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The United World College movement in practice: the role of interaction rituals in releasing positive emotional energy to 'spark change'

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ABSTRACT

The arena of international schools is continuously growing. One under-researched 'traditional' grouping is the United World College (UWC) movement. Its idealistic long-term mission to facilitate global peace and sustainability by 'sparking change' in young peoples' lives represents an important area of study. As well as preparing young people for the two-year International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme amidst a background of co-curricular experiential learning, the UWC movement offers 'Short Courses' each year around the world. Our paper explores, for the first time, the 'Short Course' and its potential to transform and build character for social change. We present five vignettes of participants' experiences and perspectives of a 'Short Course', revealing how the every-day rhythm and interactions of the course rituals coupled with an intentionally deeply emotional experience can transform young people and empower them with the positive emotional energy needed to 'spark change' in the future.

KEYWORDS

International schools; rituals; united world colleges

The diverse arena of 'international schools'

The global growth of the arena

The increasingly diverse and continuously growing body of private 'international schools', delivering a curriculum in English outside an English-speaking nation was alleged to have reached 6,000 in 2012, and had doubled again by early 2020. Asia is the epicentre of this global field, and mainland China has the most schools, fed by the growing demand from an ambitious local middle class (Machin 2017). It is acknowledged that this arena of international education should undergo more critical, sociological analysis especially with regard to its practices and potential long-term impact (Resnik 2012). We still know very little about the schooling experience delivered by this growing global arena of elite schooling.

The majority of these 12,000 institutions can be classified as 'non-traditional' (Hayden and Thompson 2013, 26). Many are commercial entities within branded networks such as Dubai-based GEMS Education which has 80 private schools in 12 nations and Nord Anglia Education which operates 76 schools in 31 nations, of which 19 are in mainland

China. There has been comment regarding the emergence of a new body of so-called ‘Chinese Internationalised Schools’ (Poole 2020), numbering almost 1,000 catering for Chinese parents and largely staffed by Chinese nationals teaching in English a fusion of curricula. At the same time, Dulwich College Management International operates a ‘family’ of 10 franchised replicas of Dulwich College across Asia including four in mainland China. Maple Leaf Educational Systems operates almost 100 ‘Canada-style’ schools (Wu and Koh 2021) across China, delivering a British Columbia-accredited curricula.

At another level we can still identify a distinctly ‘traditional’ type (Hayden and Thompson 2013) modelled on the 1924-established International School of Geneva, catering pragmatically and not-for-profit for the globally mobile ‘international community’ serving multinational agencies, and staffed largely by British and North American educators. The Council of British International Schools (COBIS) has 246 members in 76 nations, whilst the United States’ 1964-established Office of Overseas Schools (OS) assists 194 schools worldwide.

This arena continues to grow and is still largely identified by its adherence to delivering the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), which schools such as the one in Geneva helped to develop in the 1960s. This programme aims to facilitate a young person with the skills, knowledge, and values associated with ‘international mindedness’ (Hill 2012). This is transmitted partly through the rituals associated with community service, simulation activities such as Model United Nations (Bunnell 2020) and democratic action such as Student Councils (Barratt Hacking et al. 2018). Further, the Council of International Schools (CoIS) accredits 1,300 schools across 123 nations and almost half are also authorised to offer IBDP.

The ‘internationalist’ dimension

Within the ‘traditional’ arena lies a smaller type of ideologically-led school, termed the ‘Type B traditional international school’ (Hayden and Thompson 2013), with a strong sense of values and mission, committed to the goal of global peace and sustainability. Dugonjic-Rodwin’s (2021 p.16) study identified that some institutions see themselves as the ‘guardians of international education’ noting that some ‘established schools view themselves as guardians of a highly internalized ethos.’ Exploring this largely ignored dimension of international education has become important. As the arena globally becomes more closely aligned with commercial entities and interests alongside competitive national policy making (Kim and Mobrand 2019), concern is being raised about the purpose and impact of international education. The 2019 Alliance for International Education conference, held at the iconic Geneva school, was about ‘Rethinking International Education – the Values and Relevance’ and our paper adds to that critical discussion.

Identifying the ‘guardians’ is difficult, although two major networks of schools are easily identified as both were instrumental in establishing the IBDP in the 1960s. The 1951-established Geneva-based International Schools Association (ISA), with offices in India and the United States, is made up of 37 member schools (including two in China, the Earth School in Rwanda, plus the six members of the Agora Educational Project in Spain) who openly promote intercultural understanding and internationalism. Another

major, well-established category of institutions is the United World Colleges (UWCs). A seminal paper from almost two decades ago (Cambridge and Thompson 2004) had posited that the UWC was representative of an ‘internationalist’ approach to international education (rather than the ‘globalist’ approach which epitomises the growing ‘non-traditional’ type of international school).

The UWC website (uwc.org) implies it aims for long-term impact, and that ‘*Rather than being an end in itself, a UWC education equips and inspires students to take action to bring about positive change throughout their lives.*’ Ott (1990, 31) described the UWC as ‘the most powerful tool that exists for insuring the survival of mankind’. Our paper is concerned with this proposition and in understanding how the UWC movement might ‘equip and inspire’ young people to bring about positive change now and in the future. This information, in turn, might enable us to better understand how the wider ‘traditional’ arena of international education might operate and make a long-term impact.

The United World Colleges

The UWCs as a global movement

The first UWC, Atlantic College, appeared in south Wales in 1962, inspired by the German educationalist Kurt Hahn (Röhrs 1966). There are now 18 schools and colleges making up the UWC ‘global movement’, including seven in Europe, three in the Americas, two in Africa, one in India, and one in mainland China (in Changshu). The one in Japan was established in 2017. Half of the 10,500 students are housed in the 1971-established Singapore-based UWC South East Asia. Students are selected via a unique system of national committees in 155 nations, comprised of 3,000 volunteers (uwc.org), based upon merit and motivation, and the majority of applicants get full scholarship (Van Oord and Brok 2004, 134).

Samaranayake (1991) called the UWC a ‘bold and innovative experiment in international education’. It has a ‘values-driven and activist-oriented mission’ (Perez 2015, 5) complemented through the delivery of the IBDP. There are now 5,500 ‘IB World Schools’ in 159 nations offering one or more of four programmes (data available at ibo.org), within a mission to ‘*develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through education that builds intercultural understanding and respect.*’ Although there are 3,560 schools authorised to offer the IBDP globally, of which almost 1,000 are mainly public schools in the United States and 115 are in California alone, the 18 UWCs stand out as being openly idealistic and committed to facilitating global peace (Van Oord 2008).

The UWC global movement is noticeably different, and unique. The official website (www.uwc.org/about) declares that the movement ‘*delivers a challenging and transformational education*’, with a mission that ‘*makes education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future*’. Further, the ‘utopian progressive’ movement (Holland 2016) sees itself as ‘*an education, built differently*’. At its core is community service and action, but unlike other ‘IB World Schools’ where it might be a minor aspect of the learning experience this is considered in the UWC context to be ‘co-curricular’ activity (see Schreiber 2014, for an example of this in a South African context).

The UWC global movement has built, over time, a sophisticated educational model. Although each UWC is unique, there are seven ‘common aims’ centred around promoting intercultural understanding amongst diverse individuals, genuine concern for others, community interaction, and positive action. Students are encouraged to take responsibility and to manage risk. Ultimately, the aim is to give young people ‘*the confidence to spark change*’, and to show them ‘*that change is possible, and that they can make it happen*’. Such an ambitious and bold (even utopian) claim clearly warrants empirical study.

Perez (2016 p.7) describes the UWC as ‘an incredibly strong unit of analysis to study mission, organization, and outcomes.’ Yet, perhaps surprisingly, in spite of 60 years of existence alongside the ambitious and overtly idealistic and ideological purpose and mission, the UWC has largely escaped inquiry into its every-day practices and intended experiences. This might be partly due to the peripheral nature of the ‘ideologically led’ approach. Cambridge (2003, 57) had argued that this is the ‘specialist interest of a minority of enthusiasts.’ Further, we note that Alec Peterson (1987, 36), a key architect of the IBDP at Atlantic College, had himself criticised the ‘unrealistic purism’ that underpinned the notion, implying that the model defied empirical investigation.

Consequently, little is known about the operation and potential long-term impact of the UWC on young people, and its potential influence as ‘a force to unite people’, and ‘spark change’. The declaration above implies that the UWC movement can activate (‘spark’) positive action and change, and Branson’s (2003) evaluative study (among staff, students, and alumni at eight UWCs) showed that the insider perspective is that the UWCs do meet their aims. Yet, little has been explored into how exactly the UWCs might do this. What is the process for ‘sparking’ action and change? Our paper sets out to begin to fill this significant and important research gap.

Taking this task forward, we can see that the UWC global movement has also developed, over time, a mission and core set of values that combine with the moral attributes of the IB Learner Profile (Wells 2011) to project the vivid image of the UWC graduate being a healthy, balanced, risk-taking, responsible, self-disciplined, and active citizen. This strong ‘expressive culture’ of character, conduct, and manner (Bernstein 1975), transmitted in practice by every-day rituals (Bernstein, Elvin, and Peters 1966), offers a theoretical lens for inquiring into the process by which the UWC movement aims to transform young people, and promote positive action.

The potential for research inquiry

Our intervention is timely. Previous findings into the operation of the UWC have had mixed outcomes, although recent reports do point to a possible long-term impact. Going back three decades, Samaranayake’s (1991) early study had painted a very positive picture regarding the potential long-term impact of the seven UWCs that existed at the time. Branson’s (2003) later study, among eight of the nine UWCs that existed, had also positively concluded that the informal nature of the college and the way the every-day activities and interactions created a sense of a ‘community’ was the most effective aspect. One case study (Wilkinson and Hayden 2010) had concluded

that the informal interactions of the UWC experience was effective in changing attitudes amongst young people. Perez's (2016) study also revealed the importance of the informal nature of the UWC, and the specific role that the boarding regime played.

Comment has occurred (Jimenez, Moorhead, and Wilensky 2020) from Singapore about how issues around sustainability can especially be embedded in practice in elite international schools. At the same time, comment about the theoretical operation and practice of every-day rituals associated with the delivery of international-mindedness have implied a platform might exist for successful character-(re)formation which could help facilitate action through the accumulation of positive emotional energy (Bunnell 2020).

Branson's (2003) Doctoral study had set out to evaluate how effective the UWCs were in meeting their aims and mission. Using data collected from students and staff, triangulated by a survey of alumni, it was revealed that it was the informal learning experiences that are the most effective, and the UWCs (in their 'Long Course' guise) are effective at forging a strong sense of solidarity and community. That research (obviously, now two decades old and involving less than half of today's global movement) implied that a strong platform exists for action, and service, in the long-term. More recent inquiry into the practices of international-mindedness in a UWC context has implied that it does offer a platform for character-elevation and class solidarity (Bunnell et al. 2020). However, research among Israeli children attending international schools (Flesh, Lee, and Yemini 2021), including UWCs overseas, has begun to question the degree to which such a schooling experience can promote a cosmopolitan (global citizenship) identity. Our study fits within this mixed set of results, using one particular aspect of UWC activity regarding potential impact in practice, the 'Short Course', to be discussed next.

The UWC and its 'Short Courses'

We investigate a major overlooked dimension of the UWC global movement, the 'Short Courses' for young people aged 14–20 that run over 1–5 weeks, once or twice a year, outside of the school period. The UWC's 'Short Courses' ('UWCSCs') are very well-established (starting in 1978) and present a large offering each year (there were 53 offered between 2018 and 2020). They involve about 800 young people each year. Twenty-five courses ran in 2019 alone, in 23 different countries.

UWCSCs are intended to complement and support the traditional two-year course, termed 'Long Courses' that the 18 UWCs deliver. They are 'a transformational opportunity' to '*advance the UWC mission by bringing UWC education to a wider audience than UWC schools and colleges alone can reach*' (uwc.org). As such, the UWCSC should be considered an integral part of the wider UWC movement and can arguably offer an insight and a window into the machinery and 'common culture' (Branson 2003, argued that such a thing did exist) of the wider UWC educational model.

Each Short Course has its own specific theme (past themes have included sustainability, equality, bridging cultures, global leadership, human rights and many others) and brings together 30–60 young people from different backgrounds to participate in the UWC experience but without the academic programme; in other words, they focus on the experiential learning aspect of the movement. The official website (www.uwc.org/

[shortcourses](#)) advertises the courses by asking: ‘How can you spark a change in your life and the world around you in just a matter of days or weeks?’, and it is this crucial aspect, of modelling a process of ‘sparking change’ in a few days, that we investigate. To do this, we focus on one UWCSC that occurred in Northern Europe in the summer of 2019 (the summer before Covid-19 forced short courses to be deferred, move online or take place in person but with measures), which brought together 50 young people aged 15–19 from across Europe and North Africa for a ten-day spell. Towards the end of that course, the first author conducted interviews with 10 course participants in order to explore how that course had aimed to ‘spark’ positive action. We draw here on that data and present five vignettes of the young peoples’ experiences (three female, two males, from five different national backgrounds). We focus on these five participants as they enthusiastically expressed undergoing a degree of self-transformation as a result of the UWCSC and we wanted to explore the process further.

The course certainly had very high expectations. The information pack presented to the course participants said the mission was ‘to make the world a better place in just a matter of days or weeks.’ It is asserted that in the ‘most exciting weeks of your life’, the course will allow participants: to pursue a passion to progress global peace and sustainability; work on a campaign, cause or immerse yourself in a new community; and develop your leadership and changemaker skills. By bringing participants together for 10-days from different nation states, it is expected that they: *‘will leave with new friends, new views, new skills, and a renewed belief that you can change communities for the better’*.

The methodology of the study

The application of interaction ritual chain theory

The term ‘renewed belief’ implies the participants leave a course with a positive sense of energy and the ability and confidence to ‘spark’ action. It is also stated ([uwc.org/short-courses](#)) that *‘There is a very special energy you can see when UWCers get together.’* This comment about energy lends itself well to a sociological inquiry. To do this, we will utilise the work of American sociologist Randall Collins and his *Interaction Ritual Chain Theory* (Collins 2004).

Bernstein (1975) saw the ‘expressive order’ as being transmitted via rituals. Building upon that, Collins (2004) states that an ‘interactive ritual’, if a positive experience, can result in a person acquiring ‘positive emotional energy’. As a process, over 10 days, one might expect a ‘chain’ of such events to occur resulting in a substantial accumulation of this energy. Collins (2014, 48) identifies four key ingredients for a successful ‘interaction ritual chain’ (IRC). First, individuals (at least a pairing, or small team) must be physically close enough to make eye contact. Second, they must all focus on the same thing. Third, they must feel a shared emotion. Fourth, the situation must involve clear boundaries so it is clear who is taking part in the common experience. These four conditions together are intended to create a powerful emotional and mutual force. They build up confidence and trust, and promote action. IRC provides a strong theoretical framework for discussing the mechanism by which the UWCSC is intended to ‘spark change’ in young people.

The research approach: a semi-ethnographic case study

Our paper draws on a wider research study, funded by the University of Bath's 'International Research Funding Scheme', that set out to investigate participants' and facilitators' perspectives and experiences of the UWCSC and its perceived impact on participants' lives. We were particularly interested in how the UWCSC transforms and builds character and in how participants are influenced and empowered to 'spark a change' in their lives and in the world to work towards the UWC mission of progressing global peace and sustainability.

The study was situated within the interpretivist research paradigm which seeks to understand the subjective and multi-layered world of human experience and recognises 'multiple realities, agentic behaviours and the importance of understanding a situation through the eyes of the participants' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 116). A qualitative case study was designed to enable 'an in-depth exploration of multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of (the UWCSC and its perceived impact) in "real life" context' (Simons 2009, 21). This design allowed for 'methodological triangulation' (Denzin 2009) through multiple methods of data collection including documents, observational fieldnotes, and semi-structured interviews.

Access to the UWCSC was gained through known contacts with key UWC gatekeepers including the coordinator of the UWC National Executive Committee in the host-nation who had been involved in the development of the UWCSC. The lead author was offered free accommodation and meals on-site for the duration of the short course (10 days). This enabled her to adopt a semi-ethnographic research approach in which she lived on-site with participants and facilitators becoming immersed in their day-to-day lives and engaging in participant observation (Creswell 2013).

Echoing the inclusive nature of the UWCSC, the lead author was given the option to join learning and social activities, either as an 'active', 'moderate' or 'passive' participant observer (Spradley 1980). So as not to overly impinge on the young people and their activities and to generate a deeper insight into the 'explicit and tacit aspects' of the research participants' lived experiences, routines and culture as a group (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1), the role of 'moderate' participation (Spradley 1980) was selected. This involved largely remaining an observer on the periphery but avoiding complete passivity through interacting with research participants and taking part in some activities, particularly when encouraged by the community and as suitable opportunities arose.

The lead author was therefore simultaneously an 'outsider' and 'insider' researcher. Occupying 'the space between' (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 61) outsider/insider status and sliding along this spectrum at different times enhanced the credibility of the research process and outcomes as it enabled the researcher to draw objective meanings that might not be evident to insiders and access information typically unavailable to outsiders.

There were, however, limitations to being an outsider/insider including times when the researcher was excluded from witnessing conversations and 'debriefing' sessions that were of a sensitive and/or confidential nature; for example, there were times when course facilitators requested impromptu private conversations with course participants to counsel them with problems or conflicts they were experiencing, during which the

researcher was politely asked to leave. This experience reveals that as a partial insider, total immersion in the field and complete trust from research participants are unlikely and group members control the level of information provided (Merriam 1998).

Nevertheless, the semi-ethnographic approach allowed for 'prolonged engagement' in the field facilitated the building of trust and rapport (Lincoln and Guba 1985), leading to many informal conversations about the mission, objectives and activities of the UWCSC and the perceived impact. A fieldwork journal was kept in which notes and reflections emanating from these discussions relevant to the research aims were recorded (Wilson 1977). Descriptive and reflective notes were also written during participant observation on: the setting and environment; the planning, preparation and facilitation of the learning activities (which took place both indoors and outdoors) and how participants engaged with these; some 'debriefing' sessions led by facilitators at the end of each day; and the group dynamics and interactions between the research participants throughout the day during both planned learning activities and informal, social activities (e.g. during lunch breaks and evening social life). These notes helped contextualise data from documents and semi-structured interviews.

The study's main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with UWCSC participants and facilitators. These provided rich, detailed data revealing thoughts and reflections, enabling a deep understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences and allowing the researcher 'to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe' (Wellington and Szczerbinski 2007). The interview guide and questions were developed during the fieldwork and were informed by the notes and reflections recorded during the early stages of participant observation.

Three meals a day were provided on-site in a canteen, enabling the researcher to eat with facilitators and participants and engage with them informally. These were the best times to ask young people if they would be happy to participate in an interview. In all, nine facilitators, one Director of the National Committee, and 10 course participants over the age of 16 (out of the 50) volunteered and gave informed consent to participate. Interviews were conducted in English and took place on-site both outdoors and indoors in places where disruptions would be minimal. They lasted for 45 minutes to one hour and were recorded and transcribed with permission. Data analysis involved searching for key concepts and terms related to interaction ritual chain (IRC) theory, such as 'positive', 'emotion(al)', 'experience', 'confidence', 'energy', 'rhythm', 'spark', 'interaction', 'change' and 'action'. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was also employed to identify common themes across the dataset.

The role of interactive rituals

The UWCSC that was observed involved a number of every-day, routine interactive rituals (note: there is no way of knowing if all the UWCSCs do the same thing, and this involves a comparative study). Participants undergo a service project, in teams, to tackle a social issue 'back home' once they have completed the course. A further regular activity is 'Carpe Diem', where participants suggest a team activity (sports, discussion, theatre, dance etc.) which they lead on. It seems to us that it is these consensual rituals that give the UWCSC its specific identity as a distinct and separate institution.

One discovery was especially designed ‘toolbox activities’ to help participants turn their ideas and discussions into action. These included activities such as public speaking, systems thinking and sustainable living, and ‘activism’ (how to create change through art), the latter of which required participants to identify challenges that need attention, consider what they are particularly passionate about, and plan how to turn that passion into a message through art.’ Throughout the course, there was a focus on ‘building community’ and an emphasis on fun experiential learning activities.

The IRC process needs momentum and intensity, and this was very noticeable to the first author observing the course over its duration. Katie, one of the UWCSC participants, told us about the course having a ‘rhythm’. This, ‘rhythmic entrainment’ (Collins 2014, 299), is an important aspect of the IRC in practice, giving the process a sense of momentum and excitement. Katie also noted:

I think it was getting used to the rhythm of the short course, because we start really in a rush and we go on a rush all the time until now the end. But I think things worked really good, like, once we entered into the rhythm of it.

The word ‘rush’ here is important, revealing how participants are expected to leave the UWCSC with a sense of urgency for transformative change, pumped up with emotional energy – a form of ‘collective efflorescence’ (Collins 2014). This can then be released over time as action, and service; a successful outcome should see the participants ‘pumped up with confidence and enthusiasm’ (Collins 2014, 300). In the information pack given to the young people of the course it stated that:

We have been a bouncing ball of positive energy for quite some time now and can’t wait to project this energy on all of you in the memorable experience which lies ahead of us.

This claim, about projecting onto the participants ‘positive energy’ does point to an intentional delivery of a memorable experience via a process of rituals that represent, over 10 days, an IRC.

The vignettes

We will next present five vignettes of participants’ experiences to reveal their perspectives of the short course, particularly in terms of how they feel it positively influenced, inspired or changed them to help bring about positive social change. We focus on these five participants as they enthusiastically expressed undergoing a degree of self-transformation as a result of the UWCSC and we wanted to explore the process further. The vignettes approach privileges a more narrative-based mode of presenting qualitative findings whereby an evocative account of a short event is given to engage the reader on an experiential level and give them a sense of ‘being there’ (Reay et al. 2019). We also include brief data extracts to illustrate the richly captured voices of respondents (Schoenberg and Ravdal 2000). We reveal how the every-day rhythm and interactions of the rituals of the UWCSC, in small groups, coupled with an intentionally deeply emotional experience, help to transform young people and empower them with the positive emotional energy that they need to go back to their home community and ‘spark action’ in the future.

Katie: 'I'm leaving this place a very different person'

Katie's transformation was significant. She is from Portugal and had applied to enter two UWCs in Asia but was rejected by the national committees. She was offered the UWCSC instead. As such, she entered the course feeling somewhat deflated after these setbacks. She explained, in her view, what the course is about:

I think it's for us to understand what really diversity is, how to understand that everyone around us is different and has its own qualities, its flaws, its . . . I don't know, it's a lot about making us also have personal reflections on ourselves, on our actions and what are we actually capable to do that we don't believe we are, or we don't know we are?

Here one can see the importance of appreciating diversity, and the intended process of self-discovery and reflection. Katie revealed that she did now feel 'different' and seemed to be more confident about doing things in 'society'. It seemed as if her initial setbacks had been over-ridden by the 10-day experience:

I'm leaving this place a very different person than I was two weeks ago . . . I think I'm going into society with different objectives and things I want to do and knowing more about myself and what I'm capable of.

The catalyst for Katie seemed to be the workshop activities and preparatory activities for those, which began after communal breakfast in the form of a team 'game'. Each day started with two interaction rituals. At first, she was sceptical about this activity, but began to see its value:

Workshops have a defined theme, and they start with a game. And we think it's just a random game to wake us up, and then we discover at the end that it actually was somehow related to what we will be talking about in the workshop.

This 'defined theme' gives the game a clear focus, a key aspect of the IRC in practice. Katie realised that all the rituals of the day are interconnected and intentional:

And they make us think and we start reflecting and, like, joining all the pieces in our heads and we get to . . . I think we get to the point that they're wanting us to get to.

The fact that the activities involved being part of a group in which honest and open reflections were shared was important for Katie and is another key element of the IRC:

Because we kind of trained it. I don't know how to explain it. We were subjected to have to do it, like, be in a round of people. Maybe not all of us, because sometimes they would divide us in smaller groups.

The fact that participants live together, wake up together and engage in intense rituals throughout each day creates a strong level of intimacy and trust amongst participants who are encouraged to share very personal reflections and experiences in an open, safe space. As noted earlier, the rituals of the day provided a rhythm according to Katie. Consequently, Katie did seem (re)energised at the end of the course and had come to know and value herself and her potential in new ways:

But I think a lot of us will leave this place giving much more importance to spirituality and also, self-love and confidence.

Charlotte: 'the family feeling'

Charlotte is Belgian but was born in French-speaking West Africa. She had arrived with very low expectations and had entered the course primarily as a way of improving her spoken English. She described how a feeling of belonging to a 'family' had emerged over the 10 days, echoing Katie's acknowledgement of the intimacy created through living and interacting together. The small group activities had helped facilitate this, especially in the first three days:

Like the first three days, we were separated into three different groups. Smaller groups, and we kept the three groups for three days. And we talked about identity, community and diversity in those three days. And that made the first family feeling because we would do activities.

Interacting in small groups with the same people further facilitated the creation of a safe space and reveals the intended process of creating collective memory and a sense of social solidarity. As Charlotte said, a 'family feeling' emerged, quite quickly. In addition, the UWCS experience enabled Charlotte to feel empowered to take action back home. She developed a very pragmatic view of how much change she could instigate, recognising and valuing the power that one individual can make, even in seemingly 'small' ways, towards bringing about positive change:

They're giving you tools to reach the goal that you have in mind and how to be able to help others in your community in your own way depending on the capacities that you have. They make you understand that helping others isn't about saving the whole world because we wouldn't have enough of a lifetime to do that, but it's about doing what we can to make the world that we live in better. And that if we all take part in it, that, like everything . . . well, if we all do our part then that bit, like the world is going to become a better place.

Charlotte felt the intensity of the course helped participants develop a deep level of intimacy in a relatively short space of time that enabled them to feel secure to partake in very open forms of communication. Intensity is a key ingredient of the IRC, in practice:

I think workshops and activities are made for us to feel like that to get to know each other on a deeper level. And we get to spend like twenty-four-seven all together and so you get to know the people on a deeper level because everyone just opens up.

Here, we find evidence that the course had created a 'safe space' for the participants to 'just open up'.

Steve: 'I feel like a different person'

Steve is from Spain. His brother had just joined a UWC but he himself had been rejected. Similar to Charlotte, his initial expectations were fairly low but he ended up feeling that the course had enabled him to embark on a process of self-discovery and growth and to envisage what he was capable of achieving in the future:

I feel like a different person, I hope it's a better person, I feel like it is. I personally think that it helped me a lot to find myself and to grow as a person. There's so many things that I've never thought about and they were discussed here and that helped me kind of find my way through what I want to accomplish as a person.

He felt that a character change had occurred in that he had developed much more self-confidence, better leadership skills, and an understanding of the needs of society and where and how he could make a difference:

We did a leadership workshop and, I don't know, I think it has helped me really with my self-confidence. I think it's creating someone really open-minded and conscious about what . . . what is really needed in society or what . . . what really the needs of other people are and stuff.

Janet: 'I've learned how to protest'

Janet, from Poland, a self-claimed 'climate activist' joined the SC as she wished to pursue full-time UWC study; she said 'it is my dream'. She strongly inferred that the SC had given her the positive energy, and the practical skills, to take action in the future:

UWC makes education a force to unite people for peace and a sustainable future, I think. Yeah. And like just being here I've learned so much about how to like protest, how to build relationships, how to fight for a sustainable future.

Janet claimed she felt 'angry' and 'more passionate' about things after the SC. In particular, she gave an example of how she had made friends on the SC with a young Russian, and now that she had such a (best) friend she was concerned about Russian politics:

I think I'm a lot more passionate about things. I think like, for example, I don't really have an opinion on the Russian Government beforehand, but now my best friend here is Russian, and now like I have a face to put like to the crisis in Russia and I'm just like, I am angry, I'm mad, this needs to change. And I think the short course has just made me so much more passionate about these things because I now have friends who are directly affected by this and I think that's so important.

Here we can see that Janet now feels that her friends' problems are also her problems, not just 'out there' involving others. This sense of a common bond is a key ingredient of Collins' (2014) IRC. The catalyst for Janet feeling affected by the SC is the energy that it involves:

I think I've learned so much because of the fact that it's so informal, it's so moving around, so physical.

There was no denying that Janet felt the SC was a positive experience:

Like I was talking to my friend who's been to another SC and she said like it was the best experience of her life, and I was like, oh, she's probably exaggerating, but I'm being honest when I say this, this has been the best two weeks of my life.

The reference to the SC being the 'best experience of her life' does point to it potentially delivering a strong sense of collective memory. Janet called the whole experience 'life-changing', saying she felt much more upbeat about things:

I know it's easy to hear the words 'life-changing' but when I say life-changing, I mean like I am a completely different person. I feel like my mindset on things has completely changed. I used to be a really like closed off and sad person but now, not to exaggerate but I feel a lot more hopeful about everything.

Resonating with Steve, Janet also felt that the SC changed her and her way of thinking. The SC also helped her 'open up' and think more positively about how she might make a difference. Janet's comments seem to encapsulate the notion of positive emotional energy.

Barry: 'fun and emotional at the same time'

Barry was from Hungary. He had applied twice for entry to a UWC but was rejected on both occasions. He was offered the SC as a 'consolation' and entered the course feeling negative:

I expected an intense course, and it was intense, but I had very negative feelings about it because I applied for the long course.

He did seem more subdued than the others but still expressed that the SC had been 'life-changing'. He described the course as a 'mini-society' in which he developed important practical skills that prepared him for the future:

We learnt a lot about different topics and learnt facilitation skills, leadership skills, public talking skills. So it somehow prepared us for life informally, so not only the two biology workshops, that I know now, but how to present the biology lesson in a task or in front of the class.

The catalyst for Barry was the workshops, where intercultural understanding is delivered:

I think it is because of the workshops that we have done. They focus on different subjects. That could be the sustainability or religion or the gender and sexuality, and all the others. And we brought our experiences and during these workshops we could get to know each other's experiences and views. So I think this intercultural knowledge shared with these workshops.

Barry, like all the participants, felt that his communication skills had been developed the most. In fact, he felt he had 'mastered' the ability to interact with others:

Communication; it was a core point in every workshop. We actually had a non-violent communication workshop, but in every workshop, we had to communicate somehow, we had to interact with each other, and I think that's a skill that I have mastered let's say.

Barry described the workshop sessions as being fun and emotional, at the same time. Further, he implied that a form of emotional rhythm had appeared over the first three days, with each ritual leading quickly on to the next:

I enjoyed the first three days, where on the first day we got to know our identity and ourselves, and the second day we put ourselves in our community, and below that how we relate to that community. And on the third day we talked about the responsibilities which we have in that special community. Most activities were very fun, and very emotional at the same time.

This gave the event a sense of intensity, and it was a ‘very active period’:

This was a very active period of my life, the two weeks. We learnt a lot and I didn’t even notice it. We did activities, workshops, games, discussions, and after I realised how much I learnt.

Having entered the course with low expectations and feeling disappointed, Barry was very positive about the whole experience at the end:

I didn’t expect this much friendliness and open-mindedness, but everyone is open and friendly, and we talk to everyone, so this was also a positive surprise, I loved it very much.

Moreover, Barry felt energised to a level where he wanted to get active in society. He wanted to ‘do some activism’:

I think I have improved on a personal level, and it is also as a member of society, I think I am aware of serious problems, and I feel like I can do things to prevent those from happening, such as climate change. We talk about activism, and I liked it very much, and I’d like to go home and try to do some activism.

Barry’s comments again point to the need for a further, follow-up, longitudinal study looking at what happens when the participants ‘go home and try to do some activism’.

Discussion

Each participant had their own story about how they came to be on the course. For some it is a consolation at failing to gain entry to the full 2-year UWC course. Many of the participants entered the course feeling quite sad and emotionally negative, feeling frustrated and concerned at worldly and social issues. However, they all left the UWCSC feeling optimistic, and emotionally upbeat. A process of positive emotional energy accumulation did appear to have occurred. They were energised and positive about being able to go back home and take immediate action. For all of them, it was a hugely enjoyable experience. A sense of ‘renewed belief’ (the ultimate aim of the course) did seem very evident in the five young people reported on here and they did seem ready to ‘spark change’.

The key elements of the ‘interaction ritual chain’ (IRC) are strongly evident in the activities undertaken during the course. The key consensual ritual is the workshop activities, usually performed in small groups of about four persons, or at least a pairing (a vital aspect of the ‘four ingredients’ of the IRC). The intensity of the day gave it a sense of rhythm and momentum but also made it an emotional ride. This is enforced from comments by two other participants; Ariana from Latvia, said that ‘sometimes you feel a bit sad just after the really intense day, you have many emotions, you feel a bit tired and exhausted and sad,’ Fiona from Denmark remarked upon how ‘we did some different activities and people have gotten very, very emotional during these.’ Fiona described one activity where this emotion had been seen; during the ‘mask exercise’ the participants (in groups of four) had to draw a face representing their mood in life and it became clear that the majority of the group are sad (this aspect, of group awareness, is another essential ‘ingredient’ of the successful IRC). Fiona said this sort of activity had ‘dug out all their emotions’, with some participants having ‘tears streaming down their face.’

In terms of character-formation, the UWCSC seemed to deliver open-mindedness and empathy and was in line with the overall UWC mission of ‘nurturing young people’s energy and idealism into empathy, responsibility and lifelong action’ (uwc.org). The interaction rituals involved much speaking (and thus much listening) whilst being tolerant of the views and beliefs of others from different cultural backgrounds. It was interesting to learn that several of our young participants felt that they had also learnt practical ‘hard skills’ such as public speaking.

Conclusions

Our study has gathered a valuable and original insight into the workings of the UWC movement, and its every-day practice. This is timely and much needed. Through Collins (2014) work we can begin to see how the emotive and rhythmic ‘interaction ritual chain’ of an UWCSC can be theorised as intending to facilitate, quickly, an accumulation of ‘positive emotional energy’. This can be later released over time as action and service, thus positioning the participants as capable of ‘sparking change’.

However, our study comes with a number of caveats. First, it focuses on the positive outcomes of one UWCSC that was observed in Europe in 2019. This was one of 20 that took place that year, within a framework of there being several different types, with slightly different aims. Therefore, one cannot make major generalisations across the board.

Second, it is difficult to fully infer from our study how far it equates with the ‘UWC Long Course’. One participant, Janet, did say that ‘I think at its core it’s just an extension of the UWC movement fitted into two weeks’. However, she had not actually done the ‘extended/longer’ version so we do not know for certain.

Third, it is likely that those who volunteered were the most enthused or excited about the experience and wished to share their enthusiasm with the researcher. Further, it is likely that participants were those who were the most confident talking in English. As such, we are aware of the likelihood that we gained insights from the most positive, confident, and motivated participants. We know little about the views of the others, particularly of those who had joined from refugee camps and did not feel as confident speaking in English. This grouping, we feel, requires a separate study. It ought to be noted, however, that all participants took part in the course until the end, suggesting that all felt they were benefitting. Further research into the UWCSC experiences of a wider number of participants from a greater variety of backgrounds would contribute to the research gap (including the refugee students who we were unable to access). Also, a longer time frame might be useful, interviewing young people at the start of the course and at the end, to see more fully how the course affected them.

There is much scope for further research inquiry. A fuller picture would entail also examining what happens when ‘negative emotional energy’ is accumulated. There is scope for some participants to feel disappointed with a two-week course especially if they had wanted the full two-year experience. Also, the emotive nature of the course may have upset some participants. Our volunteer participants are clearly positive, and exuberant, but we have little knowledge if all had gained such an experience (although the lead author who observed the course did not see any abstentions or ill-feeling occur).

Moreover, the impact of the course must be judged in terms of future action and service by the participants. In other words, our study would require a follow-up. In fact, the experience requires a longitudinal study over several years, where the extent and nature of action can be measured. Our interviewees did seem positively energised at the end of the course, but we have no way of knowing whether that energy was sustained, or how it was used. Surprisingly, the UWC movement overall seems to have escaped such a line of research, and we are left with limited autoethnographic evidence (e.g. Tsumagari 2010). In fact, the arena of elite traditional international schooling in general has largely escaped such a longitudinal study and we know very little about the long-term impact in terms of action or social networking. Overall, there is substantial scope for greater clarity in terms of empirical evidence about the long-term (positive) impact that the experience can foster and facilitate.

Disclosure statement

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