

The problems and promises of undergraduate seminars: a Bernsteinian analysis of their ability to facilitate access to pedagogic rights.

Abbas Andrea<sup>1</sup>, Ashwin Paul<sup>2</sup>, McLean Monica<sup>3</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Lincoln, UK*, <sup>2</sup>*Lancaster University, UK*, <sup>3</sup>*University of Nottingham, UK*

The problems and promises of undergraduate seminars: a Bernsteinian analysis of their ability to facilitate access to pedagogic rights.

Drawing upon a longitudinal mixed-method empirical investigation of sociology seminars in four universities over three years this paper engages in a critical discussion of the potential and the failings of undergraduate seminars in giving students access to powerful disciplinary knowledge: associated in Bernstein's (2000) conceptual framework with students gaining access to pedagogic rights. Seminars are important because they facilitate students' understanding of disciplinary knowledge, which has been recontextualised through curricula design and pedagogic practices, and they encourage students to develop and demonstrate their skill in using this knowledge. However, our study suggests that undergraduate seminars often fail to fulfil this promise. A critical discussion of seminar teaching and how it might be improved is facilitated by using Bernstein's framework to interpret thematic analyses of videos of twelve seminars (three in each university) and interviews with the academics teaching these seminars.

### **1000 Word Synopsis**

This paper develops existing findings from an ESRC funded project in order to glean what can be learned about how to effectively engage diverse students in a variety of university contexts with academic knowledge through undergraduate seminars. So far the project has identified what students gained from studying sociology in four differently ranked sociology-related social science departments: we have called the departments Community, Diversity, Prestige and Selective to preserve their anonymity and to reflect their characteristics (project references withheld). The broad findings of the project revealed that students in all of the four universities had the opportunity to gain access to what Bernstein (2000) terms pedagogic rights (project references withheld). Pedagogic rights are constituted by three nested and hierarchically related transformations which in Bernstein's view should be accessed by everyone through education. These involve individual enhancement, social inclusion and political participation. Individual enhancement is attained through the opportunity to engage with and learn powerful sociological knowledge. This knowledge changes consciousness and enables students to see that there are different and new possibilities which can be created by themselves and others (project references withheld). Engagement with academic knowledge is necessary if students are to gain access to social inclusion and political participation.

A survey of over 750 students in the universities we studied suggested a strong relationship between students' level of engagement with academic knowledge and their judgements about whether they felt they had good teaching. The interviews with students suggested that there

were examples of good and bad pedagogic practices in all four universities (project references withheld). They also support the notion that effective seminars are critical to students experiencing teaching as good. For example, discussions of good relationships between academics and students often refer to seminars. In addition student data provided a sense of what constituted a good seminar. Students want highly organised seminars and for all their fellow students to turn up prepared to contribute. They value high levels of participation and engaged and academically focussed discussion. Students also believe that the relevance of the knowledge being discussed should be articulated and made explicit through pertinent real-life examples and case studies (project references, withheld). However, interviews with students also suggest that these ideals are too infrequently achieved. In this paper we attempt to explore why this is the case and how it can be overcome by drawing upon Bernstein's theoretical framework to interpret our thematic analyses of: a) videos of twelve undergraduate seminars (three in each of the four universities); and b) interviews with teachers about the videoed seminars.

Bernstein's language of description has been widely used to identify effective pedagogic practices in schools for students with diverse backgrounds and needs (Morais and Neves, 2011). More recently authors writing in a Higher Education context (e.g. Crozier and Reay, 2011) have drawn upon Bernstein to illuminate how students from different classes engage with university pedagogies in different contexts to better or lesser effect. Our analysis aims to contribute to the understanding of how Bernstein's concepts might effectively be used in higher education (project references, withheld, Kuteeva and Airey, 2014) as well as to the broader literature regarding how to improve students' experiences and learning at university (e.g. Ainley and Canaan, 2006; Brennan et al, 2010).

Thematically analysing the videos in NVivo allowed us to engage with the richness of this material. We have gain insight into the identities of students and how they are enacted in seminars, tutors practices, the time spent on different activities, the ordering and pacing of activities, the resources used, the types of knowledge that are discussed in seminars (for example, whether it is focusing on theories and concepts, empirical examples, procedural issues, study skills and so forth) and how much time is dedicated to each. We have also gained insight into the relationships that are enacted between students and tutors, the types of conversations that are had, the use of space and the emotional tone of the seminars. Using Bernstein's conceptual framework we have begun to identify the types of activities that do\do not encourage and facilitate the type of engagement needed for students to gain access to individual enhancement. Theorised analysis of tutors discussions of their seminars also provide a sense of why they work the way they do and their perspectives of what is (not) being achieved. Whilst this work is still in its early stages it is already apparent that a theoretically informed approach to understanding teaching and learning in seminars has much to offer. Bernstein's lens provides a way of gaining deeper insight into what is happening in undergraduate seminars that can be used to develop practices that are inclusive of diverse groups of students.

## References

Ainley, P. and Canaan, J.E. (2005) Critical hope in English higher education today, constraints and possibilities in two new universities, *Teaching in Higher Education* 10 (4), 435-446

Bernstein, B. (2000) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: theory, research, critique*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Crozier, G. and Reay, D. (2011) 'Capital accumulation: working-class students learning how to learn in HE', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16: 2, Pp.145 — 155

Kuteeva, M. and Airey, J. (2014) 'Disciplinary differences in the use of English in higher education: reflections on recent language policy developments' *Higher Education*, Volume 67, Issue 5, pp 533-549

Morais, A. M. And Neves, I. P. (2011) 'Educational texts and contexts that work discussing the optimization of a model of pedagogic practice', in Frandji, D. And Vitale, P. (eds) 2011, *Knowledge, Pedagogy and Society: International perspectives on Basil Bernstein's sociology of education*, London: Routledge.