

ENABLING STUDENTS TO FLOW IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

Lauren Clark, Lecturer in Education, IOE – UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, UK

“Water” (Cook, 2023) discusses the experience of transition and also the experience of meeting new systems and people in higher education. As an international student studying in the UK, I always felt that I was blundering through academia—trying my best to take advantage of every experience so that I didn’t miss the opportunity to enter a new space or meet new people. While this led to a wide-ranging and rich experience of higher education in the UK, it also sometimes meant ‘fracturing’ and spreading myself thinly at times, squeezing through the cracks to attempt to find a more comfortable spot.

I connected with Cook’s (2023) language around the tumult of higher education, as well as those stuck places where water becomes stagnant, and progress can feel slow. I also see parallels between the roles we take on in academia that can become so routine and comfortable that we forget to question, to challenge our ways of working and of being. At the end of the poem, Cook (2023) refers to bursting the banks—perhaps this is what is needed for so many of us trapped in safe roles where we may become complacent. The movement of water is irregular and takes on many forms, but freezing is when water takes on a different form and ceases to flow.

Cook’s (2023) discussion of inclusion for those from different socioeconomic backgrounds as well as those with health conditions that may affect their studies, or their work, helped me to see the intersections of students’ lived experience. This is something I can relate to as both a former student and as an educator. In her words I can recognize the experiences of my students, many of whom are international students who speak English as an additional language, and who typically come from diverse backgrounds. Cook’s (2023) poetry leads me to think about how they experience the flow of their studies—from the initial gushing of new experiences and information they receive at the beginning of their studies, to the freezing they may experience as they feel far away from home, trapped in feelings of imposter syndrome and inadequacy. For some, they may receive difficult feedback or a grade that freezes them into inaction; for others, the flow of their studies may remain uninterrupted as they move from module to module, from opportunity to opportunity, like water in a mountain stream.

As an educator, I found that Cook’s (2023) poem and commentary impress upon me the importance of enabling students to regulate the flow of their studies—to navigate the river to avoid the waterfall or the ice. How can I help students to use their unique position and lived experience, their strengths, and their challenges, to improve their experience? Many of my MA students return to their home countries, but some want to continue in academia despite the rapids they experience as international students studying in the UK. The experiences they have as Master’s students may change their life course unrecognizably. Building on partnership work I have participated in both as a PGR student and as a lecturer, I see the importance of these challenging experiences: these can be moments that transform the lives of students and educators—threshold experiences (Cook-Sather, 2014) that can cause students to see their world in a completely different way. However, to have these experiences, a certain amount of risk is involved (Ahmad & Cook-Sather, 2018)—but then this is inherent in moving thousands of miles away from home to study in London. Perhaps, then, my role as an educator is not to make the river smooth for students, but to provide a life

jacket and a paddle so that they feel supported to navigate the river without being pulled under or giving up. In this way, students can take the route less travelled and maybe find a new destination entirely.

References

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