

## **Rethinking the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in terms of Students' Engagement with Academic Knowledge.**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we argue that students' engagement with academic knowledge can help to develop an alternative way of thinking about the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Based on the findings of the *Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project*, we argue that the knowledge, skills and dispositions that students learn at university should define the quality of the education that they have received. Our findings suggest a potentially benevolent cycle: the key to a good quality university education is students' level of engagement with the knowledge of the discipline they are studying; the level of engagement depends on the level and direction of the students' effort, which is engendered by good teaching. This cycle means that students' engagement with academic knowledge and the teaching that supports such engagement need to be central to how the quality of undergraduate courses are defined, improved and measured.

### **The research project**

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project was a three-year ESRC-funded (Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438) longitudinal investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations. The departments at Prestige and Selective have been regularly rated in the top third of UK higher education league tables for their research and teaching in Sociology, whilst those at Community and Diversity have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

The project had the following objectives:

- (1) To evaluate what social science students value about their university education
- (2) To investigate differences in curriculum and teaching in different universities
- (3) To contribute to debates about what is good quality teaching in the social sciences

Three years' intensive fieldwork produced rich data sets, including: in-depth interviews with 98 students eliciting biographical stories and their perceptions and experiences of higher education; 31 longitudinal case studies following students throughout the three years of their degree programmes; a survey of over 750 students; interviews with 16 staff; analysis of video recordings of teaching in each institution in each year of the degree (12 sessions); analysis of students' assessed work (examples from each year); a focus group discussion with tutors from all four institutions about students' assessed work; as well as documentary analysis and the collection of statistical data relating to the four departments.

## **Our findings**

Our findings indicate that high quality undergraduate courses are those which lead students to engage with academic knowledge in transformative ways. That is, courses are of a high quality when students study hard to understand the academic content of their courses. For students studying sociology-related social science courses, engagement with academic knowledge is transformative in three ways: students gain access to an understanding of academic knowledge that is interesting and relevant to their lives; it changes the way that they understand themselves and their place in the world; and, they come to a deeper understanding of the relationships between people and society's systems and structures.

### **Access to and understanding of academic knowledge that is interesting and relevant to students' lives**

In high quality undergraduate social science courses, students engage with knowledge because they find it enjoyable, interesting and relevant to their current and future lives. We found that students' engagement with academic knowledge resulted in enhanced academic and employability skills. By way of a challenge to the idea that employability skills should be consciously 'bolted onto' academic courses, our study suggests that, for social science students, employability skills are acquired in tandem with the processes necessary to understand academic knowledge.

### **Changes in the way that students understand themselves and their place in the world**

In high quality undergraduate social science courses, students change their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. One element of this educational gain is that students' sense of confidence about what they can be and do increases. We found students maturing in two specific ways: as people who empathise with, understand, are interested in and accept others; and, as people who question and challenge what goes on the world around them.

### **A deeper understanding of people and society**

In high quality social science courses students come to an understanding of society which is more complex than they held previously. The process of understanding relates to a change in personal identity which includes an intention to change society for the better. Most students envisage working in public service in which they will use their knowledge, understanding and dispositions to contribute to society.

### **Supporting evidence from the literature**

The importance of engagement with academic knowledge has been found in a diverse range of disciplines. For example, in a wide range of undergraduate disciplines (Electronic Engineering, Biological Sciences, Economics, History and Media and Communication) the *'Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments Project'* (see Entwistle 2009 for a summary) proposed the notion of 'ways of thinking and practising in the subject' to describe the richness of what students potentially gain through engagement with academic knowledge. Similarly, Nespor's (1994) study shows the different forms of engagement with academic knowledge demanded of Physics and Management students. These studies provide strong evidence of how students' engagement with academic knowledge allows them to make transformational gains from higher education. Gibbs (2010) argues that, whilst quality processes are enacted in different ways in different disciplines, the underpinning

educational principles are similar. Based on our study and the supporting literature, it seems that, although the outcomes from undergraduate degrees in different disciplines are likely to vary, a key principle in pursuance of high quality university education is that students engage in knowledge in transformative ways.

### **Implications**

The knowledge, skills and dispositions that students learn at university should define the quality of the education that they have received. Our study is a strong endorsement of Gibb's conclusion in 'Dimensions of Quality' that 'what best predicts educational gains is measurement of educational processes' (p.43). We can discern a potentially benevolent cycle. The key to a good quality university education is students' level of engagement with the knowledge of the discipline they are studying; the level of engagement depends on the level and direction of the students' effort, which is engendered by good teaching. This cycle means that students' engagement with academic knowledge and the teaching that supports such engagement need to be central to how the quality of undergraduate courses are defined, improved and measured.

### **References**

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