Sites of silence in the convergence: Methodologies to place gender on the teaching and learning agenda (0249)

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Background and Context

In Australia, convergence in higher education practice is evidenced by moves towards fee deregulation, corporatisation of universities, and pressures to enhance learning through technology. However prioritisation of certain agenda also leads to sites of silence in policy and practice. In Australia a significant site of silence is the limited focus on gender within the general higher education teaching and learning context. Gender research tends to focus on academic careers, gender in business, and in disciplines with obvious gender skews such as engineering and teaching. Yet, statistics show an overall 17% gender pay gap on graduation (EOWA, 2012) even though there is no apparent gender difference in academic performance. Within the Australian workplace, there has been extremely slow progress in improving gender equity, and in the progression of women to senior executive positions with the most recent workplace census showing only 12 female CEO's in the top 500 Australian public companies (EOWA).

Towards disruption of the reproduction of discriminatory workplace practice within university teaching and learning

While there are acknowledged structural issues within the workplace leading to gender discrimination (The Economist, 2011), we suggest that within the generally equity conscious Australian university system, academics (and students) have the opportunity to disrupt practices which potentially contribute to the reproduction of workplace gender inequity.

This paper focuses on the work undertaken by our team to develop a case to raise the issue of gender as a teaching and learning issue within our institution. Prior to this research, each member of the team had independently become aware of practices which, while not overtly discriminatory, resulted in discriminatory outcomes, particularly for women. However, there appeared to be little awareness of these practices among academics or students. This in itself is not surprising. In everyday teaching and learning, there is little which would alert either students or teachers to the possible discriminatory nature of the practices within the field, and as Bourdieu notes "people at their most personal are essentially the product of exigencies actually or potentially inscribed in the structure or more precisely in the position occupied within this field" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989). Acknowledging that our perspectives of the structures we act within – or lack of awareness - are structured by those structures themselves, we use ethnographic approaches emerging from Bourdieusian reflexive sociology to provide insights on everyday teaching and learning practices, and to represent

these findings in a way which is likely to persuade participants to modify their own practice.

From anecdotal to research evidence: Exposing unconscious behaviours

Our team determined that the first step towards change within the institution was to develop recognition that gender was in fact an issue. We aimed to build a case which our colleagues would find persuasive – a case which required research evidence, rather than the anecdotal. We obtained a 2013 Vice Chancellor's Teaching and Learning Grant to undertake research which would demonstrate the nature of discriminatory practices within our institutional context. Previous experience had shown that as these behaviours were, in the main, below the level of awareness, little evidence could be obtained through survey style instruments. We therefore developed a multi-method ethnographic approach with a suite of methodological tools including video and audio recording, observational checklists and social mapping forms which were used to witness the behaviours of students in their everyday teaching and learning contexts, within classrooms, and in public learning spaces. We supplemented these observations with illuminative focus groups, and exploratory "fabulation" processes, where students were led through a process to determine ideal group work approaches.

Evidence of subtle discriminatory practices to build the argument for change

Our research provided case examples which demonstrated to both academics and students how normal teaching and learning practice could lead to discriminatory outcomes, for example:

- male students assuming group leadership and directing women to scribe, or "do the Powerpoint". While not a problem in a single instance, focus group data suggested that this gendered delegation, or subtle voluntary assumption of roles, occurred repeatedly;
- a confident, usually male, student determining the group, or class agenda with the first utterance, and/or dominating discussion, excluding the majority;
- gendered curriculum materials based on examples of little interest to women;
- gendered behaviour in groups which was to some extent structured by the nature of the assessment task with its focus on output, rather than process.

These findings demonstrated that discriminatory outcomes may be produced inadvertently, in the most part through the naturalised gendered behaviour students bring to the classroom context, and within what most academics would consider normal classroom practices. As conversation starters, these examples resonate with academics, and this recognition tends to inspire questions about alternative approaches, and subsequent modification of curriculum.

We also shared the findings with student participants. Presentations included photographs of the students, and examples from observations. Final year

economics students expressed astonishment that they had been reluctant to approach students of the opposite gender. Hearteningly, some men expressed concern that they had unknowingly, "talked over women". For many women, this was the first time they had been made aware of workplace gender equity statistics, and this was revelatory. We provided suggestions of alternative approaches to empower these students to adopt inclusion-minded approaches in their own workplaces.

We have since developed principles of gender and inclusion-minded pedagogy, a number of workshops, and innovative visual ideation approaches to conveying the research concepts in an engaging representation.

Harvard's acknowledgement helps build our argument

At the same time, Harvard Business School was also engaged in its own gender equity project. Although our project is very limited in comparison, reference to the Harvard project has been useful in further developing the argument for change, most significantly, the undertaking by Dean Nitin Nohria to double the number of Harvard Business Case Studies with female protagonists from 10 to 20 percent.

References

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