regarding blended learning and the VLE is that instead of relating themselves as actively participating in the use virtual technology for learning and social communication, students appear to see this technology as a medium with features that serve as aids to their learning but that offer little beyond this passive adaptation of the technology. For instance, the VLE might be accessed to gain lecture dates or electronic books might be used in essay writing. This suggests that students have not fully integrated the VLE into their lives. It is instead used as a somewhat passive tool, contrasting with the way that they might use other forms of social media such as Facebook or mobile chat, as shown in Figure 3 (Mobile Communication) above, depicting more intimate communication between students through virtual technology. Students are using virtual communication although they find the VLE in some ways uninviting. Nevertheless they also subvert this through the establishment of their own networks and connections on Facebook or chat applications (features that many students would like to see incorporated into the VLE, Kear 2013). Following this, the DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Two (2013) concludes that:

'An online student community is not currently operating to the fullest of its potential, with students having to rely on their own social networking pages or the support of departmental tutors' (2013: unpag).

One student from this report comments that 'I would like to see a greater online community, a cross between Facebook and the Virtual Learning Environment'. Inherent in the paradoxical space of virtual technology and higher education is a complexity, whereby Woodlands is aware of many of these issues (for instance the Woodlands Learning

Enhancement Unit Survey, Kear 2013) and are researching changes in the VLE concurrently with students adopting their own communication practices that do not rely on those instigated by the institution. This points to a 'temporal lag' between students and the institution or a 'lack of integration' of technology into face-to-face customs in higher education, as also highlighted by The QAA (2008) in their analysis of institutional audit reports, stating that university managers and staff themselves, as well as students, are frequently ambivalent concerning the benefits or pitfalls of virtual learning.

Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead

This chapter has considered the various spatial and temporal landscapes in higher education and their (re)-shaping by strategies such as minimal timetabling and virtual technologies. There has been a particular focus on virtual communication, the use of the VLE, and the sense of ambivalence and complexity in student talk regarding different experiences of information technology. This chapter has highlighted the individualised pathways inherent in much of student life and the way that technologies such as the VLE and practices such as minimal timetables can create a sense of 'intimate distance' or 'absent presence' for students within the university. Such experiences were discussed in ambivalent ways within the focus groups as having both negative affects and also at times being beneficial. The following chapter will deepen the analysis of affective experiences at Woodlands by concentrating on loneliness and isolation.

CHAPTER SIX: DATA ANALYSIS

Loneliness, Contact, Labour and Love

Introduction

'It Would Help if I Just Got a Little Bit More Love'

I sat in a seminar room at Woodlands, waiting for a pre-arranged meeting where students and staff had proposed to gather together to discuss higher education and collaborative ways to conceptualise and understand the recent changes that had occurred in the sector. Flyers had been put up around the campus and emails sent out to notify people. However, I found myself to be one of only three attendees that day and the meeting was postponed, later to be cancelled altogether. Loneliness appears to be in contrast to the etymology of the institutions of higher education: 'university' refers to the 'whole' or 'aggregate' and is derived by shortening 'universitas magistrorum et scholarium', a community of masters and scholars (Evans 2004). Likewise, the term 'college' designates an 'association'. Words such as aggregate and association suggest some form of network and sociality as opposed to the experience of loneliness and isolation, which were frequently discussed by the students in this research.

This chapter explores alternative ways of talking about and valuing student experience that are not often represented in more 'official' measures, such as the NSS or other student 'satisfaction' surveys. Particularly, the focus here is on the way that students talked about affective experiences of loneliness and isolation in terms of face-to-face contact, including relationships with tutors. Adopting a relational and psychosocial perspective as in the previous chapters, here I aim to challenge the idea that student affective experience can be usefully reduced to a continuum of Likert Scale responses that range from very satisfied to very unsatisfied. Instead, I draw attention to a more complex process of emotional valuing, often characterised by ambivalence and opposing talk of feelings, and the way that 'satisfaction' does not equate with 'happiness' (Collini 2011) or even with fulfilment (Ritzer 1998). With this in mind, the current chapter also seeks to highlight the various discourses that students use to speak about higher education, including ideas of 'love' and 'collaboration' and also consumer choice and 'value for money', and the way the participants, as moral actors, appeared to attempt to understand and grapple with the tensions between these.

I make sense of these affective experiences and varying discourses of university through ideas of the imagined university and 'cruel optimism' (as discussed by Lauren Berlant 2006), which refers to an optimistic attachment to an object of desire that keeps the individual in close proximity with it despite painful or complex experiences relating to it. To some extent this contrasts with Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) approach to the psychosocial subject through its implication that ambivalence is a 'fantasy' of hope that maintains painful bonds (as opposed to reflective of a healthy subject position, Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Nevertheless, the idea of the imagined university helps to focus student discussions regarding actual and desired experiences of higher education whilst allowing space for ambivalent feelings to be explored. I will also discuss the way that students appear to both use and resist affective experiences such as loneliness and isolation, the various strategies that are talked about in order to achieve this, and the paradoxical space (Rose 1993) of intimate distance (Luckhurst 2002) that results from such strategies. Focus groups therefore not only represented a method of investigation in this study but were also constitutive of finding an alternative way to conceptualise and value student experience that pays attention to the inherent relational qualities of student life.

Through examining the relational quality of student experience, especially through the lens of affect and time, I hope to show how the emotional linearity embedded within more commonplace understandings of student life - such as those gained through surveys, examined previously - frequently acts to 'smooth out' differences and inconsistencies. Such a process of 'smoothing' occurs as a technique through which bodies are made commensurable (Greenhouse 1996) so that certain experiences, such as those of loneliness, are located within individuals who may then come to define themselves, and be defined by others, as somehow marginal (Fanon 1967; Young 1990) and occupying shameful experiences and subject positions. Whilst such marginal positionings and feelings of shame may be related to gender, class and ethnicity, this is not a simple correspondence.

The denial of the structural features of affective experiences can result in the internalisation of negative affects and their subsequent amplification within the individual (Fanon 1967 describes how the structural experience of being black can lead to internalised feelings of inferiority). Whilst some students are able to resist the experiences of loneliness and isolation in higher education by drawing on various aspects of social and cultural capital, others may internalise a sense of blame, feeling personally responsible for the situation. Such ideas connect to the notion of the imagined university in terms of individuals holding on to the anticipation or desire of certain experiences in higher

education despite their actual experiences seeming to be quite painfully different from such optimistic fantasies (Berlant 2006).

Loneliness and Social Capital

The concept of loneliness is important to both this chapter and the following one as it frames student talk due to the frequency with which it was discussed in the focus groups. 'Loneliness' expresses a sense of standing apart, separation, or of being cut off from others (Merriam-Webster 2012). Existential philosophers and writers view loneliness, and the human endeavour to accept it, as an essential ontological condition necessary for confronting one's subjective truth (see philosophy and fiction by Sartre or Camus). However, sociologists have tended to argue that loneliness is a product of social structures rather than an ontological or affective pre-disposition. Weber (various writings) wrote about the asphyxiating 'iron cage' of bureaucratic organisation in modern societies that threatened individual freedoms and intimacies. Marx's (various writings) conceptualisation of alienation and loneliness linked it to the organisation of capitalism through the separation of workers from the means of production. Simmel (1950) is often attributed with making explicit links between 'the metropolis' and the isolation of the individual from both herself and others (ideas taken forward later by the Chicago School in the 1960s, or Jane Jacobs 1961).

Nevertheless, despite these apparently negative ideas of loneliness reflecting an uncomfortable and painful separation of self from others, some authors have emphasised the importance of weak social ties for happiness, as they enable networking and numerous surface relationships, leading to increased opportunities (for example, Granovetter 1973). Olivia Laing (2013) also pointed out the ambivalence and 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2006) of loneliness in her essay on urban isolation, arguing that it is a state in which contemplation and a 'depth of vision' becomes possible, a feature that may contribute to maintaining individuals in the state despite the 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2007) associated with it. Weiss (1973) categorised two types of loneliness, which can be either temporary or chronic: emotional loneliness, which derives from attachment theory (see various writings by John Bowlby, or Donald Winnicott), and is connected to ideas of love; and social loneliness, where individuals do not feel part of a larger social network (emphasised in texts such as Robert D. Putnam's (2001) 'Bowling Alone'). Although these two perspectives on loneliness are interrelated, this chapter will focus mainly on social loneliness.

Robert D. Putnam, in 'Bowling Alone' (2001), argues that social capital – the connections among individuals - in the USA has declined in contemporary times due to people increasingly disengaging from community activities. For instance, the number of people who take part in bowling as a past-time has increased but those who do so as members of leagues playing with others has decreased. Putnam then applies a similar argument to other civic pursuits such as political and religious participation or volunteering. Putnam argues that leisure activities such as television and the Internet have led to this form of social life by promoting greater individualism (although he also recognises the ability of the Internet to reinforce – although not to supplement – regular face-to-face contact and communities).

Putnam (2001:22) argues that where social capital exists it can be bonding (by reinforcing exclusive and homogenous ties, such as gated communities or groups with specific membership criteria) or it can be bridging (connecting people from diverse areas of life, such as some political movements). Both of these types of capital are essential for society to function and some groups include both forms, whilst the two types can also be in tension. To illustrate these arguments, Putnam points to the issues surrounding the benefits and drawbacks of racially segregated (bonding) or non-segregated (bridging) schooling in the USA. By way of remedy to the reduction in social capital and its negative consequences for society, increased civil engagement is recommended by Putnam.

However, Putnam's research has been criticised for 'crunching' a large number of diverse activities into the single measure of 'social capital' (Fischer 2001), thereby obscuring differences between varying activities and the processes that lay behind either engagement or apathy. Furthermore, some researchers highlight that participation has changed form but people still do participate in community activities (Wuthnow 1998). Such arguments suggest that communities are merely altering as opposed to disappearing. Banfield's (1958) study of Italian villages showed that certain types of sociality focus on the private group (or family) above the public group. From this perspective Putnam may not be describing so much a reduction in social capital but merely reflecting the way that it has become 'privatised'. In other words, people are engaging in more bonding (homogenous) and less bridging (heterogeneous) activities. In addition, whereas Putnam argues that generational changes such as television have led to increased isolation others, such as Costa and Kahn (2002), point out that widening inequality in American society as opposed to technological changes may be responsible for any reduction in membership of organisations.

Integration in Higher Education

Brennan (1982) writes that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to loneliness and it is a common issue amongst students. A number of researchers have discussed the importance of social integration and social networks for students in higher education. Vincent Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration (examined in more depth in Chapter Two) follows from his study of the factors associated with student withdrawal from higher education. He draws on the relationship between the social integration of students and student retention and argues that degree completion is strongly related to the level of student integration within the university.

Writing from a sociological perspective (as opposed to the psychological work of Tinto), Hilary Lawson (2008), in contrast to Giddens' (1991) notion of the reflexive project of self and emphasis on individualism, discusses the importance of group life on the identity of young people in educational contexts. Following qualitative interviews and using the technique of discourse analysis, Lawson argues that connectedness with others is essential for young people's developing sense of self and social capital. Lawson (2008) writes that:

'Significant friendships, founded on loyalty and trust, could be said to provide the social capital that students draw upon to get them through transitional insecurities' (2008:18).

Lawson (2008) quotes from one of her participants, called Sangita, to show the way that being part of a community of students, in this case students who are all studying languages, is essential for identity formation in the participants in her sample:

'Being a modern foreign languages student is amazing, there seems to be a real sense of community between us. Many people think that language is easy and don't understand the extent of it...' (2008:20).

Being part of a group and being able to contrast that group with other groups ('many people think that language is easy...') – Putnam's (2001) bonding social capital - was important for this participant in terms of her ability to identify as a language student. This concentration on the importance of connectedness and belonging in student life contrasts with the notion of 'satisfaction' in education and the focus on an individualised, market-driven and consumer-orientated progressive route through the system, where individual achievement is held to be foremost.

Following such previous research, the current chapter seeks to show how many students struggle with issues such as few contact hours or a difficulty in their relationships with tutors and how, through the focus group method, participants appeared to desire affiliation with others that it was not always possible to achieve, often due to structural factors in the higher education system. These issues seem to be especially pronounced for students who do not have a great deal of 'social capital' in Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) sense of what is considered 'valuable' at Woodlands. This then impacts differently and distinctly upon students' learning, the value that they place on their experiences, and also upon their identities and sense of self in ways that satisfaction surveys or attention to the universality and linearity of student life may not necessarily capture.

Face-to-Face Contact in Higher Education

'Why do we pay three grand for eight hours tuition a week?' (Box response)

The NSS does not specifically mention contact hours (defined by The QAA 2013 as time spent learning in contact with staff), with the only similar reference being 'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to' (NSS Question 11). The Higher Education Policy Institute (Bekhradnia 2013) found that average contact hours at UK universities are 13.9 hours of formal teaching per week. However, this figure is often higher for science students and lower for arts, humanities and social science students, who are expected to participate in more independent study outside of the formal timetable, and who make up the student population at Woodlands. In addition, first year undergraduate students are likely to have more contact hours than final year undergraduate students are, and postgraduate students, where the emphasis is on increasingly independent study (and also where work and family commitments may become more acute), typically have least contact of all (this particular situation was discussed with reference to virtual communication in the previous chapter).

Contact hours appear to be an important issue for students: following a survey of UK students nearly 45% of students with seven hours or fewer of contact each week are 'dissatisfied' with that aspect of their education (Grove 2012). Nevertheless, at Woodlands a DSC Annual Group Project Report, Undergraduate Group Four (2013), conducted using a survey method with space for qualitative responses, found that 85% of students are satisfied with their timetables. However, it also stated that:

‘Students repeatedly called for better communication between staff and students and more transparency of process and information’ (2013: unpag).

This suggests that there is a perceived deficit in the contact between staff and students, although it is important to remember the specific conditions of production of the DSC reports where students tend to approach the Departmental Student Co-ordinators (DSCs) with problematic as opposed to positive experiences (discussed in Chapter Three). In addition, with the introduction of Key Information Sets (KIS) that require universities to publish information relating to contact hours, there is a pressure for universities to examine this issue as more contact hours are considered by many students to represent better ‘value for money’, as in the Box Response above, asking why students pay ‘three grand’ for eight hours of contact per week (although a direct correlation between quality and contact is not necessarily the case according to The QAA (2013), which advises students to consider quality as opposed to quantity of tuition, representing a somewhat confusing position due to the inclusion of ‘contact hours’ in KIS).

As discussed by Putnam (2001), a taken-for-granted assumption is that social contact is essential for a functioning society and for individual fulfilment. However, many aspects of the delivery of higher education are increasingly taking place online or through flexible learning, as highlighted in the previous chapter. In addition, with more students and relatively fewer staff, plus other pressures such as the diversity of the student body and students working longer hours in paid employment, scheduling and making time for face-to-face contact may be increasingly difficult (this relates to issues of temporality discussed in Chapters Four and Five).

Mark Peel (2000) in ‘Nobody Cares’ discusses the importance of relationships with tutors for students, arguing that students’ levels of enjoyment and commitment to their courses is strongly related to the type and quality of contact that they have with university staff such as tutors and lecturers. However, in a questionnaire conducted by Peel, 45% of students could not think of any tutor who they could approach for help with adjusting to university life. Likewise, Peel cites Gillespie and Noble (1992) who found that staff-student interaction is crucial to students continuing their studies at university, and Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) suggested that such relationships made a greater contribution to students’ wellbeing than peer connections did.

Peel (2000) asserts that the benefits of staff-student contact are especially the case for relatively disadvantaged students, such as those without a family history of participation in

higher education, emphasising the importance of staff-student relationships to the widening participation agenda (which, paradoxically, is in tension with such relationships due to the increased number of students without additional funding for staff). Woodman (2012) carried out qualitative interviews with young people and reflects on 'contact' in an Australian context of higher education, arguing that:

'Finding time for building and maintaining relationships emerged as a central concern for the interview participants' (2012:1079).

Woodman explains this anxiety regarding social contact amongst students partly in terms of the decreasing number of courses that have a shared structure and timetable as flexibility and choice come to increasingly define higher education. To emphasise this point, Woodman (2012) quotes a student participant in his study, Marissa, who discussed her difficulties with forming relationships in higher education:

'You are in a lecture theatre and you go from where everyone knows everyone [school] to where no one knows anyone... no one sort of integrates as such' (2012:1079).

The DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Two (2013) regarding communications with postgraduate students at Woodlands also found evidence of the importance not only of peer relationships but also of staff-student alliances. Based on survey responses, the report suggested that:

'Students who provided the most positive responses generally seem to enjoy closer, more meaningful working relationships with staff through strong face-to-face communication' (2013: unpag).

Although again, this finding must be treated with caution since students with more positive relationships with staff may have been more likely to want to complete the survey. However, another section of the report contains student comments, one of which is that:

'Some people require additional support academically and it is very hard having only two tutors to operate over 60 or so students; it becomes a general relationship rather than a specific relationship' (2013: unpag).

The above quotation suggests that this student did not feel that she was in a unique relationship with members of staff. The undergraduate students in my focus groups appeared to experience the lowest levels of social isolation and loneliness of all

participants, as mentioned in previous chapters through their description of student life as an almost 'continuous' sociality. Nevertheless, there were still marked discussions surrounding issues of separation, particularly relating to the challenges of independent study and the perceived deficit of class contact time. In conversations surrounding the demanding aspects of university life, the following was mentioned in a focus group at the occupation:

Phil: Personally, I'd say the most difficult thing about being at Woodlands is that you don't always get the sort of class time and face-to-face time that you could actually do with. I feel that sometimes, on my degree anyway, and I think it's the same with most, that you get an hour lecture and an hour seminar for each module and as the university level is very demanding intellectually it would be nice to get more class time in some shape or form so that would be my only, or my major, gripe with the university. It doesn't really affect my studies too much but I think that I'm paying good money to be here and it would help if I just got a little bit more love in return (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time)

Britta: Yeah, I'd agree with that, like it would be nicer to have a little bit more seminar time especially... Because you go in for like your hour and you might get into a half hour of discussion and then it's like 'well, that's great, it's over now, see you next week'. You know, it's OK and you get enough done and of course you do lots of reading and stuff, but it would be nice to have a little bit more... Yeah (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Based on this extract, it seems that the participants feel that they do not get sufficient contact time for their respective courses, or at least that they would like 'a little bit more', and this is something that appears to be shared across the different years of study (second year and third year) and subject groups (Subject F and Subject B) that they are in. This lack of 'class time' echoes Sherry Turkle's (2013) assertion that individuals are increasingly operating without face-to-face contact and that although this has advantages in terms of spatial and temporal flexibility, it can also lead to isolation and the necessity for people to personally navigate a course between distance from others and intimacy with them. This navigation may be achieved by individuals with varying degrees of success, often dependent on other factors such as their existing access to social networks or social capital. Those students with more resources or social capital to develop networks and contact with others may have been able to do so successfully but, as this current project shows, some

participants experienced significant barriers to being able to engage in this way. One interesting point from the conversation between Phil and Britta is the way that they both assert that they would like more contact time but then they also state that what they already have is 'OK' and they 'get enough done'. There may be a number of things occurring in this apparent contradiction between talking about wanting more despite already having enough.

First, the ambiguity of their talk – 'a little bit more', 'in some shape or form' – may be strategies that act to soften their opinions in the focus group context (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000) and therefore concern the development and maintenance of sociality and connection through talk of a lack of contact. The apparent contradiction between students requesting more contact time and asserting that what they currently have is 'OK' could be examined in relation to Wetherell and Edley's (1999) discussion of the negotiation of hegemonic masculinity (see also Hollway and Jefferson 2000). The authors show how men variously position themselves in relation to hegemonic accounts of masculinity that are both consensual and contested, illustrating how sense-making from the position of a psychosocial subject is contradictory and replete with competing claims and ambivalence.

From a Kleinian perspective (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), such ambivalence and the ability of an individual to contain contradictory opinions is the key to psychic health, whereas the splitting between good and bad is less adaptive. Students navigated a path between intimacy and separation in terms of the way they positioned themselves in relation to higher education and this was also reflected by the way that they talked together in the focus groups, moving between the intimacy of revealing their opinions and concerns to one another but in ways that also contained a sense of distance from one another through the participants' maintaining that they were 'OK' (Gunaratnam 2013). The ambivalence contained within the students' talk can be further demonstrated by the following quotation and observation from the same focus group. Although the students appeared to construct a sense of sociality in the group and asserted that they wanted more of it in the form of increased contact-time in classes, this was contradicted when the co-researcher asked them about strategies for involving more people in the current project:

Co-researcher: Do you have any ideas about how to really get people involved in this project?

Cate: To be honest, it sounds like a ridiculous thing, but actually something like a Facebook group where people can, like, where questions are posed by someone. It could be anyone, it doesn't necessarily need to be the same facilitator, as like an events page where students are invited to it, like students love debating on Facebook, like every time we set up a campaign group, like a Facebook page, it's just full of debate, which is really healthy ... and it makes people want to take part in the debate more if anything. I think something like that where people feel it's not necessarily like they're taking time out of their day to sit and be recorded and all that kind of stuff... if they're in their own personal space and they can just talk they can really think about what they're saying and write exactly what they think... (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Although in one respect the participants appear to want more contact time in class, and they moved towards contact and a degree of intimacy in the focus group, simultaneously there is the sense that they do not want to 'take time out of their day' to meet with others. There is a sense of 'intimate distance' or Gillian Rose's (1993) 'paradoxical space' in such assertions, where students at once desire co-presence in the form of physically being together (as discussed by John Urry 2002, see Chapter Two) but they also appear to want such co-presence to be mediated – what Gergen (2002) refers to as an 'absent presence' – through the use of information technology. The use of virtual communications is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five. However, it is important to note that students do not necessarily view using the VLE in the same way as they view using Facebook as discussed by Cate above (an issue that the university is aware of in its desire to integrate more 'social networking' into academic technologies such as the VLE, Kear 2013), with Facebook and other chat applications being used frequently by students to connect with others, although the qualities of such connections – especially if they act as a substitute for face-to-face contact - have been questioned (Putnam 2001:410).

Returning to the above conversation between Phil and Britta, there was a sense of things being 'OK', despite also wanting more contact time. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2000:803) discuss the conversational idiom 'thinking positive' with regard to conversations between women with breast cancer. In Wilkinson and Kitzinger's focus group study of breast cancer talk, discussion was seen as a way not to describe a personal coping strategy but as a form

of support-seeking from other members since such idioms, which are vague and general, are likely to receive endorsement. The idiom 'thinking positive' was also used as a way to move topics on and to close down 'trouble-telling' that might disrupt relationships within the group by revealing differences or disagreements between the participants or through the expression of sensitive emotions. In this way, the idea of being 'OK' or getting 'enough done' may reflect the use of such idiomatic speech (without suggesting that such phrases are themselves cultural idioms), especially in the context of the focus group at the student occupation, where respondents were keen to be seen as positioned as supporting the university and its lecturers, and consequently may not have wanted to heavily critique the institution (any such critique could have had negative consequences for their social capital within the focus group).

This sense of being 'OK' or getting 'enough done' being used as a way to close down 'trouble telling' and move the conversation on can also be seen in a further extract where Phil and Britta are discussing possible sacrifices they have made in order to enter and remain in higher education. Britta asserts 'not really being able to eat' as a sacrifice but quickly closes this down by saying that she's 'doing alright', to which Phil agrees:

Britta: Yeah, I agree. I don't think I've really made any sacrifices apart from, like, not really being able to eat and stuff sometimes (laughs). But yeah, I was trying to get as far away from home as possible, and university's my favourite place I've ever been, so I'm doing alright so far (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time).

Phil: I second that (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time).

This reinforces the point that the students at the occupation may have found it difficult to discuss negative aspects of their experiences at university since they were part of a student occupation in support of lecturers and higher education more generally. Their intention may have been to emphasise the positive aspects of university as a move towards affiliation with one another. To this end, the participants seemed to employ a number of ways of talking that acted to close down 'difficult' conversations and maintain the closeness and cohesiveness of the focus group (whilst paradoxically constructing a degree of distancing from one another). The focus groups in this way themselves acted as a form of 'intimate distance', where intimacy and contact was created between the participants but only through the maintenance of a form of distance in terms of the mutual avoidance of difficult topics. Such intimate distance also alludes to the notion of the imagined university and cruel optimism, where 'optimistic fantasy' is central to enduring experiences of

'compromised ordinariness' (Berlant 2006:35), examined in greater detail in the following section. The issue of seminars and contact time was also discussed in another undergraduate focus group (with students who had intermitted from their studies), in relation to difficult experiences at university in terms of relationships with staff:

Sara: I didn't feel that teaching was a priority, I'd almost feel guilty for like contacting the tutor because I'd feel that I was taking up their time because they were obviously doing other things like their own studying and I didn't ever feel confident in approaching them because I just felt like I was a nuisance, but then I thought 'well I shouldn't really be feeling like that because I'm paying to study here and I should be making the most of the facilities that are on offer' (Third year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Kyla: Yeah, I think as well because as you get to sort of your second and third year you have less and less contact with the university because you haven't got so many lectures or you don't need to be at university as much so you almost feel that you don't really know what's going on in terms of what the department's doing, what changes are being made, things like that, so you don't, you almost feel like you don't know where to find it out because you're not sort of in the university anyway... (Third year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Sara and Kyla had intermitted from their studies and this particular situation is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Chapter Seven). However, I have brought the above excerpt into this section in terms of students feeling that they do not get enough contact time in classes. Kyla asserts that the lack of contact that she has with the university in terms of formal lectures means that she does not feel part of the institution. The foregoing highlights the way that temporal factors, such as timetabling, can create multiple affective separations for some students (Woodman 2012); this issue of temporality was discussed in greater detail in the preceding chapters. Phil and Britta appear to feel a sense of emotional loneliness in the form of wanting more 'love' from their experience of higher education (relating to Weiss's 1973 discussion of emotional loneliness), whereas Kyla also seems to be suggesting a social loneliness (Weiss 1973) in terms of talking about the way her timetable is structured leading her to feeling that she is not part of the university.

Following this, it seems that one difference between Phil and Britta who were undergraduate students and Sara and Kyla who had intermitted from university and returned into their third year of study is expressed in their different abilities to create social

networks in spaces that are not temporally structured according to the university timetable. For instance when asked how she spends her day, Britta replied:

Britta: Mainly campaigning, like I spend a lot of my time campaigning, more than I do doing work for university unfortunately (laughs) (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time)

Campaigning, although it is not part of the timetable of the university, is an activity that paradoxically allows Britta to feel integrated within a community at university, despite also acknowledging her desire for more contact hours. Conversely Kyla describes that she has few contact hours and this makes her feel that she is not a part of the university, and this may be because she is unable to access the type of social capital through networks that Phil and Britta can, perhaps due to other separations that she is also experiencing, such as the spatial-temporal separation from her peer group due to her taking time out from her studies. In this way, the affective burden of flexibility and choice in higher education as seen in minimal teaching timetables may fall on those who are already most separated from institutions. As stated by Castells (1996):

‘The number of working hours and their distribution in the life-cycle and in the annual, monthly and weekly cycles of people’s lives, are a central feature of how they feel, enjoy and suffer’ (1996:439).

Added to this, I would argue that such enjoyment and suffering are situated affective experiences, influenced by the social capital available to each individual and the circumstances of their lives. From an examination of the Box response at the beginning of this section (‘why do we pay three grand for eight hours tuition a week?’) it seems likely that these eight hours, or however many it may be for each individual student, are heavily implicated in the way that the participants experienced higher education. For some students the eight hours were talked about as poor value for money and that a little bit more ‘love’ would be better (Phil); however, at the same time these students were able to feel integrated into the university through other pursuits. For other students, who may be separated from the university in multiple ways (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1993 and the next chapter, Chapter Seven), these eight hours can lead to an affective experience of loneliness and isolation and the concomitant internalised shame (or disgust, Lawler 2005) that results from this (Fanon 1967).

Cruel Optimism and the Imagined University

Benedict Anderson (1983) famously developed the concept of the imagined community, which he suggested gave geographically dispersed individuals the sense of belonging to a nation. Anderson (1983:22) argued that print capitalism made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to relate themselves to others in new ways, allowing for secular communities that transverse space and time to develop. This set the stage for the modern nations as spatially diverse people could see themselves as sharing identities and lifestyles. In this way, Anderson decoupled the idea of community from an actual physical or territorial base of interaction, although such ideas have been challenged, not least by Putnam (2001) and the assertion of the importance of face-to-face commitments, discussed earlier in this chapter. The promise of closeness through the maintenance of actual absence hinted at by Anderson's concept of imagined community is more explicitly present in Lauren Berlant's (2006) 'cruel optimism', whereby:

'...One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition' (2006:21).

Berlant conceptualises objects of desire as 'clusters of promises' to explain how our attachment to an object can endure even if it is painful or ambivalent; cruel optimism is the 'condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss' (2006:21). Optimism functions as an affective form embedded in desire and depletion. Here, optimism actually acts to impede living and enjoyment by cohering individuals to 'clusters of promises' as opposed to the actuality of their experiences. There is an intimate distance involved in cruel optimism as it suppresses the risks of attachment and forms an absent presence. Of importance to the concept of cruel optimism is:

'...The centrality of optimistic fantasy to reproducing and surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness' (2006:35).

Applying these ideas to the student discussions in the focus groups, I would suggest that participants are in some ways attached to the university through their ambivalent feelings towards it; they feel distance and closeness, loneliness and co-presence, and simultaneously engage with a number of 'narrative' positions in higher education, as examined in the next section of this chapter. This creates the conditions of possibility of their continued relationship with the institution through their invocation of an imagined

university. In other words, the value that the students place on the imagined (as opposed to 'real') possibility for a positive experience at university appears to maintain their connection to the institution despite the fact of what many students described as a difficult actuality (for instance, see the postgraduate discussions in Chapters Four and Five). There also seemed to be a temporal layering at play in the idea of an imagined university for the respondents in the focus group with intermitting students, since 'the imagined university' came closer to what they experienced at university before they intermitted. Following a discussion regarding their feelings as deferred students, the participants asserted:

Sara: I started my degree, was it in... because me and Kyla started at the same time... was it in 2007? (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Kyla: Yeah (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Sara: So we both started in 2007 and I actually started it at the same time as my cousin was doing it and we live really close together so we'd like commute up to university together, we had similar seminar groups, so it was sort of a joint experience with her like we'd travel up. Whereas now this year it's a very isolated experience, you know because we commute, well I do, I've found it very isolating because now coming here my priority is to study I don't particularly find it a social place to be, um, I don't use the canteen... I use the library, I'm either in a lecture, a seminar or the library, I don't use any of the social aspects of the university so I find it personally quite a lonely place that sometimes I'm quite reluctant to come into, I'd rather study at home where I know I've got my network of friends close by... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Kyla: Yeah I'm similar in that respect because all my friends graduated last year and I actually had two friends from the course and I used to live with them as well so that was sort of similar to Sara as well, we used to walk in to college together and we used to discuss what was going on and gossip about things, and then it sort of became that I had to find somewhere to live here with people that I didn't know, they were students at Woodlands as well but they weren't doing the same course as me so my time now is just spent kind of coming to university for what I need to, a seminar or lecture, and then going home and kind of completing my work at home or spending as little time here as possible because I don't have a network anymore, there's no one that I'm going to see around and just bump into and recognise, yeah.

I just feel that can be quite lonely it just makes you feel a bit kind of like deflated doesn't it? (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Sara: Yeah (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Similarly to the student in Chapter Five commenting on the possibility of submitting work electronically by saying it would not be beneficial 'because handing in is a ritual that should end in the pub!' (Kear 2013), Sara and Kyla discussed the way that various daily practices - such as walking to college or talking with friends - can shape a sense of belonging, through the creating and recreating of space and time (for instance, see Doreen Massey 2005). When it is not possible to engage in such practices, perhaps due to not feeling part of social networks or being temporally and spatially de-synchronised from the institution, participants discussed feeling isolated from the university and lonely, suggesting that there are aspects of higher education that are important to students beyond 'satisfaction' with their courses and that micro spatial-temporal practices are intrinsic to students affective experiences.

The participants in the feedback seminar (postgraduate students) also visually represented this sense of shaping space as being important to feeling embedded in the institution and the expectation they entertained that university would be different (and, in some ways, better) to the way that it was experienced by them in actuality. One participant had taken a photograph of a corridor at Woodlands filled with flyers to describe student experience (Figure 4, below). The blurriness and slightly out of focus nature of the image alongside its 'busyness' with countless flyers is suggestive of an intimacy and closeness that excludes 'outsiders' from seeing exactly what is happening in the image. However, when this image was discussed in the seminar it transpired that the student had not taken the photograph as being representative of his actual experience of being engaged in a multitude of activities or sociality, but instead as being part of the experience that he was not having (although he felt that he would or should be having it) since he actually felt isolated from the social life of the university.



Figure 4: Flyers (Feedback Seminar)

Another student had taken a similar photograph of the corridors but this time the flyers had all been cleared away from the walls (Figure 5, below). This was also discussed as indicative of a sense of isolation and loneliness at the university felt by the students in the feedback seminar and the lack of control that they felt they had over the spaces of the university: since they were unable to put up flyers or posters without following certain procedures they did not feel that they owned or were part of the space. Such issues also relate to my discussion in Chapter Three, regarding the interactions that Karen (a student collaborator) and I had with the university security services when attempting to engage in arts-based research in the building. As stated, the security guard suggested that ‘official clearance’ was required in relation to putting up posters, or in this case research boxes, at Woodlands:

‘It’s different if you have the official clearance. If someone touches your boxes, we will watch out for them on the CCTV and stop that from happening. Anything you do in the university - videoing, drama - you have to go through the proper procedure. That’s how it is with risks. You have to go to your departments and talk to the administrator about your idea or your project, get the forms, get clearance. Then they would be official and no one would touch them’.

The stark differences between the images presented here (Figure 4 and Figure 5) and the response from the security guard regarding our arts-based research suggest a rupture or dis-juncture between what some students feel they could be experiencing and how they view their actual experience to be, similarly to the discussions between Sara and Kyla regarding their expectations surrounding university life (in part based on their previous experiences of it) and their current actuality of feeling isolated and lonely in higher education. Students appear to discuss anticipating a more social or 'free' space (Polletta 1999) but feel that this is not always the actuality of their time at university.

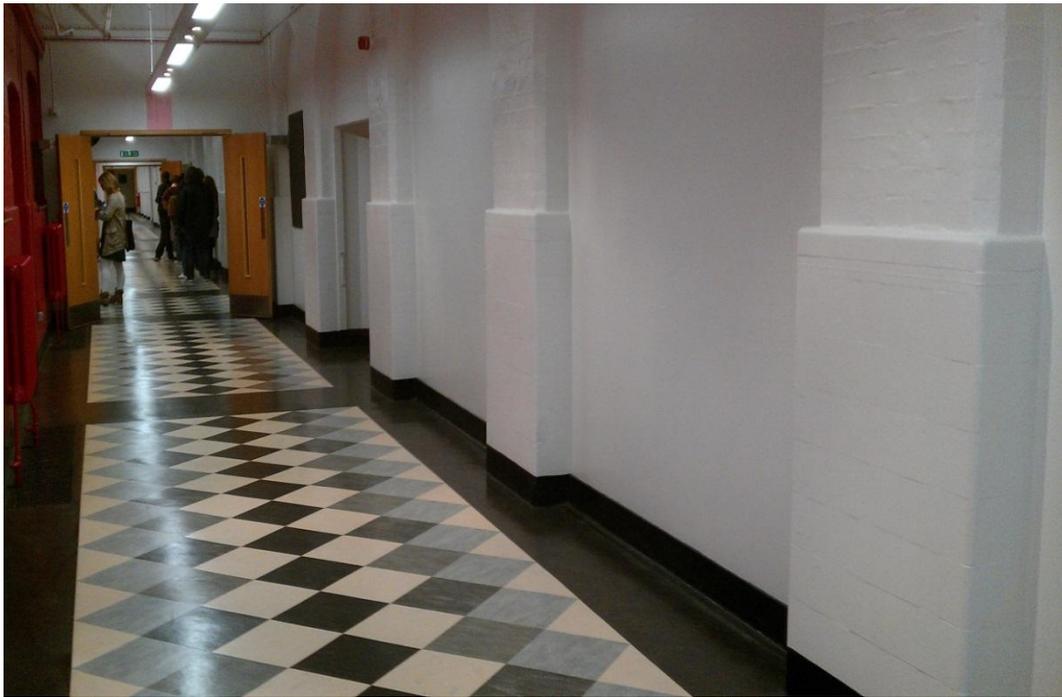


Figure 5: Corridor (Feedback Seminar)

Berlant's (2006) notion of cruel optimism explores the way that an attachment is maintained to a desired object in a way that functions to keep individuals in proximity to this object, whilst simultaneously revealing a sense of disappointment. Like Hollway and Jefferson (2000), this acknowledges the existence of ambivalence and complex positions within the subject, although Berlant posits a bleaker outlook regarding this, where ambivalence is not indicative of health but of optimistic attachments that provoke and engage us with suffering. At times this appeared to be the experience of the students in this research: maintaining their affinity with the university despite the struggles and intimate distance that they felt.

The way that some of the students in this research spoke about their relationship with the university as one of being socially apart from it was in contrast to the discussion of sociality at the occupation (see Chapter Four), suggesting that the degree of 'cruel optimism' expressed by some students in this research was not necessarily a universal experience and pointing towards highly different and diverse experiences for students in higher education (that may fall outside the scope of 'satisfaction'). Nevertheless, one Woodlands DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group One (2013) stated that:

'Many students report Woodlands' exterior as that of a well-organised and timely university only to find disappointment later' (2013: unpag).

Disappointment may be inherent in the experiences of some students at university. Nevertheless, positive descriptions of higher education have been asserted in terms of how some students remember their experiences of Woodlands in the 1960s. David Bracher (2010) compiled a memoir of his time at Woodlands based on personal photographs and interviews with students. The memoir describes 'the heady air of freedom' and 'the liberating joys of student life'. One student interviewed says:

'We believed in each other, ourselves, the power of democracy, the right to protest and be heard, the freedom to love in any way we wanted and the fact that the world of our parents had endured two world wars and that we would make sure it never happened again' (2010:121).

Likewise another student, as part of a poem concerning her time at Woodlands in the 1960s, comments that:

'Did the sun always shine? Music, friendship and endless fun... Every day full of optimism – no money but ... we knew how to dance, how to laugh, how to love and how to be together ... We thought we would always be young, living in communal groups and sharing time together. So many different people – from the North, the South, the 'Upper' and the 'Lower', the rich and the poor – all equal. We had dreams, we had ideals, life was about caring, principles and passion' (2010:32).

Such remarks appear to be counterpoised with many of the discussions of student life in this research (perhaps tessellating most completely with the accounts of student experience discussed by the students in the occupation), although it is important to remember the part that memory plays in recalling experiences more positively, especially in older adults (Kennedy et al 2004). It seems that, at least for some students in this research,

ideals (perhaps historic ideals) of sociality suggested by the imagined university were not always replicated in actuality.

The photographs in this project, which were spoken about as signifying loneliness and isolation, were simultaneously used to begin a narrative of sociality and therefore contribute to the paradoxical texturing and construction of student experience that took place in-situ through the research methods employed. This highlights the way that methods are implicated in the findings and that there is not one student 'experience' but that experience, as talk, is continually constructed and re-constructed and dependent on the conditions in which it is expressed, suggestive of the multiple separations and simultaneous connections in student life, the diverse experiences present within higher education and the frequent ambivalence expressed by students regarding these.

Love and Labour in Student Talk

'Why does it have to be run like a business?' (Box Response)

Returning to previous quotations - where Phil suggested it would help him if he received a little bit more 'love' and Sara asserted that she frequently felt uncomfortable approaching tutors although she considered that she should be able to since she was paying and so wanted to use the 'facilities' offered by the university - there is something interesting in Phil's translation of contact time or the money he is paying to be at university as 'love' and Sara's assertion of contacting a tutor as using the 'facilities on offer'. Such comments resonate with feminist discussions of emotional labour and express something of the difference between the way students discussed issues of loneliness in the contemporary university and those of sociality, or 'love', at Woodlands in the 1960s. According to Hochschild (1983), emotional labour involves the management of emotions, often to the affective detriment of the individual doing the managing (Scott 2009), and is exchanged for a wage. It may be the case that with the marketization of higher education, students are expecting a progressive degree of emotional labour or 'love' from lecturers (a very different kind of 'love' from that discussed by Bracher 2010), who are increasingly viewed as a resource or 'facility'.

Peer Illner (2011) argues that the metrics of the NSS, which focus students as consumers of the service provided by staff, generate a specific and polarised relationship between students and lecturers where students anticipate requiring certain grades from their lecturers and so the interaction between students and staff becomes more instrumental,

following the 'banking' concept of education (Freire 1970). In fact, the NSS does not ask students questions about relationships with tutors, but focuses on more utilitarian aspects of staff-student interaction such as: 'staff are good at explaining things' (Question One); 'staff have made the subject interesting' (Question Two); or 'staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' (Question Three), suggesting that even enthusiasm can be somehow calibrated and assessed.

Illner interviewed four members of teaching staff at one university in the UK and found that, according to the lecturers, students appeared apathetic and bored due to the encroachment of capital into creative spaces (or the 'free spaces' of Polletta 1999). Following this, the sense of contact time as 'love' and lecturers as a 'facility' suggests that separation from the university for students may not only be conceptualised in relation to contact hours, but also affectively in terms of the 'love' that they feel they do not get, leading to a collapsing of time (in terms of contact hours) with affect, where more time is viewed as equal to more love, indicating that 'love' can be quantified and highlighting the way that emotions are viewed as measurable and marketable (for instance, by the inclusion of 'contact time' in the Key Information Sets as discussed earlier).

This idea of love as both an emotional and economic quality is interesting in terms of two different discourses of education: education as an economic activity conceptualised in terms of linear progression through the course and to the labour market; and education as a transformative experience, which is indicative of a personal journey and highlighted by the practice of Freire (1970). There appears to be a tension and ambivalence between these discourses evident in the way that students talk about higher education. Participants are not only 'consumers' of an education 'product' but they are also struggling with questions of meaning and politics in higher education. These are the existential insecurities and moral questions that Giddens' (1990) suggests abstract systems ameliorate and that represent internal battles that are overlooked by student surveys. Participants in the MA Subject G focus group talked about different conceptions of valuing their studies, ranging from the marks they receive for essays and coursework to ideals of personal development and transformation. My field notes record how:

Participants had differing opinions about marks, with some wanting to improve their marks (although with limited guidance on how to do so) and others being less concerned about marks. It was discussed how marks are arbitrary and are not really what the university experience is about, yet they are what students are

ultimately defined by. Participants mentioned how university is supposedly about 'the mind' and how huge amount of effort, or 'blood, sweat and tears', goes into studying and then the student ends up being defined by a number or mark, which just cannot convey everything that went into its creation. Some participants felt reduced to these marks, and that the experience of being a student was being reduced to seemingly arbitrary marks that are given anonymously and take the power away from the individual student.

Participants discussed how academia is supposedly about being radical and learning radical things but that ultimately it is not very radical because it revolves around marks and set texts. Participants stated that they were learning about collaboration and collaborative approaches theoretically but that they were frustrated with the university structure, which is about working individually and handing in papers for marking with little discussion. It was discussed how some participants would prefer the structure of the university to inspire students to work together and collaborate more, how it would be good to have different learning spaces and how reading groups and discussion groups can work to change their ideas about what they are doing but how there are not enough opportunities or time to work in this way.

This can be contrasted with comments made by Karen, an undergraduate student in the occupation:

Karen: The Subject F Department has 500 students per year with one lecturer and seven to eight seminar leaders; if this is reduced how can lecturers give the same quality? So we won't be having seminars but lecturers and there'll be no debate or chance to question what we're taught. There's a lack of funding for Visiting Tutors and what will happen then? Lots of students here see themselves as paying for something that they're not getting the best service for (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time)

Other students in the research appeared to focus on the approachability of lecturers and their close relationships with them, emphasising intimacy and passion and suggesting a transformative as opposed to economic view of higher education. Although these students were frequently in the focus groups in the occupation this was not always the case since the Subject J (a postgraduate professional qualification) focus group students, outside of the occupation, also discussed their relationships with their tutors in a positive way. One

participant from the occupation remarked on the linkages between staff and students based on political issues:

Beatriz: I know this might be even more of a cliché... (MA Subject I, Full-time)

All: Laughter

Beatriz: But the fact that people, not everyone, but at least that there is a part of students who generally care about social and political issues and that is an amazing links, that creates amazing links between students and lecturers ... there are all these links which I find really interesting and how passionate about what they teach I find them, I find my lecturers each in their own way incredibly unique, which adds incredibly, they are their subjects, which is something that at my previous university wasn't the case, what they teach is what they are (MA Subject I, Full-time)

These extracts from my field notes and focus group transcriptions highlight the different discourses that students were drawing on when discussing higher education. It is evident that measurement, such as through the marking of coursework, is important to students, yet there is also the sense that the 'blood, sweat and tears' of student life should somehow be resistant to, or is not recognised by, such appraisal: embedded within such discussions is a tension between an economic model of education and a more radical, transformative model (for instance, Freire 1970). There are ambivalences in the way that students talk about value in higher education, with value being described both as 'love', collaboration and transformation and also as 'facilities', 'service', contact time, and value for money. Students appeared to move between these positions in their discussions as they grapple with fundamental questions concerning the nature of education and their place within it; as mentioned above in relation to Giddens (1990), this is both a practical and moral issue.

It is practical in the sense of the way students position themselves in higher education and it is moral in terms of the stories they tell and the way they are listened to: listening is 'a fundamental moral act' (Frank 1995:25). For Arthur Frank (1995) in 'The Wounded Storyteller' there are three types of narrative, or general storyline, that people draw from to discuss and make sense of the experience of illness. The first is the restitution narrative, the culturally preferred narrative reflecting a desire for health. The second is the chaos narrative, which imagines all is wrong and nothing will get better. The third is the quest narrative, which seek to use illness for transformative purposes. These three narrative

types all encompass a plot, a relation to the body, and a self-story and they become ethical testimonies to suffering, ways of telling and making sense of it.

The students in these focus groups could also be viewed as moral actors attempting to understand their experiences through stories. The restitution narrative can be expressed in the neo-liberal or 'banking' idea of education as progress, 'value for money' and the student being 'filled up' by the lecturers. This is reflected in talk of marks as important (MA Subject G focus group), Sara referring to the staff at the university as part of the 'facilities' on which she feels she should draw since she is paying to attend, Karen discussing value for money and services, or the Box Response asking why eight hours of tuition a week cost 'three grand'.

However, the restitution narrative is not unchallenged (as Frank 1995 suggests, all three narratives overlap and are present within the same individual). Students also drew upon quest narratives when talking about 'love' (Phil) or education as 'blood, sweat and tears' and potentially radical and transformative (MA Subject G group) and Karen wanting to question what she is taught. There is ambivalence in the way students talk about higher education, suggesting moral actors struggling with making sense of significant issues in the 'listening' space of the focus groups. These discourses, much like student experiences of temporalities in the previous two chapters, could be dis-junctive and challenging for individuals to integrate, creating a possibly uncomfortable (but healthy, following Hollway and Jefferson 2000) sense of ambivalence within participants.

Referring back to the idea of cruel optimism and the imagined university, the differential narratives of student experience discussed by participants in the focus groups could also be viewed as anchoring them to the university, a problematic object of attachment, through the optimistic fantasy of hope (Berlant 2006). Student discussions of higher education as love and transformation reflect optimistic attachments and links to higher education institutions such as Woodlands. However, instrumental relationships are concurrently implicated in such attachments as students discuss measurement through the marking of coursework that does not appear to be a transparent process and the reduction of their 'blood, sweat and tears' to the linearity of a metric or numerical figure. Students may therefore maintain their sometimes painful attachment to the university through discussion of hope and transformation whilst at the same time feeling a sense of disappointment with their actual as opposed to imagined experience.

Collaboration in Student Life

Expanding upon the discussion of the different narratives of higher education, the desire for a more collaborative – as opposed to ‘lonely’ - experience at university was frequently expressed in the focus groups and warrants specific attention here. The MA Subject G focus group spoke about their essays being anonymously marked. In this case, the discussion particularly seemed to reflect a concern with how to attribute ‘value’ to their university life and the way that they viewed staff often as the gatekeepers of this value, something that they appeared to not feel entirely comfortable with since it did not allow them to define and value their experiences for themselves. An excerpt from my field notes with this group reads:

Participants also discussed their relationships with staff at [the university], which some would have liked to have been more open and productive. They felt that staff had a great deal of power over them through the system of anonymous essay marking and mentioned that staff always know who wrote the paper they are marking (even though it is supposedly anonymous), whereas the participants do not know who marked their papers, meaning that they cannot then approach that member of staff for further feedback and discussion. In addition, one participant stated that getting marks for an essay is the point of ‘meeting with the system’ and it is a process of constantly realising what ‘the system’ is about, a constant negotiation of the relationship with it. However, she also felt that it was difficult to do something about this system or challenge it in any way.

It is important to point out that the discussion in this focus group represented a specific moment in time when the students had that afternoon received their first essay marks back. This would have undoubtedly led to a highlighting of, and ‘meeting with’, ‘the system’ of higher education, in terms of the ultimate power that marks and ‘progress’ have over the lives of students.

The students in the MA Subject G focus group appear to be expressing discontent with the system and imagining a framework in which there was greater transparency and more student control. The focus group participants were struggling between wanting to value higher education in terms of it being a process of learning and discovery and a relationship of equality with tutors but they were also constantly drawn back to, and frustrated by, the marking system, especially since it was anonymous and non-collaborative. The issue of

collaborative learning was also mentioned in another focus group when participants were discussing the difficult aspects of student life:

Sara: I don't find learning very collaborative, like tutors always say you know, encourage you to do presentations together but even, when they say you've got to do a presentation together you're a bit thrown because you don't know how to study together because we're not taught to study together, it's not how we've been programmed so on the odd occasion that we are asked to do something together you find you have a little discussion and you say well 'you do this bit' and 'you do that bit' and you just go off again in isolation... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Sara comments on the imagined university of group work and collaboration contrasted with her actual experience of 'isolation'. This appears to be contrary to Donald Bligh et al's (2000) examination of the work that discussion can do in promoting effective learning. Bligh et al argue that discussion can be better than tutor presentations in developing understanding and that even for tasks such as memorisation and thinking skills, groups seem to outperform individual ability. Groups have been shown to problem-solve better than individuals alone and also to generate more interest in a topic. Tinto (1975) also found that collaborative 'learning communities' engage students more than an isolated model of learning does. Nevertheless, this sense of being 'a bit thrown' suggested by Sara, above, was also mentioned in a focus group with postgraduate students when discussing the way they felt they only had contact with other Subject J (a postgraduate professional qualification) students:

Susanna: Even with our own Subject J group there's what 200, 100 students? (Subject J, Full-time)

Sam: There are 180 students... (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: And we've been just sort of detained in our own 30, groups of 30, 25, whatever it is, and there's been the odd week when we've all been thrown together... (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: And we all go 'Argh'... (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: ...Formed a bond, and then ripped apart again, it's a bit weird... (Subject J, Full-time)

Being 'thrown', 'ripped' and 'detained' suggests a disorientating individualism as part of the experience of higher education for some students as opposed to learning being a collaborative process (for example, Freire 1970; Ranciere 1981; Holmwood 2012). This can also be compared with the experience postgraduate students who discussed feeling 'out of the loop' in Chapter Five. These students appear to feel that they are the passive recipients of the actions of others and that they have little option but to occupy this position, suggesting an individualism that runs through the education system and may be part of the reason that students such as Phil feel that they would like more 'love' or other students comment on their isolation and loneliness.

However, as has been discussed previously, the notion of higher education as individualistic is not the only discourse upon which students are drawing in their talk of their experiences and they are also resisting this through talk of education as transformative, pointing towards complex and ambivalent experiences and ways of making sense of higher education. The above discussions are also suggestive of cruel optimism and the imagined university as students comment on feeling that university life could or should be more collaborative whilst also indicating that this is not their actual experience of studying.

Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead

The current chapter has focused on affective experiences of loneliness within higher education, specifically in terms of face-to-face contact. Such actual affective experiences in university life are, at times, discordant with anticipated or desired experiences and these have been conceptualised in relation to the sense of an 'imagined university' drawing from Berlant's (2006) engagement with cruel optimism. I have identified different 'narratives' of student experience and university life that students use when talking about their experiences and focused particularly on the way participants speak about desiring more collaboration and 'love' in their university life, highlighting the frequently uneasy tension between the co-existence of such narratives with student experiences of education as individualism or as reflecting a 'banking' concept. The next chapter will continue with the theme of separation in higher education, whilst also exploring notions of diversity.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DATA ANALYSIS

Degrees of Separation: Affect and Value in Higher Education

Introduction

'I don't want to let it Ruin the Rest of My Life'

The previous chapter examined the importance of face-to-face contact with peers and staff in students' discussions of university. In this chapter I focus on the way students talk about experiences of separation from the university, particularly in terms of affective separations. In Chapter Six I explored this gap between expected feelings and actual feelings in terms of the sense of the imagined university and Berlant's (2006) concept of cruel optimism, which examines the mechanisms through which individuals embrace hope as a way of maintaining painful attachments with desired objects in spite of the difficulty of doing so. Such ideas were used to represent the frequent disjuncture between student discussion concerning sociality and their actual experiences of loneliness. A related idea in terms of the division between actual feelings and expressed feelings is also that of emotional labour regarding the difference between how a person feels and the way that she presents herself (often for economic reasons). This follows from Goffman (1959) who adopted a dramaturgical analysis to the presentation of a public self to others, whilst a private self is kept 'back stage' and not shown openly, similar to a theatrical performance.

In this chapter I examine the way that separation or isolation from the university is an affective site of student experience that appears to be an inevitable by-product of the emphasis on individual, linear and progressive achievement within higher education. However, this affective experience is not made explicit but appears to be hidden in the unconscious of the neoliberal university and has, as will be shown, varying impacts upon students according to their differential social capital. There are some more obvious material consequences to these affective experiences of loneliness and separation, such as attrition rates or possibly increases in student mental health problems (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011). There are also more subtle implications, including negative effects on 'health' and confidence that are more hidden yet very present for those who experience them. These experiences illuminate the critical paradoxes and pathologies of the market in higher education that emphasises the disembodied individual whose affective understandings can be reduced to satisfaction.

Affective Implications of Widening Participation

As reported by the National Audit Office (Lispett 2007), around 20% of UK higher education students leave their courses before completing them. The widening participation agenda is often implicated in this and it is held in an uncomfortable tension with the notion of student retention, since working-class and non-traditional students have lower course completion rates (Yorke and Thomas 2010). Circumstances are particularly difficult for students who have children, especially those who are single-parents. Despite this, there is an increasing emphasis on 'non-traditional academic backgrounds' for entry to university, encompassing mature students and those with 'non-standard' qualifications or backgrounds. These students can find it particularly difficult to settle into the university environment and understand what is required of them, which can be viewed as representing a mismatch between the habitus of the students and the field of higher education (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Such students are often perceived as 'deficient' in terms of their study skills (discussed by Lawler 2005 and 2008 in relation to working-class experiences and 'disgust') and are associated with high levels of non-completion of their courses (Watson et al 2009). Bourdieu (1993) describes habitus as:

'A power of adaptation... It constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world which only occasionally takes the form of radical conversion' (1993:78).

Habitus is therefore a dynamic concept that is constantly altering, drawing from previous conditions and adapting to new ones. Nevertheless, Reay (1998) argues that as well as being dynamic, the habitus of an individual also acts in a constraining way since it confines the set of possibilities available to her according to the social group that she is from, signalling its closer alliance with reproduction than with production. Therefore, in the way that Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe the matching of habitus and field as feeling like a 'fish in water', these students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds may be like 'fish out of water', with the negative affective consequences that result from this, in terms of the mismatch between their habitus and the field.

Despite the emphasis on 'non-traditional' students in government policy and rhetoric of higher education, Watson et al (2009) argue that 'participation has effectively increased to a greater extent than it has widened' (2009:666). Apart from barriers to entry such as economic capital or the need to manage competing priorities such as childcare and other family responsibilities, there is a suggestion that the educational environment itself can also be an obstacle for many students (Reay 2001). Watson et al (2009) argue that the culture

of higher education remains orientated towards white middle-class students and resists being tacitly inclusive despite its explicit claims to the contrary. Watson et al (2009) studied undergraduate occupational therapy students and found that, depending on their 'capital', some students fitted in and others were excluded. Here, capital could be economic (material), cultural (dispositions such as accent or clothing), or social (membership of social groups and networks). Individuals in higher education experienced unequal positions and trajectories based upon the composition of their capital. Watson et al (2009) point out that capital often creates more capital and those students who experienced a matching between their pre-existing capital and the field of the university were more likely to flourish in higher education.

Research on university applications and choice has typically discovered that choices are not solely rational and economic following a careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of particular institutions. Instead, students make use of a wide range of other factors and characteristics when deciding where to study, including intuition, affective responses, luck and the desire to feel that they will 'fit in' at their chosen university (Crozier et al 2008). Reay et al (2005) have shown that such choices are therefore classed choices as many working-class students feel immediately excluded from certain higher education institutions and do not even consider applying to study at such universities (Reay et al 2009). Working-class students' decisions of where to study may be based on 'luck' and fairly random factors (Reay et al 2005), whereas middle-class students may come closer at times to the 'rational' choice maker suggested by a consumer model of higher education.

Factors such as class background and feelings of 'fitting in' have also been found to be essential to the retention of students in higher education (Reay et al 2009). Diane Reay (2012) cites Quinn et al (2005) whose research showed that working-class young men often feel that their school career centres persuade them to take certain higher education courses based on class-based stereotypes and they frequently do not engage in these and then 'drop out'. In general, previous research suggests that large class differentials are embedded within the higher education system and students' experiences of university life. Working-class students often arrive at university without the 'correct' capital when compared with their middle-class peers and this is a disadvantage that continues throughout their university courses. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Four, working-class students are more likely to be in (unskilled) paid employment than their middle-class

counterparts are, further restricting their opportunities to increase their social and cultural capital.

Derek Robbins (2012) from the perspective of Bourdieu's writings, argues that one factor that makes social capital and its renewal significant is the way in which individuals from different backgrounds project forward their desires to the future, in other words the capacity that they have for aspiration (although it is important to note that for Raymond Williams (1958) aspiration to a homogenous middle-class culture is undesirable). For Robbins, higher education must encourage students from all backgrounds to hold such aspiration although it also has an obligation to ensure that this aspiration is worthwhile and delivers results for students (put differently, that it is not a sense of 'cruel optimism' – Berlant (2006) - for students). Following Jean-Claude Passeron and also Raymond Williams, Robbins asserts the importance of a diverse educational system, which does not privilege any one culture but instead creates a social space where dialogue and discourse between cultures can occur. The present chapter seeks to illuminate the way that social capital (although not merely in a class-based way) is implicated in affective experiences in higher education, leading some students describe feeling like 'a fish in water' and others to feel more like 'fish out of water', paying particular attention to the distribution of the affective consequences of this.

'I don't feel that there's Anything Good about My Degree Really': Intermittent Students

'Why do students not get more support?' (Box response)

The very particular case of respondents who had intermitted from their studies at university led to the discussion of experiences of high levels of isolation and loneliness at university. In the case of these participants, intermitting in itself could be considered to be a critical life event (see Bury 2008) that represented a highly challenging time for them, leading them to be separated from their peer group, and that also seemed to contribute to a change in how they talked about university life and the value of higher education in general. One of the participants (Sara) had intermitted for reasons of physical health, and the other participant (Kyla) had experienced mental health problems, which she discussed in the group as having resulted from her stressful experience of study at Woodlands (illustrating an affectively very negative dimension of the student talk about 'busyness' and 'stress' discussed in Chapter Four). In terms of previous research mentioned above regarding student retention and social class, Sara in particular could be described as coming

from a working-class background, although such an observation is not intended to infer causation.

Holmegaard et al (2010) state that one-third of students who enter higher education leave before completing their degrees and suggest that one reason for this is the struggle of bringing together their individual identity with the institutional identity. Identity in this case is both socially constructed in the context of the university and related to a person's previous experiences and habitus, suggestive of the potential for habitus to be both dynamic and constraining. The study also highlighted that most students leave higher education without consulting members of staff before taking the decision, as they often experience feeling unsupported in this respect.

Concerns over increased numbers of students in higher education have led to a focus on student mental health. A study by the National Union of Students (2013) found that 20% of students self-report having a mental health problem and 13% have suicidal thoughts, whilst 92% of students in higher education have experienced mental distress, on average once a month or more. The reasons cited for such experiences included coursework, exams, study and financial difficulties and despite such high levels of distress, 25% of those surveyed did not tell anyone about their problems. The DSC Annual Group Project Report, Undergraduate Group Three (2013) found that mental health problems are the most common form of disability at Woodlands. However, consistent with the complexity of student experience, universities are not unaware of many of these issues. A number of institutions have developed techniques to confront the 'student experience', such as an increase in academic advising and other student support enterprises (Campbell and Nutt 2008). Such strategies are claimed to lead to increased student engagement and success, helping to construct a more meaningful experience in higher education for students (Hunter and White 2004).

Willcoxson (2010) examined student attrition in higher education and found that there were a variety of reasons for this, depending on year of study and type of university attended. Tinto's (1975) use of Durkheim's notion of social integration to explain student attrition in terms of a lack of integration into the academic and social aspects of a university is useful here (although Tinto did not examine social class and student attrition, which is an important omission). Willcoxson (2010) reports a study by Mohr et al (1998) which interviewed students who had returned to university having intermitted. The study found that reasons for first year attrition tended to be due to lack of social or institutional

integration, following Tinto's model, but that in subsequent years it was more likely to be based on dissatisfaction with the course, feeling 'uncared for' by the university, or issues with feedback mechanisms. This supports other research that suggests students in general are dissatisfied with feedback received from tutors (NSS 2013 study; also see Chapter Six regarding this issue). In terms of the way the students in this research discussed separation following intermitting from their studies, Mike Bury (2008) examines chronic illness in the form of rheumatoid arthritis as an occasion of biographical disruption or 'critical situation', quoting Giddens (1979), who writes that:

'We can learn a good deal about day-to-day situations in routine settings from analysing situations in which those settings are radically disturbed...' (1979:123).

Bury argues that illness highlights the experience of structural disruption, often involving a fundamental re-thinking of a person's self-concept. Although this disruption can be positive in terms of examining life goals, it can also create a sense of 'stigma', whereby a person feels rejected by her peer group or society as a result of difference or unusual negative experiences (Goffman 1963). This disruption can also be temporal, as was discussed in the focus group with intermitting students and their de-synchronisation from the rhythms and demands of the university, the very rhythms that they found it difficult to adapt to in the first place (perhaps due to habitus; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

This idea of re-thinking student identities following taking time out from their studies and discussions of stigma appeared in the focus group with students who had intermitted. The participants' discussion also seemed to involve the students co-constructing talk of how education is not 'everything', a possible distancing discourse on which they are drawing in order to invoke a sense of safety for themselves in the focus group situation (Gunaratnam 2003, Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000) and also in relation to possible changed self-concepts (Bury 2008) in the light of their experience of having difficulties at university and feeling separated from their peer group. In part, this sense of safety in the group could be gained by high levels of agreement and the development a sense of connection between the participants in the research encounter. The following exchange occurred in the context of a discussion about the loneliness and isolation that the participants felt that they experienced at the university having intermitted:

Sara: Education isn't such a priority anymore, like I used to think that my degree was worth everything, whereas now I kind of put it into perspective and I think 'actually it's only a small part of my life, there are other aspects of my life that I

want to put energy into'. As much as I want to do well in my degree I'm not going to let it hinder other aspects of my life so I just kind of changed my priorities and I don't put in as much time and effort to my degree as I did ... now I just stop and do what needs to be done ... I don't want to let it ruin the rest of my life... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Kyla: Yeah, I feel like because I had a year out and I spent some of that time working I just sort of got a taste for the real world as it were and I almost preferred it in a way because I just thought it's not sort of covered by all this stuff that doesn't really matter. You know, it doesn't really matter if you've learnt that particular thing or gone to that particular lecture or been to that particular night out it's more about you know, what does this mean to you and what can you get out of life to enjoy it and I just sort of felt that when I came back university didn't fill that gap anymore, there was something else that I needed and I kind of found it a little bit when I wasn't at university and I think that's definitely changed my attitude towards, you know, completing my degree. (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Sara: I'd sort of say the same as Kyla and when I took my year out I did a lot of work in primary schools and I found it really um, sort of, satisfying and like I was contributing something back to, you know, those children's lives whereas when I'm here I just feel like I'm here, there's no purpose to my degree, I don't feel that by getting a Subject H degree I'm going to go and get a well-paid job, I feel that I need experience and it's only by getting that experience that I'm going to be able to go out and get a job so I don't know whether I value academia in the way that I thought. I don't think it's going to be of benefit in the way that I originally thought. (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

According to Hollway and Jefferson (2000) when writing about the defended subject, 'splitting' in terms of creating dichotomies between 'good' and 'bad' can be an indication of unconscious defences against anxiety and may represent underlying emotions, such as anger. The students in the above focus group excerpt could be said to be polarising the university as 'bad' and the 'real world' as 'good', perhaps due to the difficult feelings they have surrounding their experiences at university, such as feeling lonely, separated from the institution and covertly angry as a result of this. For instance, in the extract below, Sara and

Kyla were speaking about sacrifices that they had made to study at university. Kyla felt that she had sacrificed her health whilst being at university:

Kyla: I think because of how stressed I became at university it then became a health issue and that's why I had to defer in the end, so that's probably the biggest sacrifice, and I think that's probably why I've placed a lot of blame on my university life because it kind of led me... I'm sure it wasn't just university solely... but yeah I do place a lot of blame on it because of health issues and things... I feel like university is structured in a certain way that's just kind of uniform: everybody has to go to that lecture and listen to that person talk and, yeah, I think I didn't realise how affected I was by the pressure I was put under... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

The participants' dialogue of university versus 'real life' and their valuing of the latter may reflect the separation that they feel from the institution either because they in some way externalise a sense of anger and 'blame' the university for making them unwell or for compounding their illness, or because they felt unsupported by the university at a critical moment in their lives. However, at the same time as expressing the separation they felt from the university, these students were in the midst of creating links with one another and using talk as a way of defining themselves. They appeared to be drawing on talk of loneliness and isolation and a discourse of not valuing the university to create connections and closeness with one another within the focus group. This closeness was not absolute and it was bounded by agreement in the form of consensus, but nevertheless it did involve a degree of intimacy through the sharing of personal biographical details.

The separation that the students talked about feeling from the university appears to involve multiple separations: they are removed from their peer group; they feel disorientated by the mechanisms of the university; and they feel it is inappropriate to contact tutors. The students appear to feel unable to make use of the university, apart from those aspects which are necessary to them for completing their courses, suggesting a mechanical and instrumental form of belonging to the institution as opposed to it being a place replete with meaningful social networks (Bauman 2003, who discusses cities as 'cohabitation of strangers').

This also relates to a sense of capital as discussed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) in terms of 'the rules of the game' and the knowledge of how to use a system for personal advantage. It seems that intermitting from their studies reduced the social capital available to these students in multiple ways (and these were students who may well have been

struggling to 'fit in' anyway). Part of this separation and reduction in capital was a spatial and temporal isolation from the university as the students, having intermitted, found it difficult to re-engage with the rhythms of the universities and found their lives to be 'out of sync' with the timeframes of higher education. These students differ substantially from the undergraduate students discussed in Chapter Six, who appeared to create and sustain social networks with one another outside of the formal structure of higher education through their participation in a range of extra-curricular activities.

It is also important here to think of the way that Kyla says 'I feel that the university is structured in a certain way that it's just kind of uniform'. Although higher education is now a mass system, as discussed by Watson et al (2009), it remains in many ways geared towards a certain cultural milieu (Reay et al 2005). Students who may differ from the field of the university in terms of their background or their experiences may find themselves experiencing negative *affects* and feeling stigmatised, either by the way they are valued others or by the way in which they value themselves. This can then influence subsequent interactions that students have with higher education and the way that they talk about their participation within it. These multiple separations, both spatial and temporal, from the university appear to be implicated, perhaps in a reciprocal way, in how the students de-value higher education and emphasise the benefits of the 'real world' instead. The emphasis on the real world may be because these students are in their final year of their degree programme and so are deeply aware of the transitory nature of their current position. However another third year undergraduate did not discuss this real world in the same way:

Karen: I could be searching for work instead of studying here but I know so many people who are unemployed at the moment, and that's not a good situation to be in, so I figure I'm better off here, moving in the direction of something that will be helpful in the future... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time)

This comparison of the way that Karen talks about higher education as somehow protecting her from the 'real world' of possible unemployment (Karen was from a 'non-traditional' background as she was a mature, working-class student) and the way that Sara and Kyla (white, non-mature, working-class students) speak about it as less desirable than the 'real world' highlights the potentially different ways that the structure of higher education (and the workplace) impacts upon students according to their personal biographies.

Returning to Derek Robbins (2000) whose ideas were discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it seems that the capacity for aspiration is essential to how students experience higher education. For example, Karen's aspiration that she was 'moving in the direction of something' as opposed to Sara's assertion that 'there's no purpose to my degree'. Although there is not a simple correspondence between social class and aspiration in this data, rather the idea of 'fitting in', which appears to involve multiple factors, seems to be central. For instance, one working-class black student, whilst recognising that he was from a working-class background, could draw on his political opinions and academic talents in order to fit in at Woodlands:

Phil: I always knew I was academically gifted so I had that way out but quite a lot of people I was growing up with didn't have that same confidence' (BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Therefore, on the surface it appears that undergraduate students who had intermitted did talk about high levels of loneliness and isolation that then went on to inform other areas of their student experience and leave them feeling alone and deflated. However, it is also important to bear in mind the way that these discourses work to allow connections to take place between the students in the focus groups and the paradoxical and ambivalent layers of student experience that this both reflects and creates.

'That Central Hub is Always Nice': Postgraduate Students

'What is the point of the University?' (Box response)

Postgraduate students represented another group of students who discussed being negatively affected in terms of loneliness and isolation by experiences at university and there has been some discussion of this in Chapter Five. Loneliness and postgraduate study is well-documented (Janta et al 2012). Some of the factors associated with this have been considered to be limited social interaction, a lack of integration between student groups, completing individual as opposed to collaborative and group projects, a lack of timetabled activities, and a diverse student body. The postgraduate students in this research also reflected on not fitting in to the university. In a discussion regarding having nowhere to go one Friday night when finishing classes, the participants in the Subject J (a postgraduate professional qualification) focus group commented that:

Jacque: Yeah, I know in my old university I knew about all the clubs and societies but, I probably couldn't join them here anyway because of the workload, but I don't

know about any of the clubs and societies that Woodlands has ... but it would be nice to meet people who weren't just Subject J students (Subject J, Full-time)

All: Laughter

Sam: What?! (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: It's all coming out now! (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: But really I don't feel like we have any contact with anybody else other than Subject J students (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: Yeah, it's true (Subject J, full-time)

Jacque: Even the second year we don't really speak to... (Subject J, Full-time)

And again:

Susanna: It's nice that we've formed like really good friendships within our group (Subject J, Full-time)

Sam: Yeah (Subject J, Full-time)

Susanna: But I think we just feel like we are the Subject J and it kind of feels separate from... (Subject J, Full-time)

All: Laughter (inaudible comments)

Susanna: Yeah, and I just think that central hub is always nice in a place, just to kind of feel that you're part of something... (Subject J, Full-time)

Sam: ...Definitely I don't really feel like we're, like I'm a proper student (Subject J, Full-time)

All: No, I don't, no...

Sam: Probably because we're not here not here half of the time (Subject J, Full-time)

All: Yeah

The above extract is suggestive of a number of issues. First, as with undergraduate and intermitting students, it shows that the participants are suggesting that they would like more contact time, here in the sense of social contact with students who are not studying

the same course as them. However, in a similar fashion to the focus groups with the undergraduate students and the intermitting students, these postgraduate participants also assert that even if they did have this contact time they would be unable to capitalise on it: 'I probably couldn't join them here anyway because of the workload'. The participants also seem to be suggesting that they are fine as they are (again, recalling the previous discussions in Chapter Six) - 'it's nice that we've formed really good friendships within our group' - but that they also want something more: 'it would be nice to meet people who weren't just Subject J students'.

The constant use of 'I think', 'yeah' and 'probably' in the above extract suggests that the participants are not completely certain about what they are looking for, although they feel that they want some aspect their experiences to be different. It also highlights the way that the groups moved towards agreement and connection through a discourse of isolation and loneliness and by being indefinite in talk and cushioning their critique of the university (Wilkinson and Kitinger 2000). In addition it is a searching exploratory dialogue that may have been created by the focus group situation and that students do not typically reflect on due to the structure of the university not giving space to such concerns for many students (for example, those who are not actively involved in political associations; this is the sense of a lack of free (Polletta 1999) or creative (Illner 2011) spaces in the university).

Jacque asserting the lack of a 'central hub' also resonates with the discussion of the photographs taken by the postgraduate students in the feedback seminar in Chapter Six, which were talked about as being indicative of a lack of sociality in their experiences at Woodlands. On top of this there is also an affective layering whereby those students, who perhaps do not 'fit in' or, as Sam says above, do not feel like proper students, seem to experience this sense of separation more acutely. Such issues of 'fitting in' may be classed, as in Sara and Kyla, but this is not necessarily so. For instance Phil, a working-class male student, felt able to 'fit in'. Instead, there appear to be multiple factors that interact to create a sense of being 'a fish in water' or 'fish out of water' for students and it is very difficult for students positioned in certain ways to feel like a 'proper student', which was also picked up on in the survey method adopted by the DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Two (2013) report:

'I spend far more time in a work-based setting than an academic one and consequently encounter more professionals than academics/other students. It is an

interesting mix and one I appreciate, but it does mean that my sense of identity within the student community is slightly compromised' (2013: unpag).

'I haven't enjoyed it Myself Coz I'm Not Cool': Fitting in with the Field

'Why does everyone wear skinny jeans?' (Box response)

Relating to the previous section and the way that the university is perceived by some students as 'uniform', certain students in the focus groups discussed experiencing not fitting in to the culture of the university, either in terms of style of dress, social interests or being 'cool'. This struggle for some students to 'fit in' was evident in the focus group discussions, for instance one participant spoke of a feeling of not belonging to the university based on what she perceived to be its strict dress codes:

Sara: Even like um, like I said before, like looking in your wardrobe in the morning you're thinking 'what shall I wear to make sure that I fit in at Woodlands?' And like, if I was at home and I went up to where I live I would best be wearing a pair of jeans and a hoodie, whereas I know that if I came here wearing jeans and a hoodie that everyone would sort of look at me and think like 'she looks a bit chavvy' or something, so I kind of feel the need to fit in, although I do wear what I like, but I'm still conscious of the fact that if I wore something that was... so they say that Woodlands allows you to be who you are but there's still a kind of uniformity in the way people are, there's a certain type of Woodlands student, I think there is, even though there's a variety they still fit into a certain category... like if you tell someone else you study at Woodlands they do think 'oh, everyone there thinks they're really different don't they...' (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

This comment was made despite Sara having previously affirmed that she liked the university because of the freedom of expression it allowed her to experience:

Sara: This sounds really silly but I like, like I said about the university, it's quite informal and all that, and I like going to the train station, looking at everybody in like their suits and their formal clothing on, and there I am in my trainers and my little dress on and I think 'oh I really like being a student because you can just be yourself'. It's quite an, um, it gives you that freedom to express yourself in the way you want to ... I find it quite, like I said, quite a liberating experience that allows you to express yourself in the way that you want to, particularly at this particular university which is one of the reasons that I really liked it here. I'd say it allows you

to express who you want to be and who you want to become... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject H, Full-time)

Ambivalence appears to be central to Sara's description of how she feels about the clothing she wears to Woodlands, invoking the notion of the complex psychosocial subject that Likert Scale surveys do not represent. However, these extracts could also be read as illustrative of the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2006) and the sense of the imagined university, Chapter Six, that permeated students' experiences at university, whereby the idea of what university would or should be like kept students anchored to a more painful and difficult reality. Sara appeared to rely on her imagined sense of the university, where it is possible to 'express yourself', invoking the idea of higher education as a journey of self-discovery (Moffatt 1989) or a transformative quest (Frank 1995). However, at least part of her actual experience was that she was not able to 'express herself' but she felt 'the need to fit in' and sensed the tacit requirement to modify her dress style accordingly.

This echoes Puwar (2004) when discussing the Palace of Westminster, where 'social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy' (Puwar 2004:8). Instead they are raced, gendered, and classed. For those who do not automatically 'fit in', for example, for Sara who may be concerned about being 'chavvy' or working-class, there is a struggle to do so (Ahmed and Fortier 2003; Fanon 1967). This powerfully highlights the enduring relevance of the body in an arena such as higher education that purports to emphasise the mind (Puwar 2004). There can be no 'universal' student experience, rather it is situated and positioned. For instance, in one focus group at the occupation, being a 'trendy' (which is not synonymous with 'chavvy' but there are similarities) was discussed in disparaging terms, when Jazmine (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time) and Debbie (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time) dismissed a large number of students as being 'just trendies', emphasising the policing of boundaries of value at Woodlands.

The discussion of dress also represented a point of dissonance in the focus group since Kyla did not seem to feel that she was separated from the university in this way. This difference between the participants appeared to be too threatening for them to mention and there was a long silence following Sara's assertion that I eventually felt the need to break by asking a different question, thereby unintentionally colluding with the agreement in the group. In this way, in response to the Box question 'why does everyone wear skinny jeans?' it seems that there are a number of inclusions and exclusions in operation at the university and those who do not immediately conform due to their habitus may feel a struggle in

terms of their identity and pressure to present themselves differently. The desire, although to some extent inability, to conform in higher education and the lack of social capital that may result from not 'fitting in' was also discussed by Arian, a Muslim student at the occupation who found fitting in to university difficult as he did not drink alcohol:

Arian: I'd also like to have more opportunity to get to know people from other courses. All of my friends are from my course and I'm going to be living with six of them next year too, but I don't really know people from other courses and that's a bit of a shame because I'd like to meet different people and get to know them more and stuff. I mean, I do know other people but not well, they're not my really good friends. I think part of that is because I don't go out so much I don't drink and smoke and so I don't really get involved with lots of student things here. It's probably not true, it's probably just me but it feels like unless you do all that stuff and go to pubs all the time then it's actually quite limited the sort of student life that you have here, but maybe that's just because I haven't really got involved with other things myself (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject C, Full-time).

As students talked about the university as having a uniform culture to which they do not conform they discussed feeling on the outside of it or having to develop strategies to allow themselves entry to the 'inside', such as Sara adjusting her style of dress. The adoption of such tactics may be more difficult in the case of Arian and the culture of drinking alcohol, suggesting less flexibility to adapt to the demands of the field of higher education and invoking Hargreaves (1994) notion of the 'boundless self', whereby those who succeed in higher education may be students most able to adapt to the demands of the field. The dominant modes of sociality appear to exclude some non-normative students from feeling that they belong to the institution, which has affective consequences for them in terms of their identity and feelings of fitting in. For instance, the DSC Annual Group Project Report, Postgraduate Group Three (2013) highlights the emphasis often placed on alcohol:

'The events that are put on by the departments were generally commented on as being largely under-attended unless the event involves some kind of social aspect that includes alcohol' (2013: unpag).

In the case of Arian, he also appears to blame himself for his feelings of separation from his peer group, suggesting that his isolation may be 'just because I haven't really got involved with other things myself' and pointing towards an internalisation of negative affects as opposed to their location within structural sites (as discussed by Ahmed 2004, Fanon 1967

or Young 1990, see Chapter Two). However, Harrison and Peacock (2008) found that international students (Arian was not an international student but the authors' discussion of alcohol is relevant here) and students from the UK do not mix much socially, in contrast to government policy ideas of UK students relating with international students meaning that students from the UK will acquire more intercultural skills.

Specifically the authors argue that stereotypes around alcohol act as barriers to greater communication inter-culturally as UK students are viewed by others as drinking excessively at university. The study by Harrison and Peacock focused on the way that international students may separate themselves from UK students, but in this research Arian suggests that at least for him this is not a desired separation but the result of what he perceives as almost incommensurable differences in social practices. Nevertheless, despite such differences Arian was also able to resist some affective consequences of separation through, for instance, his participation in the occupation. Fitting in at Woodlands is not a simple or one-dimensional issue.

The Value of 'Diversity'

'Why is the university so elitist' (Box response)

The Equality and Diversity student profiles for Woodlands (Student Profiles 2013) show that between 2009 and 2012 32% of all students were 21 or under and 63% of all undergraduate students were 21 or under. In terms of disability, 13% of students declared a disability (in higher education in the UK overall the figure is 8%), mostly studying a first degree, and dyslexia was the most common disability declared, although there has also been a large increase in students with mental health problems. The ethnicity of the students at Woodlands is 65% White, 16% Asian or Asian British, 8% Black or Black British, 6% Mixed, and 5% Other or Unknown. This is above the national average in terms of the ethnic mix of students, which is 81.6% White.

However, proportionately fewer top class degrees are awarded to BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) students, which is consistent with the general UK experience where BME students are also less satisfied with their education and more likely to leave their studies before completion (Singh 2009). BME students may also be disproportionately found in certain 'new' universities (Race to the Top Report 2012) and subsequently associated with lower levels of graduate employment. Nevertheless, it is important to remember the differences that the group 'BME' obscures, making it less than ideal for measurement. For instance,

Bagguley and Hussain (2007) found that women from Bangladeshi and Pakistani culture are increasingly participating in university and similar findings have recently been stated for black students (Swain 2013). Woodlands is comprised of 64% female students at undergraduate level (nationally this is 56.4%), with similar figures for postgraduate study. Around 80% of students at Woodlands come from the geographical locality of the institution.

Apart from these statistics relating to diversity, 'diversity' is also a brand and marketing strategy at Woodlands. Universities have increasingly adopted branding approaches to attract students, investing significant sums of money in such activities, largely due to the arrival of a corporate culture in higher education discussed by Mary Evans (2004). Diversity can be viewed as 'cool' and as making the university more visible with a clear image. However, there may be a discrepancy between actuality and the branding strategies used by marketing departments. Woodlands does appear to have a greater mix of students than the national average for higher education does according to statistics, although branding may act to emphasise this and lead students to expect that 'diversity' or cultural exchange will be greater than it actually is.

Sara Ahmed (2012) in 'On Being Included' examines diversity based on interviews conducted with diversity practitioners in higher education. Ahmed shows how diversity is highlighted as a feature of institutional life but that this often forms merely a 'symbolic commitment' that is non-performative in nature: it does not bring about what it purports theoretically. In this way, the pursuit of diversity can actually act to conceal racism through rhetoric and the experience for those who are viewed as embodiments of 'diversity' do not necessarily tessellate with institutional talk regarding this factor. For instance, at one focus group in the occupation, when discussing the university not being as diverse as they had originally hoped, students commented:

*Jazmine: Yeah, I'd say that, I think that a lot of people see Woodlands as more radical than it actually is. They kind of hype that up a bit in but when you actually look at it, yeah in terms of the student body as well, I think there is a group of really quite radical students that are quite active students at least but then there are a lot of people who just completely don't give a shit ... a lot of them are just trendies
(Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time)*

All: Laughter

Debbie: I actually find it as an institution is quite right-wing (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time)

Jazmine: Mm... (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time)

Debbie: And again like what you said about the trendies... I came up and I did not expect my first day of introducing myself to my flatmates to be like 'which one's better, 'Abercrombie and Fitch' or 'Jack Wills'?', 'Oh I like 'Jack Wills'...' (Inaudible) (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time)

All: Laughter

Debbie: You know I do not live with one single black person, it's supposed to be diverse and it is in some ways but you tend to find the ethnic minorities keep to themselves, you know they don't integrate, and I don't think we don't contribute much to the community either (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject D, Full-time)

The above excerpt recalls the discussion by Harrison and Peacock (2008) when commenting on the lack of integration between international students and those from the UK, but it also highlights how even within the cohort of 'home' students there may be a degree of segregation and a lack of 'mixing'. Emphasised in the focus group above is also the way that branding or advertising may create generalised expectations that are not necessarily actuality in terms of individual experience. Such expectations and their lack of fulfilment appeared to lead to a degree of disappointment amongst certain students, suggesting the negative affects that can be cultivated in a market-driven higher education system (and referring back to Berlant's (2006) cruel optimism).

Students in the focus groups also spoke of connections that they had with the university before commencing their studies at the institution. Some of these connections appeared to have an imagined or projective quality in terms of ideas that the participants had of what the university would be like, many of which concerned the notion of 'diversity', as mentioned above; others were based on connections with people already at the university or people they knew who had previously studied at the institution. For instance, in a focus group with undergraduate students at the occupation when discussing their choices and decision-making process regarding higher education, the following exchanges occurred:

Cate: Yeah well I'd say like, because where I'm from it's really sort of middle-class area where everyone's very apathetic about everything and it gets really depressing

and I sort of wanted to be far away from that somewhere people might care a bit and there was a bit more, well a bit more diversity of people than in a tiny village in Yorkshire where nothing ever happens, um, so yeah, it was like 'London, that's a good idea' and then Woodlands seemed pretty cool, it was quite a random choice but it worked out well (First Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

Britta: Yeah so where I'm from everyone's not particularly well off and stuff and there's a lot of like, it's one of the first places that got the BNP elected, fun times, so that wasn't very nice growing up and not understanding why people didn't want multiculturalism and stuff, um, so I decided to move to West Africa for over two years on my own, um, to learn Arabic and more about Islam because a big thing in my area was like 'get the Muslims out' and so I kind of moved to a place that was almost in some ways more racist than where I was from like but towards black people instead, so I decided that I wanted to go to a university that was very, very, multi-cultural in an area that wasn't ridiculously well-off and had that diversity and I was a bit disappointed that there's not as much of a mix in the community as I had hoped but still ... that's really in terms of the people I hang out with now and the people I know I have kind of surrounded myself with a little group of people that's not that diverse in some ways, with people who agree with my viewpoints... (Third Year, BA (Hons) Subject B, Full-time)

These reasons expressed for coming to university involve a sense of a rupture from what has gone before and some sort of 'escape': either escaping a quiet middle-class village in the case of Cate or getting away from racism or a working-class background for Britta. These are suggestive of the quest narrative discussed by Arthur Frank (1975), where illness (or in this case going to university) becomes embedded with a journey towards transformation. Another uniting factor in these different stories is of seeking a 'multi-cultural' or political environment where 'people do care'.

However, as suggested by the participants, they have not necessarily found this ideal (suggesting the need to modify their quest narrative to some extent) and Britta describes how she tends to surround herself with a limited range of people, despite also seeking 'diversity'. The tendency to surround oneself with like-minded people was played out continually in the focus group, with the movement towards agreement and the closing down of 'trouble telling' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2000) where disagreements in the group might disrupt processes of affiliation, to some extent contrasting with the way the

participants spoke about seeking diversity. Discussions of diversity seek to unite students into a coherent and cohesive group, making differences commensurable. One reason that this issue was discussed might be due to this group taking place in the student occupation where qualities, such as 'diversity', considered to be unique to Woodlands were staunchly emphasised in its support. However, the issue of diversity and community was also talked about in other focus groups outside of the occupation.

Other than wanting to attend a university with a reputation for being diverse and inclusive as in the focus group above, which was also discussed by the postgraduate students in the excerpt below, the postgraduate students in this project tended to focus on more prosaic reasons for choosing this institution, such as the content of the course or personal links to the university. For instance, one focus group discussed their reasons for coming to the university, emphasising practical issues and personal connections (MA Subject A students):

Amelia: ...It was only when my dad offered to pay the tuition fees for me that I realised it might actually be a possibility, um, so that was in the summer, so I started looking around at universities and I just started looking at universities I could remember the name of in London, um, and some of them their deadlines had finished and I was like (inaudible), another one was for the same course, and they were charging like ten grand for the same course so I thought 'screw that', um, and then I saw Woodlands and the application date was still open and it was four grand and I was like 'it's looking promising' so I saw the website and it said that they were a bit mad and bonkers and unconventional and I thought 'I'm going to fit in there' (MA Subject A, Full-time)

All: Laughter

Amelia: And also because it's an arts place ... I love the fact here that people just look so diverse and you get guys wearing make-up and things like that and I just think 'oh you wouldn't get that in other places', it's brilliant, I love it. And just the fact everyone's bonkers really I think, it helps. So yeah, I applied and I got in and I never even visited the university until the first day so that was an added stress, there was a massive pressure to like because of course, I'd given up my job for it and everything, but luckily I did, which was good, but not liking it wasn't really an option... (MA Subject A, Full-time)

Katherine: ...I haven't enjoyed it myself coz I'm not cool! (MA Subject A, Full-time)

All: Laughter

A combination of personal circumstances, linkages, financial considerations, course content, location and image or identity of the university as understood through marketing and branding (and also the self-identity of the student) interact when participants construct discourses of deciding which institution to study at. Diversity and being a bit 'bonkers' are emphasised as part of the identity of the Woodlands, something that some students find it difficult to fit in with and therefore they may feel that they do not enjoy their experience so much; for instance, Katherine's comment 'I haven't enjoyed it myself coz I'm not cool'. In this way, fitting in becomes based on the ability of the individual student to accrue value within the field of the university and students are inscribed with differential worth according to their ability to do this. The dominant values of the field shape which individuals and actions are considered to be valuable and those individuals with a habitus that is congruent with the field will be granted a heightened value compared to those whose habitus does not match that of the field.

In their discourses of choosing the university, those students who most closely tessellate with the field of 'diversity' or being a bit 'bonkers' seem to feel a sense of greater value than those students who do not consider themselves, or are not considered by others, to be 'cool'. The discussions of choosing to come to a certain university can be viewed not only as building social capital within the focus groups but also as an examination of the process through which value is assigned to specific individuals and not to others and the way that talk amongst students is implicated in this process; they are not passive recipients of value but are actively involved in constructing the value that they are given and the value that education has for them. It appears that for students who are not considered to be valuable in Bourdieu's sense, negative feelings (frequently internalised) towards the university, their studies, but also themselves can occur. This sense of social capital and the 'field' of the university were discussed again in another focus group (Subject J students):

Co-researcher: And would you be able to tell me something of your personal experiences as to how you got to Woodlands? What sort of made you want to come here...?

Susanna: Well, I did visit it... I visited here and 'Another University' and I liked the sound of the course here, it was it was appealing, I didn't know loads about Woodlands but I kind of had heard about it and I just thought it sounded a little bit different, quite a cool place to do... And I remember them telling me they had a like special week and I do remember them telling us about that, that's different from other [postgraduate professional qualifications], I thought 'they don't have that at Another University' (Subject J, Full-time)

All: Laughter (inaudible comments)

Susanna: Yeah... and it was between this and Another University because I live nearby, so yeah... (Subject J, Full-time)

Jacque: It's got a definite brand hasn't it, Woodlands? It's definitely got a clear brand which I think appeals to a lot of people, I think you can see, I think it's quite sort of traditionally 'studenty' in a way if you know what I mean, and the links with the arts side to it appeal to me and also I live really nearby but also on a really personal level my mum and dad went to Woodlands in the 1970s and did their teacher training and met at Woodlands which for me is quite a nice sort of link, so it's the fact it's close and yeah... carrying on the tradition (Subject J, Full-time)

In the above focus group in general it was discussed numerous times the way that the students felt 'separated' from the university, yet in the discourses of choosing the university that they present they emphasise connections, which they talk about in positive terms. Such talk of connections could be a way of both attempting to reflect and accrue capital in the focus group situation in a way that positions the individuals as having value within the institution, unites the participants of the focus group, and reflects the individual biographies of the students as cohering with the field of the university. Having 'value' within the university appeared to involve an increased number of connections to the university in terms of family attending the institution, time spent on campus, fitting in in terms of dress, having a circle of friends, positive relationships with tutors and being 'cool'. For other students, who are variously unable to participate in these forms of belonging, the result appears to be a feeling of unease in higher education.

The quotations in this section regarding the reasons that students give for having chosen to study at Woodlands are also relevant to the consumer model of higher education whereby students are designated as rational stakeholders who are able and willing to make analytical deliberations based on data sets such as the KIS when choosing where to study. As discussed previously, Reay et al (2005) suggested that individuals are not rational actors when choosing universities, but often rely on processes of intuition and serendipity:

‘We found little evidence of the consumer rationalism that predominates in official texts. There were some students who could be described as active researchers, especially at the two private schools, but many relied on serendipity and intuition’ (2005:159).

Reay et al (2005) were discussing students who were still in the process of making their university choices but my research highlights similar processes at work when students recall their choices retrospectively. Participants spoke about a variety of reasons for deciding to study at Woodlands. Phil (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time) shows some evidence of a rational consumer discourse:

Phil: I was looking for universities that had the highest entry requirements that I could meet so when I came I found out like, I looked at it a little bit on the Internet and found out it was political (Second Year, BA (Hons) Subject F, Full-time)

However, this is tempered with him discussing politics as also important in his choice of institution. Other students above emphasised the location of London, living nearby to the university or personal connections with Woodlands, such as family members also having studied at the institution. There was evidence of the serendipity discussed by Reay et al (2005):

Susanna: I didn't know loads about Woodlands but I kind of had heard about it and I just thought it sounded a little bit different (Subject J, Full-time).

Many of these responses highlight the heuristically orientated nature of student's choices of studying at Woodlands, with evidence of analytical decision-making but also – and perhaps mainly - decisions based on convenience (locality), ‘fitting in’ (image and coolness) and intuition, chance and serendipity.

Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead

This chapter has focused on multiple separations in higher education, such as intermitting, postgraduate study and 'fitting in'. I have examined the affective consequences of these, particularly in relation to Bourdieu's (1993) sense of value and social capital, where individuals are differentially valued and valuable according to their social positioning, the affective consequences of which can then become internalised (Fanon 1967). Focus groups as a relational method were particularly able to highlight these issues through the intimate distance created in students' talk about their experiences in higher education. Diversity was also considered as both an element of 'fitting in' and a branding concept and 'symbolic commitment' (Ahmed 2012) within the university. The next chapter will explore the overall findings of this thesis and offer an open-ended conclusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Uncovering Linearity: Time and Affect

'Can I get a refund?' (Box response)

In the foregoing chapters I have examined time and affect in talk about student experience of higher education, focusing on one university. I have approached the topic in a qualitative, exploratory and open-ended way and, consequently, this discussion and conclusion may raise more questions than it provides answers. My starting point has been the way that student experience - a highly ambiguous and contested term - is produced through a range of technologies and assemblages of methods including social policy discourse and mechanisms of measurement, the most well-known of which is the National Student Survey, which is conducted yearly and focuses mainly on final year undergraduate students.

In order to describe the production of student experience I have employed Roger Luckhurst's (2002) terminology of 'hybrid object', which he used in the study of telepathy. For Luckhurst, a hybrid object can be described as one produced through 'diverse social, cultural and scientific resources' and tied together 'in a tightly bound knot' (2002:3). I have adopted this term in the present study of student experience to highlight the way that the polysemic nature of student experience is frequently bundled into a single calibration, concealing the various sites of its construction. In contrast to this unitary measurement, I have wanted to examine the various, multi-sited and frequently ambivalent formations and constitutions of this complex term. The current context of higher education has been important to this project: rhetoric of widening participation is creating (or attempting to create) a more diverse student body at the same time as degree courses and learning are becoming more standardised and market-orientated as universities become businesses (Holmwood 2011; Couldry and McRobbie 2010; Edu Factory Collective 2011).

Following John Law (2004) and his assertion that methods are creative as well as descriptive of social life, I decided to approach the study of student experience from a relational as opposed to individualised perspective. Such an approach recognises the inherently inter-subjective and inter-relational dynamics and qualities to human experience as opposed to understanding the social world as comprised fundamentally of discrete individuals (Ruch et al 2010). I have also concentrated on exploring the complexity and ambivalences of

psychosocial subjects as opposed to the linearity embedded in theoretically rational actors (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

I have worked against the grain of two key assumptions that appear in constructions of quality, value and measurement of student experience of higher education and I aim to challenge these. The first of these assumptions is that students are rational actors capable of determining their own biographies. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that contemporary society is characterised by reflexive modernity in which traditional interconnections between individuals (such as family relationships) are changing and structuring factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and age are no longer considered to be so important. In this environment, individuals are free to (and also must) orchestrate their own identity. Similarly, Anthony Giddens (1991) asserts the 'reflexive project of the self' whereby individuals are largely faced with the imperative of narrative choice regarding their identities and pathways through life. Such arguments resonate with ideas that individuals are able to be rational actors in a world defined by almost perfect competition (the ideal neo-liberal environment in fact). However, as Diane Reay et al (2005) have shown, most students – except for perhaps the most privileged few – are not able or willing to be intelligent consumers of higher education but rely on intuition and serendipity when making life changing choices.

The second assumption is that student experience of higher education is temporally linear and straightforwardly progressive according to the abstractly measurable and universally divisible notion of 'clock time' (Urry and Lash 1994) or 'timeless time' (Urry 2000), which is continuous in nature but once again represents an emptying out of time and space. This view is embedded within the idea of university education as a marketplace, where students purchase a product that allows them to move into employment in a direct fashion. Nevertheless, the sense of 'clock time' or 'timeless time' negates the identity and situatedness of individuals. In this thesis I have viewed time as both normative and performative and therefore deeply embedded with morality. As Michelle Bastian (2012), Lisa Adkins (2009) and others have argued, time is not an abstract backdrop to experience but is a lived construct that is created and endured variously according to differential subject positionings. Normative time, in this sense, is implicated in the social exclusion of certain lives and embodiments and the acceptance of others, and this is something that I have been keen to investigate in this research by drawing from critical feminist writing on experience and time.

Based on the two assumptions discussed above, I have examined the way in which current measures of student experience often assume a temporally and affectively linear university life. Students are viewed as rational actors capable of engaging in impartial progress through the educational system with a limited range of affective experiences that can be measured on a continuous five-point Likert Scale of satisfaction. Such a discourse of student life then becomes generative as it is incorporated into university marketing and branding technologies, such as Key Information Sets, through which prospective students are asked to select where to study and form opinions about university life. The methods of the production of such data are rarely questioned and universities and departments make changes on the basis of the results of such measurements, aiming to maximise the 'satisfaction' of the student population and consequently the attractiveness of the university to potential applicants.

However, as writers such as Stefan Collini (2011) have pointed out, 'satisfaction' does not necessarily equate with 'happiness'. Sara Ahmed (2010) argues that happiness (or in the case of this research 'satisfaction') is hegemonic and represents an oppressive imperative that can act to conceal social injustice and prevent change. 'Troublesome knowledge' (Meyer and Land 2005) is sometimes essential in order for education to become transformative. For instance, Freire (1970) argues against the 'banking' model of 'satisfaction' that leads to dehumanisation of both staff and students in education and suggests instead that individuals must become uncomfortably aware of their situation in order to become co-creators of knowledge and social change (a notion he termed conscientization). Similarly to Ahmed (2010), such a process is not necessarily a 'happy' one, but it is potentially more fulfilling (Freire 1970). From a different perspective but still critical of happiness as hegemonic, the focus of measurements of student experience on 'satisfaction' marginalises important alternative discourses of student lives in higher education, such as mental health research that shows an increasingly vulnerable student body (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011).

When investigating these marginalised aspects of student experience my approach has been, as stated previously, attentive to the relational dynamics between individuals (Ruch et al 2010) and the self as a complex, defended and therefore frequently ambivalent psychosocial subject (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). I have placed into (critical) dialogue data from focus groups, a feedback seminar, university reports and participatory arts-based research techniques with the aim of 'mapping' student experience at Woodlands (one university in London, UK) in the sense of Marcus (1998). Such a perspective allows

recognition of the idea that 'all images are partial' (Latour 2004) and the development of a Live Sociology (Back 2012), inclusive of an 'artful and crafty approach to sociological research' (Back and Puwar 2012:6) that recognises multiple viewpoints, the situatedness of subjects, and the dynamism of the social world.

The methods employed have also had the aim of consciousness-raising. For instance, many focus group participants discussed loneliness and isolation and the groups had a role to play in connecting students through such stories of separation; when one feels alone it can be difficult to discover that others are in the same position unless there is a possibility for conversation. This involves a move towards the externalisation as opposed to the internalisation of affective experiences and recognition of the way that such observations can be located in the social structure as opposed to individual deficiency (Fanon 1967; Young 1990). Correspondingly I have analysed my data using a discourse analytic framework that implicitly acknowledges that 'all representation is misrepresentation' (Tufte 2006): 'to the extent that a representation is regarded as realistic, it is because it is so familiar it operates transparently' (Shapiro 1988: xi).

To this end, this project has comprised an open-ended inquiry into distinct ways of conceptualising diverse and different student experiences, with a focus on those that may be marginalised by neo-liberal discourses of linearity and progress. Such marginalised experiences are conceptualised by Gordon (1996) as 'traces', understandings and elements that 'haunt' institutions in ways that go largely unnoticed by current metrics. 'Traces' of student experience are typically invisible in higher education's market-orientated rhetoric of quality, value and measurement since they frequently occupy material and affective spaces and temporalities that are overlooked by a hegemonic focus on progression, linearity and satisfaction within the system.

Focusing the Data: Observations and Reflections

Through an examination of time as 'polyrhythmic' (Lefebvre 2004) and lived, and temporal experiences as situated and produced in broader social conditions, I have focused on the multiplicity of frequently dis-junctive timescapes (Adams 1998) and the interactions, sometimes in the form of collisions, that occur between them in student experiences of higher education. The institutional time of the university creates a structuring effect with term dates, holidays, coursework deadlines and exams. Furthermore, virtual communication extends such a time frame seemingly continually, although with frequently ambivalent affects for students. There is also a layering over these temporalities of social

events, talks, political and extra-curricular involvement for some students, often producing a sense of continuous time and endless choice for them that they seek to manage. However, for other students, differently situated within higher education and perhaps with family or work commitments, the relationship between the different timescapes in their lives becomes 'dis-junctive' as opposed to continuous (Appadurai 1990) and negative feelings such as stress and guilt under such circumstances create a psychosocial sense of *dys-ease* within higher education.

Although the education sector may focus on rhetoric of equality and inclusion through widening participation (Bratti et al 2008), it appears that the spatial and temporal organisation of institutions, in terms of linearity and progression, may systematically and structurally disadvantage certain students. This may be particularly acute for students with family or work commitments and such individuals may be multiply separated from aspects of higher education through their difficulties with integrating into and harmonising with the spatial and temporal demands inherent within the linearity of the market-based educational system. These students may experience difficulties in managing multiple layerings, dis-junctures and collisions of time in a way that goes unnoticed and unacknowledged by a focus on satisfaction and progress within the field of the university. For such students, negative affects were conceptualised as coming in 'waves' and creating 'conflict' and 'guilt', where institutional and non-institutional times collide, both making demands on the individual and creating 'hot spots' of intense emotion (Southerton 2003).

However, there was ambivalence surrounding talk of such temporal commitments, with the structure university time talked about as both helpful and hindering: it could infringe and interrupt other timeframes such as festive periods with families, or create pockets of isolation and separation from the institution through timetabling decisions, but its flexibility also allowed responsibilities, such as childcare, to 'stretch out' and be accommodated for. The flexibility of 'student time' also facilitated participants when engaging in a more spontaneous form of lifestyle - for instance travelling to visit friends or partners on weekdays - which students often compared in positive terms with what were discussed as the possible temporal restraints of full-time work.

The focus group discussions also centred on normative discussions of 'busyness' and stress in university life: time became virtuous and based on self-improvement. In the context of increasing variability and unpredictability of temporal structures, it may be that those students who have the most control over their time and availability of free time are able to

amass the most cultural capital, thereby reproducing inequalities (although not necessarily in a straightforward or simple class-based way since age, gender and life circumstances also impact upon temporal resources). In contrast, those students experiencing 'time poverty', which is gendered and particularly acute for single parents, struggle to maintain the pace of temporal belonging in higher education (Callender et al 2006) and, if they do manage to do so, their lack of conformity to linear temporal structures and frequent de-synchronisation from higher education may subject them to difficult affective experiences and value judgements from themselves and others. For some students, such as middle-class students, university involves 'staying as they are' (Reay et al 2005:161). However, for other students, the institutional time of the university creates demands that form a dis-juncture with other aspects of their lives and feel incommensurable, creating the sense of being a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

A further temporal layering mentioned in the focus groups, feedback seminar and arts-based research was virtual communication. Virtual technologies have the potential to create a form of closeness, although such intimacy may always be mediated (an 'absent presence' as discussed by Gergen 2002), and are frequently used by students to keep in touch with one another through interfaces such as Facebook and Twitter. Higher education is changing rapidly and the introduction of MOOCs has been asserted as having the potential for more lateral learning relationships following connectivist pedagogical principles. However, the participants in this project were frequently hesitant regarding the benefits of virtual learning through technologies such as the VLE. They described finding it disorientating and difficult to navigate, with experiences such as feeling 'thrown' or 'out of the loop' being attached to it.

Students were reluctant to 'trust' the disembedding of their learning (Giddens 1990) to virtual communication, although some students (especially those most separated from the institutions) spoke of the positive aspects of information technology, such as not having to travel to university to read books or access lecture notes. There was also a sense of students recognising that virtual education could be associated with individualised pathways - as opposed to its potential for connectivism - and thereby acting to reduce some of the sociality of university life. The university is aware of many of these issues surrounding technology (Kear 2013), further complicating the picture of 'student experience' and highlighting a continual tension between intimacy and distance, both aiding, and with the potential to challenge, instrumental approaches to learning.

Relating to affective experiences at university, this thesis has particularly drawn out discourses of loneliness and isolation. Through examining the relational quality of student experience, the emotional linearity embedded within more commonplace understandings of student life that acts to 'smooth out' differences and inconsistencies, thereby making bodies commensurable (Greenhouse 1996), has been questioned. Certain affective experiences, such as those of loneliness or isolation, have been shown to become internalised by some individuals and located within them, leading to them defining themselves or being defined by others as somehow marginal (Fanon 1967; Young 1990) and occupying shameful (or 'disgusting', Lawler 2005) subject positions, often with the need to attempt to 'disguise' such positioning; for instance students discussed being selective about the clothes worn to university to ensure that they 'fit in' (Bourdieu 1993). Although such marginal positionings and feelings of shame may be related to gender, class and ethnicity, this is not a simple and straightforward correspondence.

Students in this research seemed to both move towards closeness but also at times found such intimacy difficult. There was an ambivalent relationship expressed that could often be seen in the different discourses of higher education invoked in the focus groups. Particular affective separations were evident for students who had intermitted from their studies and postgraduate students, perhaps due to their temporal de-synchronisation from the institution. This could also be related to the social and cultural capital of individuals (and its interaction with the policy aim of widening participation). For those students who were particularly separated from the university, Berlant's (2006) notion of cruel optimism became important, defined as the formation of optimistic attachments to painful objects such as through remaining hopeful regarding the ideal of a social higher education despite having a lonely and isolating experience at university. Following Berlant, I explored the idea of the imagined university, whereby the actual experience of students is not necessarily the hoped for experience of higher education, frequently resulting in their differential endurance of negative affects.

Students in this research were also conceptualised as moral actors, following Arthur Frank (1995), grappling with different discourses of higher education that involved consumerist understandings of university life but also included transformative ideals of education and intimacy within HEIs. These ambivalent and complex ways of understanding student experiences are completely overlooked by market-orientated metrics of higher education. Separation or isolation from the university, which can be more explicit in terms of temporal dislocation or an implicit feeling of not 'fitting in', is an affective site of student experience

that, at times, may result as a consequence of the market-driven emphasis on linear progress and individual achievement in higher education. However, this affective experience is not made explicit within the neo-liberal university but 'haunts' the unconscious as 'traces' (Gordon 1996) whilst impacting variously upon students in terms of their differential accumulation of and access to social capital. Material consequences such as attrition rates or mental health problems (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011) have been shown to result from such affective experiences but this research has highlighted that more implicit implications also exist such as a subtle erosion of self-esteem and self-confidence, which may be hidden to measurement but appear very present for those who encounter it. These experiences help to illustrate the paradoxes, ambivalences and, more worryingly, pathologies of a market-orientated and neo-liberal higher education system that focuses on rationality and the disembodied individual and assumes that the *affects* of this can be reduced individual factors or to satisfaction.

Critical Considerations

In terms of the methods used within this project and the way that I have presented them in the thesis, I feel that there are sometimes tensions between 'what actually happened' and the literature that I have drawn from to describe research methods (for instance, Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 1998). I have relied heavily upon the theory and practice of focus group research when relaying my methods, although frequently the groups that I facilitated did not conform to what may be traditionally considered to be a 'focus group' (see Wilson 1997 for a definition). My groups of participants were often fluid in nature: a discussion at the occupation with a group of students who happened to be 'hanging around', or inviting a group of friends sitting together in the library to talk with me about their student lives. The groups did not always tessellate with the pre-arranged and more formal nature of focus groups; they were purposely designed to capture the dynamism of student life and also they often relied on opportunistic encounters, such as being present at the student occupation and sitting and talking with students there. This acted as a successful strategy for recruiting and working with interested and committed participants, although retrospectively it meant that the literature of focus groups, in which the discussion of my methods is framed, may not always have directly applied to the actuality and the fluidity of my study.

One element of the 'focus groups' that I had planned to be central to my participatory approach was the idea of having a co-facilitator (in fact, I initially planned to have more

than one co-facilitator). My hope was that these facilitators, being students themselves, would bring closeness to the research and openness to the group discussions, and that different facilitators would allow for different relationships to develop within the groups, highlighting the varied and textured nature of relational student talk about their experiences. This strategy was also intended to increase the participatory nature of the project: as students realised that they could talk about these issues with other students I imagined that they might go on to set up their own groups and gather their own information (for instance, see Padilla 1993). However, due to the difficulty of recruiting group facilitators and participants alike, this aspect of the research was not always successful and certainly did not lead to the degree of participation that I had initially imagined, perhaps highlighting to me the difficulties involved in 'artificially' attempting to create participation and that the very notion that I was investigating – the heterogeneity of students' lives – meant that simply being a student did not necessarily provide a sense of commonality or homogeneity of circumstance amongst participants.

The point regarding the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of student experiences raises another issue within this research. In this project I have attempted to highlight the individualised nature of student lives, as a counter-narrative to measures of student satisfaction that tend to view students as a homogenised cohort of educational consumers. However, conterminously I have also wanted to universalise from individual instances in my data to enable me to contribute to discussions concerning broader structural experiences of students and theoretical conceptualisations, but without flattening out or neutralising the importance to this project of the specific. Such apparently dual requirements of individualisation and universalisation have at times created an uneasy tension for me between speaking about personal experience whilst also attempting to write in a more general way (Smith 1988). In finalising this thesis I have attempted to work with this tension by focusing on individual talk as engendered in the discussion groups and making it clear when the theorising is my own, acknowledging the positions that such talk and theorising stems from. Nevertheless, I do not claim to have used this strategy successfully in every instance and the conflict between individual and universal experiences still exists within this project; it is important to bear this in mind when reading the work.

Whilst my reasons for undertaking this research have often been very personal and, as discussed in the Preface to this thesis, included my own experiences of the disjuncture between policy discourses and lived student lives, on reflection I feel that at times I have seemed to write myself out of the findings of this investigation. I frequently struggled with

the conflict between writing my own inclusion and absencing from the project as I observed my desire to place the participants at the centre of the work as much as possible. To focus on the words and images of the participants has therefore been my way of resolving the difficulties between participation and re-presentation through completing a 'finished' piece of academic work. However, I recognise that this is only one pathway through such issues and there are certainly other routes (for instance, Borland 1991) that involve much greater acknowledgement in the writing of the dialogic and relational quality of research relationships and a much greater presence of the researcher in the analysis of the data.

On consideration of these issues, I understand that by minimising my own presence within the research I have also minimised the effects of my positioning and the interactions that such positioning had with the positioning of the participants. I feel that this silencing has, at times, led to a more one-dimensional analysis than that which I had set out to achieve at the beginning of this work. Such personal absencing has sometimes involved my relationships with participants being implicitly acknowledged as opposed to more explicitly presented, creating a degree of strain between my theoretical foundations of relationality, relationship-based approaches and the psychosocial standpoint (Ruch et al 2010; Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Likewise in terms of the arts-based research, the identities of the participants were unknown to me (since participation was anonymous) and the embedding of this research within the discussion group data may occasionally have created a rather uneasy mix of telling and not telling. Despite this, I felt that it was important to include the arts-based data, not only because it represented collaborative research, but also because it strongly reflected and frequently emphasised the themes considered by the students in the discussion groups. However, I recognise that, much like the metrics of 'satisfaction', this approach omitted the possibility for an analysis of the identity of participants and a consideration of the conditions of its own production.

Such issues also relate to the way that participants are introduced within this thesis since it is me, as the writer, who is creating the introductions and describing the participants to the reader. Whilst I have drawn heavily from the words and images of participants and I hope that the way that they are portrayed is close to how they would wish to present themselves, I realise that the writing of this research is intimately bound with my own identity and positioning and that this factor deeply effects the way that the arguments are presented here, the issues that have been highlighted and other factors that may have been given less space (Borland 1991). Due to my own silencing within the analysis of the data in order that I felt the participants were able to 'speak', it may at times be difficult for

the reader to understand the way that my own identity and reasons for conducting this particular piece of research have influenced the identities of my participants and, as discussed above, this is a conflict that I have struggled with throughout the research and writing period, deciding to resolve it as far as possible by highlighting the centrality of the participants to the research.

Related to this conflict has been another issue of maintaining the anonymity of the study university by referring to it as 'Woodlands' throughout. I have adopted this strategy as an ethical consideration and due to departmental advice, although I am aware that the institutional identity may not be fully concealed (for instance, I have relied on university documents in the data analysis sections, which alone could potentially be used to reveal the research site). Furthermore, by not naming the university it may be difficult for readers to discern the specificity of this research in terms of the unique characteristics of the institution in question, although I have made every attempt to describe the university in as much detail as possible without revealing it (which alone may have inadvertently created a tension between naming and not naming). This then further silences aspects of the research and could lead to a reduction in the texture of the findings and implications able to be ascertained from the data presented. However, it was important for me to abide by ethical and departmental requirements in this research, and for this reason I took the uneasy decision to use a pseudonym.

In terms of more general limitations of this study it is essential to bear in mind that this research was conducted at one very specific HEI at a particular moment in time. Students participated in this project in the context of fee increases for higher education, student action, political protests and widespread discussion concerning the future of higher education in a fraught economic climate. Some of the participants were involved in such student actions more deeply than others but for all participants the temporal-spatial coordinates interacted uniquely with psychosocial factors to produce a study that would undoubtedly be very different if repeated at another time and elsewhere. Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging this aspect of the work it is also hoped that the insights and themes presented here, such as the way that metrics might conceal a number of difficulties for students such as mental health problems or isolation, can be extrapolated more broadly. Such projection could be used to create a space and openness for institutions to listen differently and sensitively to individuals' experiences of university life as opposed to relying on metrics of satisfaction to determine the 'value' of what they offer to students.

Concluding Remarks

Although it is recognised that all higher education institutions are different, it is hoped that this study has managed to provoke ideas for future research and to capture a number of important issues that have implications for the way that student experience is understood. Such factors in student life and their consequences could potentially exist elsewhere, although possibly in different forms. Likewise, this research has shown that there are numerous different student experiences and it is not intended to be a comprehensive coverage of them, merely to point towards the way that understandings of student experience could usefully be more expansive than the current discourse of satisfaction allows for.

By way of offering some concluding comments, this thesis has often focused on what could be termed challenging, difficult or negative aspects of student experience at Woodlands: temporal dis-junctures, spatial separation, loneliness and isolation, instrumental ideas about higher education and the feeling of not 'fitting in' to the institution. Despite this concentration on difficult experiences, I have not intended to suggest that student experiences cannot be 'positive' but instead to highlight the way that a focus on market-driven metrics is reductive of the complexities and differences inherent in heterogeneous student lives. Despite the many challenging aspects of student experience as discussed in this project, my hope is that a discourse of optimism is also present: students in the focus groups are grappling with varying narratives of student life, including market-orientated consumerism and also ideas of a transformative purpose of education. These different discourses surrounding higher education and its purpose co-exist, often in tension with one another, and are dynamic as formulations of higher education are constantly changing. However, the existence of transformative narratives within student talk about higher education shows that promise remains for universities as sites of 'troublesome knowledge' and as providing scope for free spaces of resistance to a purely instrumentalist approach to higher education.

Such a neo-liberal approach to higher education, including a market-driven emphasis on quality, value and measurement, has been the dominant conceptualisation of universities since at least the advance from a system of elite to mass access to the academy following a number of post-WWII changes to higher education (Tight 2009). There has been an encroaching movement towards universities being run like businesses (Holmwood 2011; Edu Factory Collective 2011) and the increasing adoption of private sector practices by the

public sector (Burrows 2012), although this process of acquisition has also occurred reciprocally (Edu Factory 2011). These business-like practices within the neo-liberal university have led to measurements such as performance indicators becoming themselves increasingly performative (Nelson-Espeland and Saunder 2007) and changing the spatial, temporal and affective landscape of higher education. Student experience has been conceptualised by linearity, rationality and satisfaction and divergent or different experiences (even within the rhetoric of widening participation) have been marginalised by this hegemonic discourse.

This thesis has shown that, despite the market-driven emphasis on individualism and temporal and affective linearity in higher education, many student experiences, and the way that students talk about their experiences, appear not to be characterised by temporal and affective linearity and individualism. Instead, student experiences can be argued to be shaped by additional factors including multiplicity, complexity, dis-juncture, continuity, collision, ambivalence and relationality. It has been argued that students are differently positioned in higher education and that certain individuals may tessellate more strongly with the neo-liberal university according to their social capital and temporal resources.

Nevertheless, even those students who found it easier to conform to the market-orientated system of higher education discussed their idea of the 'imagined university' as referring to experiences beyond a market-driven emphasis on achievement and individual progress to the labour market. Such a 'banking' concept of education was present within this research for students, but in a way that was co-existent and in tension with narratives of transformation, sociality and 'love' in university life. These tensions in student talk about higher education point towards the 'intimate distance' of student experiences and challenge ideas of the purely rational neo-liberal subject or notions of social individualisation. Instead, the transformative conceptualisations of higher education amongst students suggest that despite the increasing prevalence of private-sector and market practices in university life, there remains the possibility for (and actuality of) free and creative spaces of critical thought capable of engaging with and creating 'troublesome knowledge' and the potential for a more 'human' (Freire 1970) system of higher education.

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APPENDIX ONE

Focus Group Composition

FOCUS GROUP ONE

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Katherine	MA Subject A	Full-time	Female	One year Course
Eva	MA Subject A	Full-time	Female	One year course
Amelia	MA Subject A	Full-time	Female	One year course
Martin	MA Subject A	Full-time	Male	One year course

FOCUS GROUP TWO

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Jacque	Subject J	Full-time	Female	One year course
Sam	Subject J	Full-time	Female	One year course
Susanna	Subject J	Full-time	Female	One year course

FOCUS GROUP THREE

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Britta	BA (Hons) Subject B	Full-time	Female	Third Year
Phil	BA (Hons) Subject F	Full-time	Male	Second Year
Cate	BA (Hons) Subject B	Full-time	Female	First Year

FOCUS GROUP FOUR

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Sara	BA (Hons) Subject H	Full-time	Female	Third Year
Kyla	BA (Hons) Subject H	Full-time	Female	Third Year

FOCUS GROUP FIVE

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Bibianna	MA Subject H	Full-time	Female	One year course
Debbie	BA (Hons) Subject D	Full-time	Female	First Year
Jazmine	BA (Hons) Subject D	Full-time	Female	Second Year

FOCUS GROUP SIX

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Masie	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course
Steph	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course
Liz	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course
Erika	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course
Lydia	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course
Katie	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course
Lila	MA Subject G	Full-time	Female	One year course

FOCUS GROUP SEVEN

Participant	Course	Modality	Gender	Year
Arian	BA (Hons) Subject C	Full-time	Male	First Year
Paul	BA (Hons) Subject E	Full-time	Male	First Year
Andrea	BA (Hons) Subject D	Full-time	Female	Second Year
Lucinda	BA (Hons) Subject H	Full-time	Female	Second Year
Karen	BA (Hons) Subject F	Full-time	Female	Third Year
Helen	BA (Hons) Subject D	Full-time	Female	First Year

APPENDIX TWO

Made anonymous where necessary

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Mapping Student Experience

You are being invited to take part in research that forms the basis of the Woodlands Initiative, a participatory and unfunded project currently organised by an open group of staff and students.

What is the purpose of the research?

1. To develop an understanding of student experience
2. To explore the creative use of multi-methods and collaborate with students

In addition to the focus groups, the project will review existing literature and make use of multi-methods.

What can I expect if I decide to take part in the focus group?

The focus groups will be facilitated by Caroline Norman or a trained student facilitator. The length of each group will vary although it is anticipated it will last around one hour.

With permission of each group the discussion will be tape-recorded. Individual members will be asked to sign a consent form.

All information relating to individuals in the group will remain confidential and if any information (such as quotations) from the groups is used in the writing-up of the project or the production of resources, individuals will remain anonymous. This means that while quotations from the discussions may be used, no individuals will be identifiable.

The project aims to encourage your participation in the research. As such, group members will be able to read the transcripts of their focus group and to feed back any comments/observations or after-thoughts to the researcher.

What are focus group interviews?

Focus group interviews are a type of interview made up of small groups of people. Unlike an interview, focus groups use the interaction between the group members as part of the method, meaning that the researcher will often 'take a back seat' and although she may ask certain questions, group members are encouraged to discuss topics amongst themselves.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

The main disadvantage of taking part in the focus group is that some participants might provoke strong reactions, which could evoke feelings of discomfort or anxiety. In addition, some individuals may feel anxious when involved in a group discussion.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Focus groups can be an enjoyable experience and allow participants to explore, develop and share ideas with each other or make contacts with other students. However, this cannot be guaranteed.

What if I am unhappy about anything?

If you wish to complain about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated in this research, I would ask you to approach [tutor] and [tutor] in the first instance.

Contact for further information

If you would like any further information about the focus group interviews or about the wider project please feel free to contact:

Caroline Norman at [email address]

APPENDIX THREE

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Mapping Student Experience

Have you read the Information Sheet about the project?

Yes No

Have you had the opportunity to think about the project and to ask questions about it?

Yes No

Have you received enough information about the project?

Yes No

Being able to change your mind

Do you understand that you can change your mind at any time about being interviewed, without having to give a reason, and without it affecting you or your treatment in any way?

Yes No

Do you agree to take part in the project?

Yes No

NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS:

Signature:

Signature of person obtaining Consent:

Date:

APPENDIX FOUR

TOPIC GUIDE

General welcome, introduction, information sheet, time for questions, consent forms

Any questions before we start?

Ask once again about consent to record

Once recording has started:

To get to know each other a bit better, could you take it in turns to say your names and tell the group something about yourself that people do not already know (if the participants know each other)? Or something about you that is an unusual fact (if the participants do not know each other)?

I would like to get a sense of how you spend your time, so could you tell me about what yesterday was like for you? What did you do?

What would you say is the most difficult thing about being a student? Explore reasons; possible prompts include travel, family, money, time...

What would you say are your feelings relating to your time spent studying here? Possible prompts include expectations, positive and negative feelings...

Do you have any ideas for how to get people involved in this project? What has your experience been like and how would you like to take it forward? Possible prompts include collection and representation of information...

What would you say is the best thing about being a student? Can you tell me about some positive experiences?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

APPENDIX FIVE

DSC ANNUAL GROUP PROJECT REPORTS (2013):

Report Number	Title	Authors
1	Academic Support	Undergraduate Group Three
2	Access to Learning	Undergraduate Group Two
3	Assessment and Feedback	Undergraduate Group One
4	Communication	Postgraduate Group Two
5	Departmental Community	Postgraduate Group Three
6	So Very [Woodlands]	Postgraduate Group One
7	Student Representation and Student Voice	Undergraduate Group Four