Combining words and drawings, the better to understand students' lived experiences

Dr Poppy Gibson
Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University, UK

Abstract

This case study presents and interprets two data sets – interviews and line drawings – about barriers to learning in the HE context, as seen from the student perspective. Eleven undergraduate students participated in this exploratory study, which took place at a United Kingdom higher education (HE) institution. The findings help reveal to the reader the lived experiences of students and present opportunities to consider intervention practices that can be used to support student transition from further education (FE) into HE. This case study also discusses how to collect and use this mixed data set and highlights how employing this method promotes student voice. Researchers may find that the approach may be applicable to their own project design.

1. Introduction

Findings from studies about the wellbeing of first-year students (dos Santos Boni *et al.*, 2018) show that, when students are academically and emotionally supported, we can see improved "*performance, motivation, optimism, and empathy*" (dos Santos Boni *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p.85). It is essential that HE institutions consider support strategies to engage students in active participation in and successful completion of their degree programmes. Students, owing to self-doubt, may suffer from 'impostor syndrome' and educators must recognise that this feeling may be present if they are to help dissolve it. This case study will outline four potential interventions and strategies to be considered for deployment on other cross-faculty accelerated programmes (Gibson *et al.* 2019, p.1).

Being a 'university student' becomes another facet of one's identity and our behaviour adjusts itself within each of the various groups of which we are members. Our identities are thus defined by the groups to which we belong, our positions within them and the ways in which we play these roles (O'Neil, 2006). Multiple roles, in turn, allow us to possess multiple identities. It is suggested, therefore, that the nature of interactions, including dialogue, signal the 'position' and identity of members of a community. In recent years, identity has become an issue, because rapid social changes have led to identity "dis-ease" (Lawler, 2014, p.1).

Bauman (2004) argues that, with the collapse of apparently fixed and stable identities around constructions such as gender and nation, there is more social fluidity – and insecurity – around identity (Lawler, *op.cit.*, p.3). This insecurity relates to the development of online identities, where the screen of a device provides a mask of anonymity that users can choose to adopt, concealing (or revealing) parts of themselves that they might not be able to hide in the non-virtual, real world. Here is a parallel to Goffman's view of the stage: the idea that we can choose to present aspects of ourselves depending on how we wish the audience to perceive us (Goffman, 1959). This fluidity can, in turn, present opportunities for multiple identities to be adopted in multiple realms and it is through the harmony or conflict of these different identities (Brook *et al.*, 2008) that our security or insecurity may be established. While various uses of the term 'identity' exist, it is used here to refer to the parts of a self, composed of the meanings that individuals attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method that aims to provide detailed examinations of the lived experience of participants. It produces an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions. IPA depends on idiography, meaning that the researcher is concerned with the specific lived experience of the individual rather than the universal understanding of a phenomenon (Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove, 1995). As such, it is recognised that the process is an interpretative endeavour, as humans are sense-making organisms. IPA is a particularly useful method for examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

Drawings can also provide a rich data set to add to our understanding of the participants' perspective. *"Pictures indeed tell of the drawer's existence, thoughts, and inner self' (Farokhi and Hashemi, 2011, p.2219).* This case study encourages the reader to consider how combining spoken words and visual pictures produced by the participants may offer valuable insights into students' lived experiences.

This study offers the reader a rare opportunity to see students' thoughts and feelings presented through sketches as well as interview responses. The findings may help educators to understand better what students perceive as barriers to success in higher education (HE) and may perhaps inspire discussion about what kinds of support HE institutions might provide to help; the findings of this original study suggest four key intervention practices for educators

to do that. As the researcher and author in this case, I plan to repeat this study with future cohorts and set up a longitudinal system that enables students to reflect on how barriers may have been lowered, completely removed or, perhaps, even rebuilt during their degree. Appropriate support at HE level, especially as we emerge from the COVID pandemic, will promote better mental health, improve student retention and facilitate enhanced student outcomes.

2. Method

2.1 Design

This qualitative study employed two research methods: 1) one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the eleven students and 2) a drawing task in which participants were asked to create quick and simple line pictures ('doodles') that would present their current feelings about their university experience. The steps involved in the data collection and analysis are shown in figure 1 below:
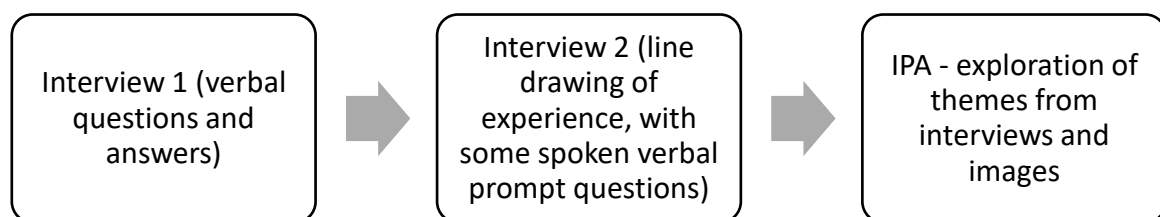
Interview 1 (verbal questions and answers) → Interview 2 (line drawing of experience, with some spoken verbal prompt questions) → IPA - exploration of themes from interviews and images

Figure 1. Data collection steps and analysis

2.2 Participants

Eleven students were recruited from one HE institution in England. Three second-year students and eight first-year students took part in this project, which took place in the autumn term of the 2021-22 academic year. That participants chose their own pseudonym for the study ensured confidentiality and anonymity and allowed them to identify their own data easily. Participants were reassured they could withdraw at any time and have their data removed. This did not happen.

2.3 Materials

A Dictaphone was used to record the semi- structured interviews before they were later transcribed. For the drawing task, the participant had access to paper and drawing materials.

2.4 Procedure

Once the university ethical clearance had been granted, students were offered information of the study via email. To avoid the unethical practice of power dynamics, those students who were invited to take part were not currently being taught by the researcher. Students could then choose to opt into the study and complete a participant information form, upon receipt of which, interview days and times were organised between the participant and myself. The participants each attended two interviews. The first interview was solely a verbal semi-structured interview, whilst the second interview involved the creation of the line drawing to represent their feelings about their HE experience and included some further light questioning.

3. Results

In this section, the line drawing and a key quote from each interview is presented for each of the eleven participants. These are only brief, as the purpose of this case study is more to inspire the reader with this combination of spoken and visual data. As you view and read each, I invite you to reflect upon the barrier or barriers that you consider the participant is presenting. Within the brackets for each participant, you can also see if s/he is a first- or second-year student and consider how this plays a part in her/his academic journey and how emotions, confidence and purpose may change depending on the stage in the degree.

Participant 1: Rachel (First-year student)

"Uni is like alphabet soup… hot water…things are in the mix…we all share similar stories and experiences. Maybe I don't fit just yet… but I'm still part of that." – Rachel

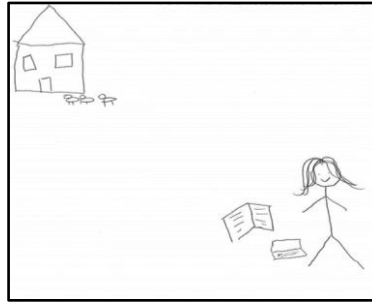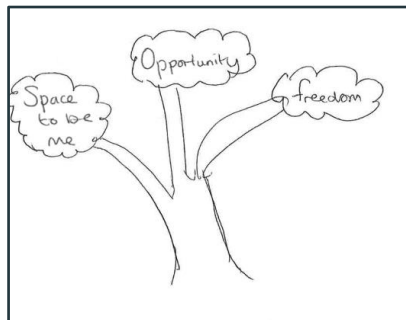**Participant 2: Eloise (First-year student)**

"I've always wanted to show 'I can do this!'" – Eloise

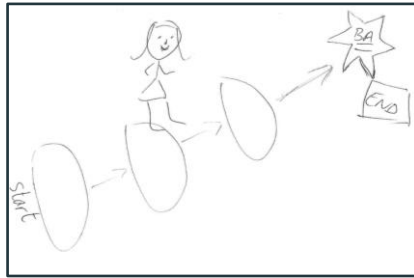**Participant 3: Maggie (First-year student)**

"If you've been given everything, it's up to you if you want it or not" – Maggie

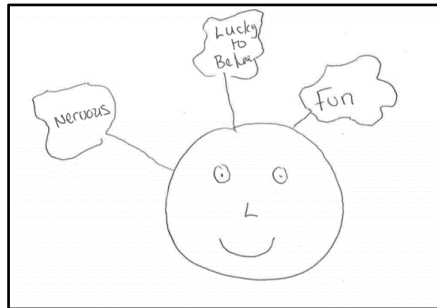**Participant 4: Callum (First-year student)**

"Am I good enough? If they can do it, I can do it!" – Callum

Participant 5: Rosa Valentine (Second-year student)

"Learning for me is an ongoing process. It's always a joy for me to learn!" – Rosa Valentine

Participant 6: Rachel (First-year student)

"We're all the same, we're all here for one reason: we all want a first!" – Olivia

Participant 7: Ed (First-year student)
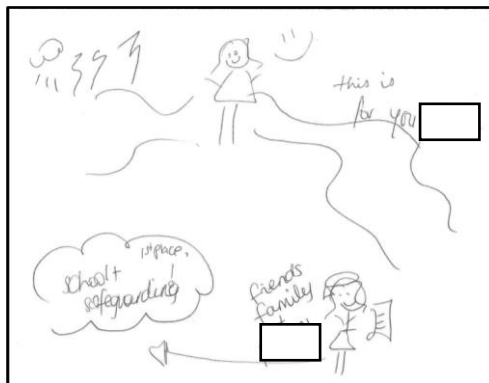

"Welcome to adult life!" – Ed

Participant 8: Chanel (Second-year student)

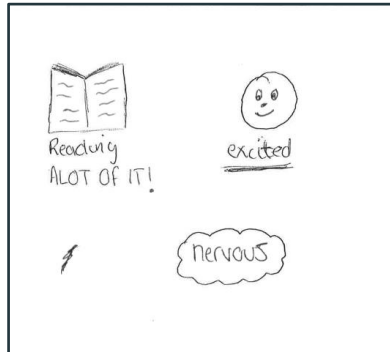*"Uni makes you more appreciative of others' ideas…makes you open your thinking"* –
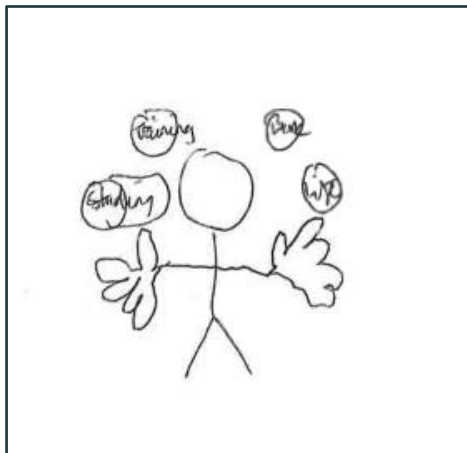Chanel

Participant 9: Mia (First-year student)

*"This degree is to showcase what I already know…to showcase my level of
qualification…and to grow"* – Mia

Participant 10: Ariana (First-year student)

"The workload is more intense. The hardest thing is trying to adapt to the different level of work" – Ariana
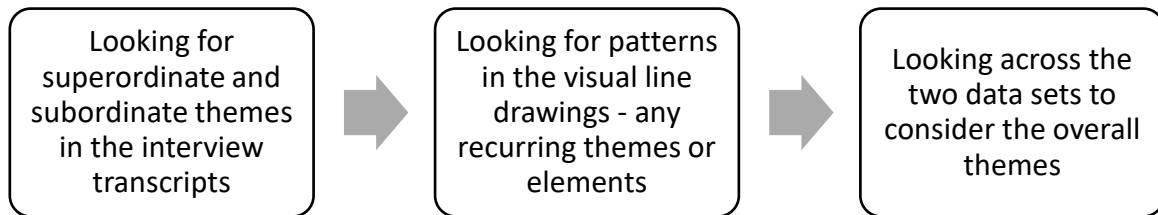
Participant 11: Levi (Second-year student)

"Maybe more of a spotlight can be put onto that transition from college: how to study, how to learn" – Levi

4. Analysis

Once the two data sets had been collected, the data were coded to identify superordinate and subordinate themes. The IPA process is three-fold when using two data sets, as shown in figure 2 below.

Looking for superordinate and subordinate themes in the interview transcripts → Looking for patterns in the visual line drawings - any recurring themes or elements → Looking across the two data sets to consider the overall themes
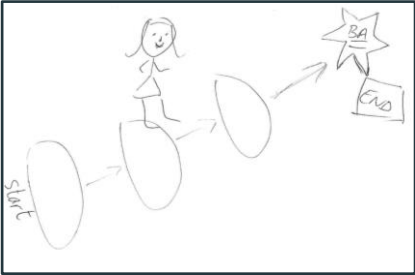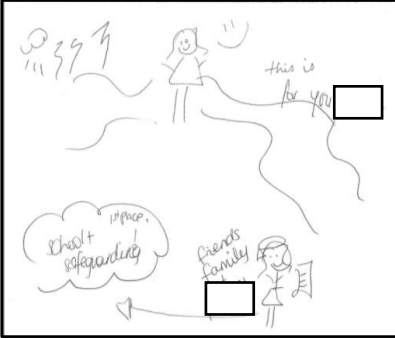
Figure 2. Process of coding data with two separate data sets

The interview transcript and recordings were read and listened to multiple times. This immersion gives the researcher opportunity to gauge the atmosphere of the interview and increases the likelihood of identifying insight. Exploratory comments on the content, gestures and pauses were noted.

Once the transcripts were annotated with researcher comments, the researcher identified emerging themes in the notes and then grouped these together into themes (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012) that included large superordinate themes and then the subordinate minor themes. It is essential that when coding interview transcripts the researcher acknowledges the themes drawn out from the data are the researcher's own interpretation; essentially the findings are the researcher's views of the participant's self-reported views.

Pictures were analysed in a systematic way by identifying five features and then five key feelings, emotions and issues portrayed in it. This meant that, in this case, each image had a list of ten words associated with it and I could begin to cluster together themes from each image in this logical and systematic way.

To help illustrate this method, a sample of the key words and images are shown in table 1 below, linked to two of the images presented above.

Participant	5 things that are seen in the image	5 feelings/issues/emotions
Participant 5: Rosa Valentine (Second-year student)	• smiling face • clear trajectory • clear goal of BA degree • start and end • progress along the path	• determination • commitment • clear vision to reaching a goal • purpose • motivation
Participant 9: Mia (First-year student)	• smiling face • support network from friends and family • end goal of working in school • a journey • progress along the pathway	• support from external network • clear vision to reaching a goal • purpose • motivation • satisfaction

Table 1. IPA of line drawings- an example of two participants' images

5. Discussion

From analysis of the full interview scripts alongside the line-drawings, four key barriers were identified from the data. These are presented in table 2 below, along with suggested interventions to help reduce and remove these barriers where possible.

Barrier	Suggested intervention
Several other roles to play, alongside being a student, such as parent/carer/worker	Personal one-to-one introduction meeting between students and their personal tutor during induction fortnight, to build emotional attachments and allow personal tutors to be more aware of each individual's situation.
Struggling with the transition from college/previous study to working at Level 4	To promote to students the use of the university's study skills workshops and online courses and to look to build these into personal tutor group sessions with first-year students to aid transition.
Lack of clear future pathway post-graduation	To run ambition/inspiration coaching sessions during induction fortnight, or throughout the academic year, so that students can consider pathways and goals from the very start of the degree, in order to drive engagement and help keep students focused. To ensure sessions are provided by the university careers team.
Student impostor syndrome: not feeling 'worthy' of their place on a programme/amongst peers	Consideration of more formative feedback opportunities, from both tutors and peers, to build confidence and self-efficacy, as well as peer bonds.

Table 2. Key barriers and suggested support strategies and interventions in HE

6. Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from this initial analysis of both the narrative and the line-drawings is that the biggest internal and external factors influencing engagement come respectively from 1) the intrinsic motivation of students themselves, which is stronger when a clear goal or pathway, such as training to be a teacher, is realised and 2) – externally – the emotional investment from tutors and staff to help support students with the transition from college, study

or employment, which is developed through being emotionally available and approachable. Through deeper IPA analysis of these eleven narratives over the coming months, greater insight into the barriers undergraduate students feel will perhaps be achieved and possibilities for reducing learning barriers will, hopefully, be revealed.

Regarding next steps, as themes are drawn from the data, plans are already being finalised for the second phase to this project, which will plan to initiate the suggested interventions that have been drawn up in response to the barriers to success originating from the students' narratives.

I plan to repeat this study with future cohorts and aim to set up a longitudinal system that also allows for students to reflect on how barriers may have been reduced, removed or perhaps rebuilt during their degree. Appropriate support at HE level, especially as we emerge further through the COVID pandemic, will promote better mental health, improve retention and facilitate enhanced student outcomes.

This case study has presented the argument for combining interviews with drawings; I hope that the glimpse into this study may inspire readers to adopt the same method.

References

Bauman, Z. (2004) *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi.* Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN: 0745633099

dos Santos Boni, R.A., Paiva, C.E., De Oliveira, M.A., Lucchetti, G., Fregnani, J.H.T.G. and Paiva, B.S.R. (2018) 'Burnout among medical students during the first years of undergraduate school: Prevalence and associated factors.' *PloS one*, 13(3), p.e0191746. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29513668/ (Accessed: 27 October 2022).

Farokhi, M. and Hashemi, M. (2011) 'The Analysis of Children's Drawings: Social, Emotional, Physical, and Psychological aspects.' *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 30, 2219-2224. Available at:

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042811022580 (Accessed: 27 October 2022).

Gibson, P., Perera, S., Morgan, R. and Kerr, B. (2019) 'Creating conditions for student success on a two-year accelerated degree.' *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching,* 12(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v12i1.944 (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. NY: The Overlook Press. ISBN: 0385094027

Lawler, S. (2014) *Identity*. London: Polity Press. ISBN: 0745654169

O'Neil, D. (2006) 'Human Culture: What is Culture?' Available at: https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/culture_1.htm (Accessed: 27 October 2022).

Pietkiewicz, I. and Smith, J.A. (2012) 'A practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology: Praktyczny przewodnik interpretacyjnej analizy fenomenologicznej w badaniach jakościowych w psychologii. Czasopismo Psychologiczne, 18(2), 361-369. Available at: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-practical-guide-to-using-Interpretative-Analysis-Pietkiewicz-Smith/0b9fd62471e437af0cc41b91202509148b443641 (Accessed: 27 October 2022).

Smith, J.A., Harré, R. and Van Langenhove, L. (1995) 'Idiography.' In: Smith, J.A., Harré R. and Van Langenhove, L. *Rethinking Psychology.* London: Sage. (pp. 56-69). ISBN: 9780803977334

Smith, J.A., and Osborn, M. (2015) 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain.' *British Journal of Pain*, 9(1), 41-42. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4616994/ (Accessed: 27 October 2022).

Stryker, S. and Burke, P.J. (2000) 'The past, present, and future of an identity theory.' *Psychology Quarterly* 63, 284-297. Available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2001-10002-001 (Accessed: 27 October 2022).