

Autobiographical accounts of students working on the Innocence Project London¹ (IPL): students telling their story about how working on the IPL affected their lives

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Abstract

This reflection on a presentation at the Greenwich Learning and Teaching Conference (SHIFT) 2021 shows how powerful a sense of belonging can be, not only for students, but also for academics. By sharing their autobiographical reflections' project, the student and staff presenters so powerfully connected with their audience that everyone was struck by the importance of collaborations that give students a voice. The occasion both produced some unanticipated outcomes and enabled everyone to relate personal experience to that of others.'

Keywords: autobiography, higher education, innocence organisation, human experience

Autobiography

Autobiographical accounts provide a means of understanding the human experience (Hunter, 2015). Through the telling of stories, individuals can not only construct an understanding of their own experiences, but also tell the stories of others connected to those experiences (Letherby and Cotterill, 1993). The process of individuals' narrating and commenting on their own stories provides access to their thoughts and feelings about important aspects of life and encounters that have shaped them (Letherby and Cotterill, 1993). It is this aspect of autobiography that Dr Louise Hewitt (LH) was drawn to when thinking about how to capture the impact that working on the Innocence Project London (IPL) has had on students. The IPL is a project where Law and Criminology students work on the cases of convicted individuals who have maintained their innocence but have exhausted the appeals process. The students deconstruct a claim of innocence by investigating either a new legal argument or fresh evidence that could form the basis for an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. Anecdotally, students have told LH how innocence work not only changes their perspective on the criminal justice system and helps them develop skills not found in the classroom, but also has an impact on their lives. LH adapted an existing autobiographical reflection template, used in the Sociology programme at the University of Greenwich, that was devised by Associate Professor Dr Louise Owusu-Kwarteng (LOK) as part of a module she teaches, entitled 'Self in Society' (discussed in more detail below). The adaptation produced the following aims:

¹ The Innocence Project London was established in 2010 and is based at the University of Greenwich. It is a pro-bono registered charity that investigates claims of innocence by individuals who have maintained their innocence and have already exhausted the appeals process. It is a member of the Innocence Network which is based in the USA.

- to engage students in recognising how the IPL has enhanced their outcomes
- to enhance the student experience
- to provide a voice to all students no matter their age, ethnicity, background or gender
- to place students at the heart of their learning and provide them with a tangible experience.

By using autobiographical accounts, LH wanted to give IPL students the opportunity to tell their individual stories about the impact upon them of innocence work, enabling them to engage in recognising and taking ownership of their learning. The presentation was a joint effort between LH, LOK and two IPL students, Victoria Box (VB) (second-year Law) and Lidia Stoica (LS) (MSc Criminology). LH and LOK spoke about the value of autobiographical reflections and the process of working with students to write them; VB and LS spoke about how writing their autobiographical reflections affected them.

Radically reimagining higher education for a new era: working together for a just and sustainable future

The use of autobiographical material as research is new to academic lawyer LH. It is, however, recognised as a well-established research tool in sociology and to some extent criminology. This approach gave students an opportunity to tell their stories about their IPL experience and engaged them in a new way of reflecting on their learning (Lejeune, 1982). The SHIFT 2021 conference theme of 'Radically reimagining higher education for a new era: working together for a just and sustainable future' seemed to be the best fit for this work. LOK shared her experience of using autobiography on the level 4 module entitled 'Self in Society', which encourages students to reflect upon their personhood in the context of broader social structures, including the family, education system, economy etc. LOK places strong emphasis on the opportunities provided by staff-student collaborations such as this. Her paper *Living and Learning, Telling Stories, Challenging Narratives: Critical Reflections on Engaging Students, from marginalised groups in academic research activities* (2019) sets out the voice that this activity gives to students. Hearing their stories helps us to understand not only who they are through their personal experiences, but it is also an excellent way to enhance key employability skills, such as public speaking and conveying information in concise but creative ways. The conference drew out aspects of 'working together' that LOK has experienced; in particular, the notion of students' voices and creating a sense of belonging at university.

Student voices

The project was devised to give students the opportunity not only to record their individual stories but also to weave into them the stories of the IPL clients who inspire them (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993). However, these individual, subjective narratives that show each participating student's experience (McAdams, 1997) had much greater effect than LH had initially anticipated. When LS and VB spoke at the conference, they demonstrated how their investment in reflecting upon their learning has helped them to construct an understanding of their positionality in the world. After the presentation, LS said she felt empowered: "...the audience were engaging with what I was saying, and even relating to some of the ideas I

was depicting which gave me a heartfelt sense of community.” VB said she felt the value of *“being able to reflect on how important it is that we use our voices to help those without one.”* Both are passionate students who work closely with LH, but it was good to see that passion recognised by others who did not know them. Awareness and recognition of the potency of giving the students a voice over and above that of everyday study became the most important aspect of this session. It was a pivotal moment when both VB and LS realised that what they had been doing was of interest to an audience bigger than the IPL and their Law School.

A sense of belonging

The sense of belonging was something that LH had not foreseen as an intended outcome, but it very quickly became apparent that both the students were describing this idea to the audience. Innocence work is difficult and challenging at times, but there came realisation during the presentation that, for the students, innocence work helps them feel part of a community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This sense of belonging coincides with and contributes to the construction of their identity in the legal world and beyond (Walton and Cohen, 2007). LS said it was a *“great opportunity”* to reflect on what she wanted to say and to perceive how it might affect those who heard it. VB added that being able to explain to the audience how innocence work had changed her *“as a person for the better”* and to feel them really listening to her constituted an important aspect of being on the IPL. She said, *“These unprecedented times really highlight how lucky some of us are and I’m just so grateful to be able to help someone and give them a voice, so they are not forgotten about in society.”* Hearing a student say this is powerful, and at this point LH realised that the IPL creates a sense of community amongst the students who work on it – one that remains beyond graduation.

In the end...

Writing this reflection has provided an opportunity to consider the effect of the autobiographical reflections project on the IPL, in particular the impact of telling stories and making voices heard. To have students as partners in projects such as this demonstrates the importance of being innovative. We should not underestimate the power of developing a community that builds for students a sense of belonging, especially when the learning experience is enhanced as a consequence, a point made by VB and LS. It is indeed rewarding for academics to collaborate with students in a venture that encourages the latter to feel confident about telling their own stories. The power of autobiography should be recognised more broadly in academia as an important way of capturing and giving voice to human experience, not only our own but that of those – including the often marginalised in society – whose stories are interwoven with our own.

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