

BOOK REVIEW

**Bangeni, B. & Kapp, R. (Eds.). (2017). *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention*. London: Bloomsbury.**

Reviewed by Taryn Bernard\*

*Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention* is the first in a Bloomsbury series, entitled “Understanding Student Experiences in Higher Education”. It consists of nine chapters, all of which report on research that was conducted using qualitative, longitudinal data at the University of Cape Town (UCT) – an elite, English-medium, and historically white South African University. The participants in the research are all part of a generation of young black people who have grown up in the new South Africa and are mostly first generation, working class and from single-parent families. In addition to this, they are all bilingual or multilingual and English is generally used as a second or third language.

By collecting and analysing data over a period of eight years the book offers a rich understanding of the identities and experiences of this important group of university students. The approach adopted by the editors and authors when representing participants in the study is also of significance: in the Introduction, Kapp and Bangeni (2017, p. 2) draw the reader’s attention to the fact that many public textual representations in South Africa construct black working-class youth as failures or victims, as disadvantaged and as marginalised. In this book, the researchers can be commended for the necessary step of moving away from such deficit constructions to rather focus on the *agency* of the participants, and conducting research that highlights the *agentic* and *enabled* subject positions of the participants. This is done by avoiding a static notion of identity from the outset, and by adopting a poststructuralist approach to identity that acknowledges that identity changes over time and in accordance with the context in which the individual is situated.

Overall there were twenty participants included in this study from the period 2002 to 2005, and another hundred participants from the period 2009 to 2012. The participants were registered in a range of faculties and for a range of degrees. The researchers draw on a number of data-collection methods and texts such as questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, written reflections and assignments that had been selected by the students themselves. In this way, the voices of the participants have been traced throughout their journey through the higher education system. This longitudinal perspective offers insight

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into how and why students persist and engage with their studies and UCT as an institution, or why they deregister or disengage. More specifically, the book sets out to answer three extremely pertinent questions in higher education contexts today:

1. How does a particular group of students can gain meaningful access to institutional and disciplinary discourses?
2. How can the knowledge, languages, resources and discourses that the students bring with them be recognised and valued; and
3. How can important role players address the practices and resources that marginalise particular groups of students?

In addressing these questions the researchers work towards facilitating more meaningful approaches to access in an effort to transform discourses that exclude, silence and marginalise.

The chapters in the book are arranged in order to focus on the experiences of one small, typical sample of participants at a time and the approach to analysis differs from chapter to chapter, depending on the aims of the author(s). Throughout the nine chapters, the contributors are able to cover a variety of contexts and subject positions, including the working-class township schooling context (Kapp, Badenhorst, Bangeni, Craig, Janse van Rensburg, Le Roux, Prince, Pym & Van Pletzen, Chapter 1), the Engineering Extended Curriculum Programme context (Craig, Chapter 7), subject positions regarding mathematics (Le Roux, Chapter 2), the experiences of a young working-class Muslim woman registered for a social science degree (Sacks & Kapp, Chapter 3), Humanities, students' understanding of language, literacy and identity (Kapp & Bangeni, Chapter 4), the role of religion in framing students' experiences of higher education (Bangeni & Pym, Chapter 5), the factors shaping the degree paths of black students (Bangeni, Chapter 6), and finally, the impact of previous experiences and social connectedness when transitioning to higher education (Pym & Sacks, Chapter 8).

There are a number of prominent issues that are raised in this book, and which stand out for me as being worthy of further exploration – ideally in terms of comparable research emanating from other universities in South Africa. I refer specifically here to topics and symbols that reoccur across text types and during diverse processes of analyses. Of particular significance is the participants' notion of 'the university', of 'home', of English and of religion and religious practices. For example, the authors are able to reveal the extent to which UCT is conceptualised as a site of privilege and excellence, wherein English is conceptualised as both a portal for access and a gatekeeping mechanism, and perceptions of learning academic English are constructed around contrasting binaries of loss/gain, whiteness/alienation and upward mobility/exclusion. These findings should have a significant impact on how academic literacy development is conceptualised and implemented at tertiary level.

Adding to this, the longitudinal data were able to highlight connotations around the notions of 'home', where home remained a significant aspect of the participants' identity even while away from home and at University. The chapters all make a valuable contribution to understanding the paradigms and discourses with which the students

enter University, including religious paradigms, which are often challenged in disciplinary discourses (particularly those of Philosophy and Science). Many students maintain their religious beliefs as a framework that enables them to stay positive and maintain a good working ethic in the context of challenging home and academic environments. The manner in which this issue is dealt with within the book is so convincing and authentic that it works as a cautionary tale to academics who may disregard religious beliefs as such beliefs may contribute to persistence and retention, particularly amongst a vulnerable group of students.

Overall, the book makes an extremely important contribution to the global conversation around widening access and participation by offering an in-depth understanding of student experiences at UCT. Over and above this, each aspect of the research project is able to critique the dominant, yet deficit, assumption that students will be passively assimilated into disciplinary discourses after they have been rehabilitated in adjunct, first-year practices without any changes to mainstream teaching practices and institutional culture. This then offers an important commentary on approaches to teaching and learning, and academic development which are commonplace at many South African universities.

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