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Student interactions at a college canteen: a critical perspective

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Much has been written about the style of lecturing that is adopted by lecturers in institutions of further and higher education. However, little has been written about interactions that take place in the informal settings of college and university campuses. Using an ethnographic approach, this paper presents an exploration of how students at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), a post-secondary vocational college in Malta, further enable themselves to progress through a programme of studies by interacting at the college canteen. By employing an ethnographic methodology, based on participant-observation and unstructured spontaneous interviewing, the study explores, in a holistic way, different ways that students at MCAST experience student life and use the canteen as a space to give added meaning to the time they spend in this educational setting.

Keywords: college; interactions; culture; place

Introduction

This paper adopts an ethnographic approach to explore the nature of informal interactions at a college canteen. It is focused on students of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), a vocational college in Malta. The author lectures in Health and Social Care in one of the college's nine institutes, each of which offers specialisations in particular vocationally inclined areas of study. He initially reflected upon the following questions in order to foster insights that would enable him to better understand the influence that the time the students spend at the canteen has on their overall education at MCAST.

- Do the students see the canteen as a place where they can interact easily and consequently be drawn into contact with others who go to the canteen for a similar reason?
- Are the students' interactions at the canteen characterised by a sharing of meaningful positive and negative experiences or are they superficial, thereby serving simply as a means to while away time?
- What aspects of wider culture do the students' interactions reflect?

The emphasis on gauging informal social interactions on the MCAST college campus stems from various empirical studies that show that peer involvement influences student retention, attrition and graduation rates. The greater the level of satisfaction with the college environment, the greater the likelihood that students will pursue their studies to

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successful completion (Gayles and Hu 2009; Johnson 1997). While other complementary aspects such as participation in sports and in cocurricular activities can further augment student experiences, these do not necessarily appeal to all students. The canteen, however, is a permanent structure. This implies that students are likely to visit it at some time. In effect, some students may spend a good many hours there without necessarily realising it, particularly if they spend six to seven years studying at MCAST overall.

The MCAST canteen

The MCAST canteen is an L-shaped structure. One part is a hall-like structure which leads on to a wide terrace by means of a double door that seems to form part of ‘a wall’ which is made up of tinted glass set into supporting aluminium frames. In this part of the canteen, a refectory-like layout has been adopted. Here, there are 10 long tables each seating around eight people, laid out one after the other, in rows. There are two such tables in every row with a wide aisle down the centre. There are also four small tables in the centre of the aisle that can seat two people on each. In the other part of the hall, there is a food counter which is placed at a short distance in front of one of the walls (so as to enable the staff to stand behind it in order to sell food and drinks), and adjacent to it there

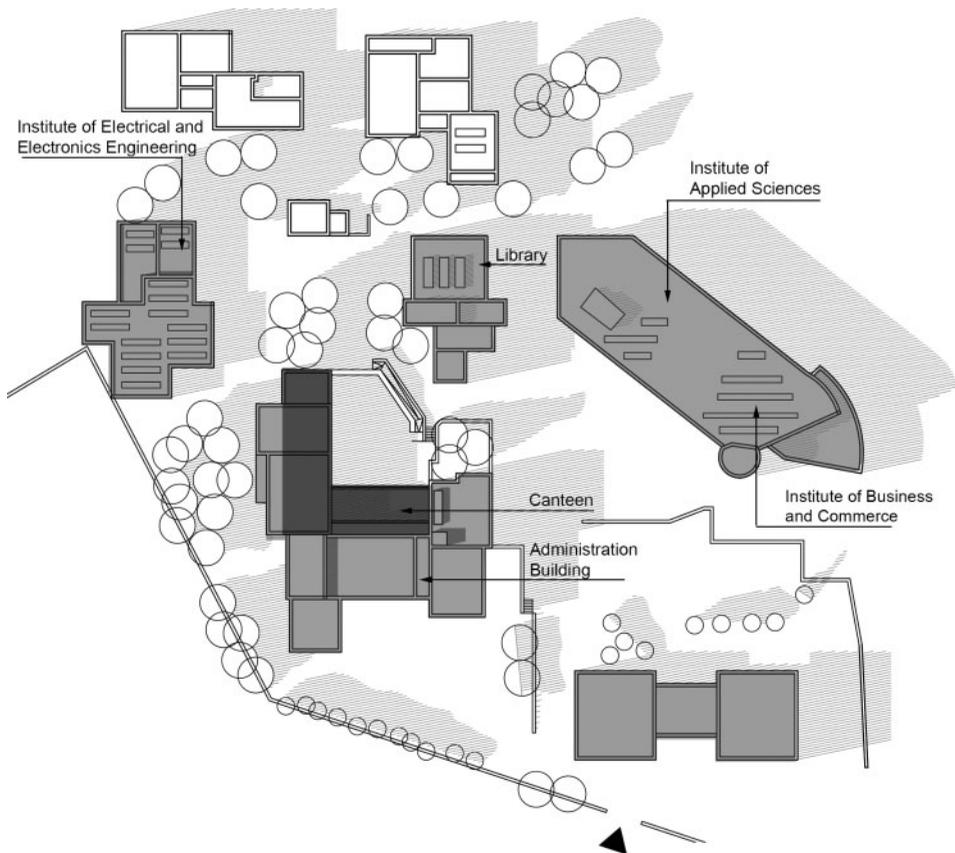


Figure 1. Illustration of the layout of the canteen area. This shows its location relative to surrounding structures (buildings).



Figure 2. Illustration of the outdoor canteen area showing the entrance to the canteen (which is located near the coin-operated drink dispensing machines) and also showing the overlying administration block.

is the cash-point. Immediately opposite it are coin-operated machines, which dispense hot drinks and pre-packaged snacks. In this part of the canteen, windows overlook the terrace. At the far end, beyond the food counter, are billiard tables, a door which opens onto a room which is designated as a staff room, and the toilets. There is also an outlet leading onto a staircase, leading downstairs, onto the road immediately behind the canteen, and upstairs, to a part of the building used by the MCAST administration. The main entrance to the canteen is located immediately opposite the food counter, even though the doorway, in the part of the canteen where the tables and chairs are located, is by far wider.

The terrace has a comparatively less rigid seating arrangement compared to the indoor seating area of the canteen. On the terrace, there are around 12 square tables each seating four people each. Since students move the tables and the chairs around, however, more people can sit around them, particularly if they are placed side-by-side to form longer tables. Usually, there are around 20–25 students in the canteen and terrace area, except during break time when the students can number even up to 300. Students normally start to gather at the canteen at around half past seven in the morning. Sometimes, students can be observed at the canteen at closing time, namely, at around half past four in the afternoon.

The terrace offers a demarcation between the canteen and the remainder of MCAST as it overlooks a road. This road also separates it from the adjacently positioned library. The terrace does not offer a similar demarcation from the administration building since it forms part of it. Contrastingly, all the buildings at MCAST are detached and, in most cases, house different institutes. From an ethnographic point of view, Foucault (1965) does not see architecture as silent since the walls of buildings ‘speak out’. Consequently, the canteen forming a part of the administration building may symbolise that the students lack a certain degree of autonomy. The windows of various offices in the administration block, including a large open-air ‘passageway’ that links different sections of the administration building to one another (that is mainly used by the staff), and an overlying balcony (on the floor above) that similarly adjoins one part of the administration block to another, overlook the terrace. An outdoor stairway leads from the terrace up to a multi-purpose hall that is used by MCAST for official functions (such as induction seminars for new students), although this is also accessible directly through the administration block. The door at the top of the outdoor staircase is often locked.

Contrastingly, the institutes appear to be more spaced out from both the administration building and from one another, and this may point to a relatively distributed style of leadership. Additionally, the institutes each have different facades and layouts, suggesting

that each has its own 'character'. This is also traceable to their past. Each institute has a history of having operated independently (some for a longer time than others) prior to the setting up of MCAST, in the early 2000s, when they were then brought into the same fold. Since then, many institutes have expanded the number of courses that they offer. Over the years, MCAST has benefited from access to European Union (EU) structural and other funds, including some which were provided by the Maltese Government. It has used part of these funds to further develop its institutes' operations and infrastructure.

Each institute has its own director and administrative staff, with their differing styles of leadership, which further contribute to their individuality. Other factors which differentiate the institutes include the number of students attending, the level of the course they attend, the particular areas of study that they select, how motivated they are in their studies and the staff to student ratio in each course. It would, however, be erroneous to see MCAST simply as a conglomerate of a number of 'individual' institutes, since the institutes interact on various levels. Primarily, there are several administrative strategies in place to ensure that the directors and deputy directors of the different institutes come together to discuss matters. Second, but by no means less importantly, students from different institutes interact together.

As in any college and university setting, students are not only simply students but also people with multiple interests, commitments and relationships which are influenced, in turn, by factors such as family, friends, social networks, the media, globalisation, internationalisation and access to information and communication technology. This wide spectrum of influences makes it essential to incorporate as wide a focus as possible in any ensuing analysis if such an analysis is to be empirically informed. A detailed description of the research methodology employed is given in the following section.

Methodology

This paper is based on fieldwork that was undertaken in the academic year 2009/2010. In this academic year, the researcher spent many of his non-contact working hours, free time and breaks at the canteen, spending the remaining time engaged in tasks such as lecturing, carrying out internal verification of students' assignments, curriculum planning, collaborative research, supervising students in their dissertations and setting and grading assignments. In essence, much of his activity at the canteen was spent in interaction with the students, and not simply 'observing'. In order to carry out the study empirically, he had to be adequately self-reflexive, since as Watson (1996) cautions, the 'self' and the 'other' are more closely intertwined when a teacher (or lecturer) studies his 'own' students. Watson further argues that an indispensable component of research is objectivity and advocates that researchers do not 'completely go native and hence lose any capacity to see events from the perspective of the investigator as well as that of a member' (449).

Lofland and Lofland (1995) note that there are advantages and disadvantages associated with carrying out research 'in-house'. Amongst the advantages are that the researcher already knows how to access the 'cast of characters'. However, the disadvantages are that these 'characters' may feel uncomfortable disclosing data, which they may consider private, to someone they meet almost daily.

The study employs a methodological model adapted from the work of Carspecken (1996) who suggests an empirical analytical approach that aims to link social phenomena to wider sociohistorical events and to expose domination, hidden assumptions, ideologies and discourses. Carspecken's methodology can be seen as conducive to the adoption of social constructionist thinking wherein people's perceptions and understandings of a

given reality are given prominence in any analysis made (Burr 1994; Gergen 1994, 1999). The approach adopted in this study could be conceptually broken down into three sequential phases:

Phase I

During this phase, the researcher technically 'enters' the field as a detached observer and obtains a more accurate understanding of the research participants. Since the researcher was already familiar with the setting, his 'entry' into the field was mainly concentrated on spending as much time as he could in the canteen and introducing himself by his first name to the students he had not known previously in order to obtain a wider understanding of the research field. This time was also dedicated to paying particular attention to the way in which students expressed themselves and the topics they deemed were of importance. The researcher refrained from directly interviewing the students as far as possible. This was so as to enable him to understand 'the participants' world' as much as possible. The fieldwork in this first phase was carried out on a daily basis and generally lasted no less than half an hour at a time. On most days, the researcher managed to carry out observations twice a day, but there were some days when he could visit the canteen only once, due to other work commitments. This procedure was carried out for six weeks. During that time, almost 50 observations were carried out.

Phase II

At the time the researcher entered this phase, he was reasonably confident that he had identified and accessed relevant 'locales,' or 'patterned activities taking place in areas surrounding a social site' (Carspecken 1996, 156). These included when groups of students met up with one another in the morning before lectures started, or when particular groups seemed to frequent the canteen on a regular basis at a certain time of the day, presumably when they had a 'break' in their timetable. The second phase lasted a further eight weeks, and the researcher sought to get to know the students better, spending as much time as he could with them and also meeting up with them in places such as on the buses (when going to and from MCAST), or in other parts of the MCAST campus. The number of observations during the second phase was also around 50 as the researcher succeeded in dedicating more time to each observation so as to acquire the data that he needed in order to understand the influence that the time spent at the canteen had on their lives as MCAST students. Whilst carrying out these observations, he interacted with the students, sometimes asking for clarifications relating to subjects they raised. These ongoing 'informal interviews' had no fixed schedule and could last for around 20 minutes, although some were shorter. Direct interventions and questions were kept to a minimum, although at opportune times, the researcher asked the students participating in this research whether they perceived their interactions with one another at the canteen as in some way influencing them in their studies at MCAST.

During this particular phase of the research, the students were told that research was being carried out. The researcher was as open as possible about the research he was undertaking and explained that it was an academic exercise that he was pursuing for his own interest. He took down notes openly (all note taking was done manually as this was seen as less intrusive to recording what the students said directly by means of using an electronic device) and regularly asked the students at the canteen for their permission to use the data they provided. He also took all reasonable measures to ensure that nothing

that any of the students participating in the research said could be traced to them and that all identifying details were thereby omitted from this study.

Phase III

In the final phase of this research, the researcher adopted a more direct approach with the students by discussing his findings, from the research that had been undertaken so far, so as to understand how their interactions at the canteen affected them. In this phase, which lasted for around 3 months, the researcher carried out a total of 15 at-length discussions with them. Unlike the previous two phases, where the researcher had adopted a relatively low profile, he was now more 'direct' in his approach. By this time, practically all the students at the canteen were aware of the study being undertaken, and some of the students said that they felt important since a lecturer was giving them so much prominence and importance by carrying out an empirical study about them.

A particular difficulty was computing the precise number of the students who participated in this research. While about 15 provided data during the third phase, a rough estimate would be that 30 provided data overall. Having said this, since the study is focused on interactions at the canteen, it would be fair to assume that the data was extrapolated from an even larger number of students than this. Added to this complexity is that certain data came about not as the result of an interview but because of a momentary interaction between the researcher and the participants, or else from an observation that the researcher made.

The researcher also observed that the students seemed to start trusting him more as time passed and noted that they appeared to communicate more openly with him as they got to know him more. This implied that even the nature of the data supplied was subject to change. The net result was that the data elicited was not only simply multiple and different (since a number of young people provided data) but also evolving. Data that was presented in Maltese was translated into English by the researcher who is perfectly bilingual in these languages.

Findings

The study was aimed at understanding how the students' interactions at the canteen played a role in their lives at MCAST and to subsequently understanding the canteen's inter-related influence as a physical and social space. Peter Berger (1963) points out that much of people's behaviour is influenced by social and cultural forces. As a result of this, in order to engage with different social and cultural contexts, the students have to remove themselves from one context and enter another. Berger argues that 'human conduct is patterned by grooves ... deemed desirable by society' (87). It is likely that the canteen, although part of MCAST, is in many ways a different groove to other parts of the college, since students can interact more 'freely' there, particularly due to the absence of the formality normally associated with lectures and lecture rooms and due to the relative absence of the lecturing staff who most often use their own area which is cut off from the remainder of the canteen. These interactions, even if differing from those in lectures, as discussed further in this (findings) section of the paper. In this respect, the time that students spend at the canteen is not totally unstructured since it is influenced by underlying social and cultural meanings.

Most of the students, who can be seen at any moment at the canteen, are young, and they are Maltese. However, the overall MCAST population is neither exclusively young

nor exclusively Maltese. Some of the students are older, and are commonly referred to as 'non-traditional' students. In many cases, such students would have been through experiences not shared by younger students. These could include leaving school several years ago, getting and losing jobs, engaging in longer relationships, possibly moving house and sometimes becoming a parent several times over (Kasworm 1997; Nunn 1994; Tschirhart and Wise 2002). On asking the non-traditional students of MCAST why they were rarely seen at the canteen, they said that they prefer to use the little available free time at MCAST to go to the library to work on assignments or to study. They said that they could not study at home due to the demands on their time of other family members which translated into interruptions from their studies. One female student, in her mid-40s, who is the mother of four children ranging in age from 4 to 16, explained that:

the other (younger) students simply have to worry about coming to MCAST in the morning. Even if they have children of their own, they have their parents to help them look after them. I have to take care of getting my children to school and sixth form, getting their (school) uniforms ready, seeing that the kids are in bed on time, seeing that everything is kept clean, making sure that the home-works of the little ones are ready, and, oh, the whole works. I cannot go to the canteen or anywhere. Every minute that I spend at MCAST is precious. It is come here and rush home.

It seems that this non-traditional student sees the canteen as a place where she would simply waste time whenever she frequents it. This does not imply, however, that she sees the canteen as a space which excludes her in some way. Rather, she seems to be describing it more from an 'I do not want to go there' position than an 'I will not be accepted there' one.

The asylum seeker students at MCAST did not frequent the canteen either. They gave a totally different set of reasons for so doing. Primarily, they were mainly blacks and explained that they thereby feared that they would be seen as misfits if they visited the canteen, since most Maltese, like most Europeans, are whites. Second, they explained that there were both financial and cultural considerations that led to their preferring to frequent places other than the canteen, when they were at MCAST. From the financial side of things, they believed that it was cheaper for them to bring their own packed lunch from home, rather than buying ready-made food from the canteen. Added to this, from a more 'cultural' perspective, the Muslim migrants explained that they could not go to the canteen since there was no halal meat on offer. The Christian migrants, on the other hand, explained that they feared that they would be under obligation to repay people who may buy something for them if they went to the canteen (which may have also been applicable to the Muslim students). While neither group of migrants directly linked their going to the canteen to their home setting, both their reference to the way meat was prepared and to the social obligations they would enter into if somebody bought them something, reflect wider cultural considerations. The fear of not being accepted at the canteen because one is black may reflect a wider subjugation to existing hierarchical social structures such as the wide-spread exploitation of African men at the workplace when they are awarded wages far less than the local minimum wage in Malta. Macedo and Gounari (2006) caution that this type of subjugation may give rise to 'essentialized racial categories' (45), as employers may come to increasingly expect a certain type of subservience from Africans that they may not anticipate from Maltese who may be in a better position to demand a wage that falls within legal parameters.

Not all foreign students at MCAST are asylum seekers. There are some who are fee-paying students, even though the overwhelming majority are from countries in the EU and thereby benefit from the freedom of movement to which they are entitled as citizens

of these countries. These students are mainly young people whose ages approximate those of the younger local students at MCAST. In common with the asylum seekers, however, they do not visit the canteen much. Some explained that they did not speak enough Maltese or English in order to communicate optimally and this caused them embarrassment. Language thereby served as a psychological and linguistic barrier to their going to the canteen. Somewhat like the asylum seekers, this manifested an underlying fear that 'I will not be accepted there'. Others brushed off the desire to go there, thereby reflecting, in all likelihood, a similar position to the one adopted by the non-traditional students.

While it is not possible to say if certain younger Maltese students avoid the canteen because they also fear that they will not be accepted, the fact remains that the students who frequent it the most are young people, (and this may possibly reflect that most MCAST students are young people). The data that has been incorporated into this study has been mainly elicited from them, implying that further research that explores the viewpoint of the remaining students is needed for a fuller understanding of students 'interactions at MCAST to be obtained. Even though the (Maltese) students' conversations were focused on several topics, three of them were emphasised mostly as influencing them in their daily lives as MCAST students. These were (1) their home background, (2) the attachment of gender-based perceptions to such aspects of their lives as career path selection and (3) the attention to the different linguistic background of their peers at MCAST in Malta's overall bilingual context. These are described further below.

The home background in a Maltese context in the students' lives

Not all MCAST students live at home with their parents and siblings. The older students generally live in families of their own. The asylum seekers usually rent a flat shared with other asylum seekers although some live in shelters that are run by the government (Spiteri and Zammit 2011). Even though some of the younger local students have moved out to live with a partner, the almost overwhelming majority of both younger Maltese students and those who come from abroad live at home with their parents, siblings and possibly sometimes other family members. In certain cases, staying on at home, is a matter of choice. Home serves as a functional place in which they have access to whatever practical daily help and support they need, as well as, in some cases, being a place where they feel loved and validated by those present. This was evidenced when they said things like they were 'looking forward' to going home to eat; or when, after a male student accidentally dropped coffee over another male student, the student who had the coffee dropped over him told the other, 'thank you, now you have given my mother something else to wash'. He seemingly took the incident in good spirits, possibly aided by the fact that he would not be the person trying to remove the coffee stain from his clothes.

In other instances, students may wish to move out of home, but they may not have the personal and financial resources enabling them to do so. For example, some of them referred to stress that was traceable in some manner to their families-of-origin. These included when a student started swearing publicly at the canteen because he failed his examinations and then broke into tears in front of his friends. Possibly, as a result of his friends' efforts to comfort him by speaking to him about the need to be a fighter, he spoke about family issues that led him to feel traumatised. Sometime after this, another student came to the canteen visibly disturbed. He eventually disclosed to the researcher privately that he had been arrested for having physically assaulted his mother at home and also said that he had never come to terms with his father's having beaten him regularly when he

was younger. Such arisings show that the informality of the canteen might encourage students who go through difficulties at home to speak out.

It is not only problems that are aired at the canteen, however. Sometimes, students share jokes or simply engage in what may seem to be 'small talk'. One example of this was when a male student narrated a joke to other students (both male and female). After boasting that his parents had bought him a brand new car, he explained that whenever he went driving off somewhere, what he wanted was a pillow, a blanket, a floorcloth and a bucket. He explained that this was a safety precaution saying that if he drove his car somewhere for a night out, and ended up drunk, he would not drive home drunk as that would not be the right thing to do. Rather, he would spend the night in the car, wherever he parked it. He would need the blanket and pillow to sleep on. He would need the floorcloth just in case he vomited. Finally, he would need the bucket to serve as a temporary toilet. One of his friends, in a humorous way, then asked him what God created trees for.

Of analytical interest is that the student did not say that he would phone his parents (or his partner) to come and collect him and take him home, nor did he say that he would try to phone a friend to give him a lift home by car. This 'joke' shows that, for certain students, the home is likely to offer a certain degree of formality and is also likely to be associated with certain particular norms, behaviours and expectations. Having said this, a certain degree of ambivalence about parental roles is common among young adults who have to negotiate their manner of relating to their parents as they start interacting in increasingly 'adult' ways, with all the challenges that this process brings (Spiteri 2009).

Sometimes, young people are seen as going overboard in their desire to behave like adults and are described as engaging in premature or precocious transitions to adult statuses (Krohn et al. 1997). This is particularly the case when it comes to experimenting with drugs or alcohol early on in life. While the researcher did not observe any illegal activity at MCAST, the students who were present at the canteen at one time led him into a discussion about whether MCAST was more overprotective towards its students than the University of Malta was. The MCAST students noted that the students attending this university could purchase and consume alcohol on designated areas of the (university) campus. On another note, they pointed out that there were condom dispensing machines placed in the toilets near the university's canteen, unlike at MCAST, where condom dispensing machines were non-existent. While one student acknowledged that a certain percentage of the student population at MCAST was aged 16 and 17 and were thereby minors, and this implied that restrictions on the sale of alcohol would apply; another student described MCAST as 'a glorified secondary school,' insisting that even 16-year-olds should have access to condoms. This student also said that the alcohol issue was superfluous since students could easily purchase alcohol from any one of the bars which were located a stone's throw away from MCAST's gates. The student also observed that the only type of alcohol available on the university campus was beer.

While none of the students used sexist language, during one of the conversations that took place, a group of young men described a female lecturer who instructed them during one of their practical sessions as not being 'ideal' for the job. The underlying reason for this, i.e. for seeing her in this light, is traceable to wider cultural stereotypes that prevail in Maltese society. While it is public knowledge that MCAST tries to achieve a gender balance amongst its staff, this does not always work out. Some institutes have by far more male staff than female staff and vice versa, presumably because job applicants do not offer MCAST much choice. Added to this, some of the courses are also attended by exclusively young men, while others are attended exclusively by young women, even though most are relatively balanced. At times, at the canteen, groups constituted of either

young men or young women sit together, thereby almost defining themselves as men-only or women-only groups. When this happens, normally, the people who position themselves in this manner would be studying in the same course, usually manifesting some form of gender imbalance. When there is a male student who attends lectures in a class otherwise mainly attended by female students, or vice versa, this person may be interpreted as challenging traditional ideas about gender biases applicable to certain career routes.

Gender – is it just a cultural ascription?

As is the case with the participants in a study by Becker et al. (1961), which was entitled *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School*, MCAST students are socialised into their professions. While, just as in Becker's study, a good proportion of this socialisation takes place when they are out on placement and can be traced to their exposure to the workplace through this route, another part of it takes place when they attend classes. This class-based aspect of their socialisation is not only traceable to the messages that the lecturers give their students based on their own particular workplace exposures but also due to the impressions that the students form about the world of work whilst at MCAST, on the level of peer-learning. Differences in factors such as the students' social class, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and abilities and/or disabilities can thereby influence students' idea of the workplace and the manner in which they train for it. Added to this are differences in gender roles – what gender is ideally associated with what job. Going back in time, in Malta, certain jobs (such as bus drivers and police officers) were only accessible to males, and it is only in fairly recent times that such sectors of the job market have become less restrictive on gender lines.

When the students feel uncomfortable about ascribed gender roles and are unable to build another narrative that contrasts with the perceived dominant narrative, they are likely to react in some way. These reactions can influence their beliefs about where their training at MCAST is leading them and in some cases, may lead to the terminating of their studies. This was demonstrated when a (male) student told the researcher that he was dropping out of the course he was following at MCAST to take up a job at a driving school (working as a driving instructor). He explained why he was so unhappy to carry on pursuing his studies as follows:

I do not like the place. I never felt part of MCAST. Nobody tries to make anyone feel a part of MCAST. Everyone thinks feeling a part of MCAST just happens. I am just a number here. I have to leave. If I do not leave, I will go mad. I need to be myself. I need space. Where can I go for space? Where do I go where I will not feel caged in? The canteen? The library? What do I come to MCAST for, though? Everyone comes for the lectures. That is everyone, but me. There is more to life than acting as if the lectures are the only things that count in life. What about relationships? What about forming a family? What about the deeper meaning of what life has to offer. Is life only about working? Why do I have to work? Bugger it. I am leaving.

Although much of what the young man has said is equally as applicable to males and females, his sentiments about work can be said to be gender-loaded. Formiani (1990, 19) points out that boys and young men tend to be influenced negatively by society's requirement for them 'to work and to be profitable and uphold the male systems which must have been in place for what must be thousands of years'. He points out that 'intrapyschically, men are split from their essential selves as a result of feeling obliged to bend down to the pressures that such requirements create for them' (38). What the student who is cited above is saying about the things that count in life can be interpreted to be very

subjective. It is clear that he is speaking about what counts to him. So as to understand him fully, his view of relationships and the need to search for deeper meanings needs to be clearly envisioned in the context of the modern (and in some respects post-modern world) where the clearer demarcations of gender-based roles manifested through working finds little or no place in his life.

Another student, a young woman, said that the most important thing to her was getting her certificate quickly so that she would be enabled to find work. Like the student cited above she sees MCAST as a route which she has to pass through for employment purposes. She said that:

I am here because I want to find a job. My life at the moment is MCAST and my part-time job. I do not have time for anything else. I wish to hurry up, finish my studies, and get out of here. My life is MCAST, assignments, work; MCAST, assignments, work, and that's all.

What is particularly striking is that this person does not mention entertainment, hobbies, going out with friends or any of the activities that one would anticipate would feature in a young woman's mind, or that Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2000) associate with the daily lives of 'ordinary' young people. Having said this, not everything that the students speak about is such a 'doom and gloom' affair. There have been moments when a student shared her happiness at the birth of a new sibling or when another student told the others present excitedly that someone she had a crush on asked her out.

The students usually use the language that they speak as a first language at the canteen, particularly when sharing deep emotions. When engaging in talk to simply pass time, both Maltese and English are used. This can be seen when students mingle with different groups at the canteen and speak in whatever language the group they join happens to be using at the time.

English-speaking and Maltese-speaking people? Who's who and what's what?

Malta is one of the few countries in the world that recognises two official languages in its Constitution. While the practice of teaching both languages at schools has been in place for several decades, it was only in 1999, that the National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education 1999) made it explicit that it 'considers bilingualism (i.e. Maltese and English) as the basis of the (Maltese) educational system' (37). Slightly after a decade later, when a revised National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment 2012) was published, emphasis was not only placed on bilingualism but also on multiculturalism. The National Curriculum Framework's emphasis on the acquisition of language skills could be seen as having been possibly influenced by Malta's joining the EU in 2004 (and, in 2008, eventually also becoming a Eurozone country). The revised framework proposed that 'the learning of two languages other than the mother tongue from an early age is linked to the development of multilingualism' (51). While multilingualism is not readily discernible at the MCAST canteen, it is highly likely that at any one time, in some of the groups of young people present, English would be used; in others, Maltese would be used; and in some groups, code switching (between the two languages) would take place. This linguistic manifestation offers testimony to the reality that the canteen is in Malta, since it reflects patterns and practises derived from wider Maltese society.

Effectively, which language is spoken depends on factors such as family and educational background. Camilleri (1995) identifies four different types of families in Malta, differentiating between them in terms of how they use Maltese and English at home. First, there are families where English is spoken by one or both of the parents and

is acquired as a first language at home; Maltese is then acquired later through formal teaching at school and socialisation with speakers of Maltese. Second, there are families whose first language is Maltese. They would acquire knowledge of English from formal schooling. Third, there are families where both Maltese and English are acquired as a first language and are used interchangeably. A fourth category of family would be those where a dialect of Maltese is acquired as a first language; usually this would be the first language of the parents and spoken widely in the neighbourhood. Many children who acquire a dialect variety of Maltese at home learn standard Maltese (besides English) at school. Before school age, they might be exposed to standard Maltese at church, on television and the radio, and also when communicating with people who do not use a dialect when speaking. In such families, English would normally be learnt at school.

People from each of these categories would face different advantages or disadvantages stemming from having an effective knowledge (or lacking such knowledge) of either language in Malta's bilingual context. Two Maltese-speaking students, on discussing assignments at the canteen had the following discussion:

So why do we have to write out our assignments in English. Why can't we do them in Maltese?

No. We cannot. That is if you want to do a BTEC (certified) course. A BTEC (certified) course is by far better than a local one. What – a certificate that is only valid in Malta. What is that worth?

When referring to BTEC, the students are referring to the validation of the courses offered at MCAST by the Edexcel/Business and Technology Education Council which sends external verifiers from the UK. Although MCAST is currently developing a curriculum system of its own, implying that it may not require its courses to be BTEC validated in future, the actual mention of BTEC shows that students consider it to be important in the context of their overall lives at MCAST. The above excerpt also shows that some MCAST students who find it easier to communicate in Maltese may prefer the extensive use of English since they look beyond the course and instead focus on what their certificate is 'worth' in the labour market.

On another level, however, these young people are also unknowingly propagating a 'hidden curriculum' (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977) that favours English-speaking students over Maltese-speaking students, since if assignments are presented (and submitted by the students) in English, one can reasonably anticipate that people who are conversant in English are likely to find writing them easier to carry out. Having said this, preferring the use of English over Maltese may also reflect Malta's colonial past, where much of the formal political decision-making was done in English. Even though there are advantages to the use of English, the most obvious one being that unlike Maltese, it is an international language, some students find its use stress-inducing. This was stated by a female student who said that:

I cannot cope with the assignments. Everything is in English. I am leaving this place. I cannot do otherwise. I do not know enough English. Nobody ever spoke to me in English at home. My father is a farmer. My mother is a housewife. Neither of them attended much school when they were young. All this English, English, English. Why? Do they (the lecturers at MCAST) use English to send us (the students) crazy?

The government tries to ensure that English is widely used in Malta, particularly since Maltese is not used much away from the country. However, sometimes, as this student points out, it remains an essentially 'foreign' language. This is particularly the case for students from working-class backgrounds. Numerous studies show that working-class

students need to make a far greater effort to succeed in schooling than middle class ones since there is a greater disparity between the home and school culture (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). In Malta, language further compounds the issue. For instance, most state and church schools, which are likely to be attended by students from working-class backgrounds as they do not charge fees, give most lessons in Maltese (even though students usually submit most of their homework in English), whereas the independent fee-paying schools normally give lessons and home-work in English. For some students who have come from an educational system where Maltese is mainly used, writing assignments, at length, in English may prove problematic. This, of course, does not exclude students from English-speaking backgrounds from encountering other problems. A case in point is when they are out on work-placements. Most commonly, Maltese is widely used.

Conclusion

To the students, MCAST is not simply a physical space. Rather, it is one that is associated with personal experiences, memories and feelings. In this respect, it is not simply a locus but something/somewhere 'alive'. This implies that even though students identify with it during their 'student days', MCAST is likely, at least to some extent, to have a lifelong influence on its students.

While Nichols and Griffith (2009) point out that the extent of student learning that takes place in educational institutions has often been judged, through the use of baseline data collection about the final scores achieved, this study has shown the further need to explore broader concerns if a more holistic appreciation of student learning is to be acquired. This is especially the case since, in today's world, there is no one youth–adult transition pathway (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Consequently, people tend to develop their own sense of agency, sometimes expressing resilience in face of different constraints, be they personal, structural (for instance, due to factors such as gender, class and race) or attributable to other exogenous factors such as the rate of unemployment and the state of the economy. In effect, it is often the case that in order to reach the career and life-course destinations that they forge for themselves, students, both in Malta and in countries abroad, operate in different and sometimes highly individual ways (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Sever 2012, Spiteri 2008). At least on a day-to-day basis, most college and university settings are likely to offset the uncertainty and risk associated with such individualised transitions by offering their students the experience of constancy. This is manifested when students know who they will meet during their lectures, know what lectures they will have and can reasonably predict, at least to a certain degree, some of the people they will interact with at such venues as the college or university canteen.

This study has shown how important it is that MCAST develops this sense of constancy in order to enable their students to feel secure in their learning despite the changes that take place in today's world. It is suggested that MCAST could create further inquiry-based contexts in lectures and in other fora with the aim of encouraging its students to explore and discuss their varied viewpoints, in a similar manner to what is done informally in the canteen. In so doing, as this study has shown, it will encourage its students to adopt an approach to learning that is based on their becoming increasingly aware of their own and other people's holistic needs.

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