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Relational pedagogy in universities: creating epistemic communities

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Abstract

Universities are, above all, involved in knowledge work. Taking an inclusive view of knowledge means universities are more likely to be places which accommodate inclusive communities in which a diversity of knowledges and knowers are legitimised and recognised as having an epistemic contribution. Fricker (2015) argues that such a contribution is a 'central human capability' and is a feature of epistemic justice.

This presentation considers pedagogy in practice in which academics consider underpinning assumptions about knowledge and challenge systemic exclusion of knowers. It draws upon the edited book *Universities and epistemic justice in a plural world: Knowing better (*Meredith 2024) and brings together key learning from contributing authors who work in diverse geographical, cultural and disciplinary contexts. Their curriculum design and pedagogy address knowers with explicit legitimisation of their existing knowledge resources and epistemic contributions to develop relational forms of pedagogy based upon recognition of the person (Honneth 1996).

Full paper

Despite the rise of populism and its divisive rhetoric knowledge legitimated by universities has a particular power to frame issues and perceptions of reality through teaching and research: to 'name the world', in the words of Freire (1972, p. 135), according to a particular form of meaning-making and discourse. In creating epistemic communities it is therefore important to ask, 'which knowledges and whose perspectives are currently favoured?', 'whose are missing?', in curriculum design and pedagogy in universities.

The university as a loose grouping of epistemic communities suggests that all should have the opportunity to 'contribute to the pool of shared epistemic materials—materials for knowledge, understanding, and very often for practical deliberation' for the 'local epistemic

economy' (Fricker 2015, p. 6). She argues that dismissing someone's capacity as a knower strikes at a fundamental dimension of their humanity, emphasising the significant harm that can result from such dismissal:

To be wronged in one's capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value. [...] The capacity to give knowledge to others is one side of that many-sided capacity so significant in human being: namely the capacity for reason (2007, p. 44).

Honneth's (1996) work on the affirmation or diminution of the individual according to their socially-valued achievements and contributions can illuminate the significance of each person being recognised as an individual whose epistemic contribution is acknowledged as important in their community.

Drawing on my edited book *Universities and epistemic justice in a plural world: Knowing better* (Meredith 2024), I take key insights and present themes of relational pedagogy for epistemic inclusion. The book contributors include academics who explicate their practice with those whose marginalisation is specific to their context. The academics discuss their strategies for challenging such exclusion and creating communities of knowers. The examples to be used are the teaching of: science with rural students in post-apartheid South Africa, contextual studies in art with working class students in the North of England, educational research methods with East Asian students in an American university, and educational leadership with international students in Australia.

The key ideas unifying themes towards creating epistemic communities are:

(i) Acknowledging the systemic nature of epistemic marginalisation: recognising the systematic nature of marginalisation in their contexts and how academia tends to devalue particular knowledge systems and experiences, all authors challenge 'deficit' perspectives which exclude students who have internalised discourses of personal or community 'lacking'.

(ii) Understanding and legitimising students' existing knowledge resources: knowing who is in the classroom, what knowledge and cultural traditions they come from, and what knowledge they bring with them. Some of the academics focus on this information as a starting point to validate students' experiences and prior knowledge resources as offering insights. Others work to deconstruct prior conceptualisations of legitimate knowledge. For example, Rogers (2024) challenges Western ideas of leadership and relocates leadership as a social and political practice.

(iii) Using specifically tailored scaffolding approaches. For example, Madondo (2024) explicitly teaches what he calls the 'rules of the game' in science, including academic literacy practices such as third person writing, explanations and descriptions. Corby (2024) builds from regular collaborative analysis activities in a shared learning environment that develop students' confidence incrementally to more complex academic writing. Inoue takes concepts from Japanese (2024) epistemology to reframe his teaching approach to

accommodate different understandings of the nature and purpose of questioning students.

(iv) Connecting curriculum to the students' lived experience: The students in South Africa were explicitly encouraged to share local rural knowledge practices as entry points to scientific understanding. This local knowledge served as a bridge when students later learn formal scientific observation skills in chemistry experiments. Corby integrated Jeremy Deller's film "The Battle of Orgreave" (2001) into her curriculum, which recreates the 1984 miners' strike and confrontation with police, challenging historical misrepresentations of the working class. This film directly connects to many of her students' home communities.

The ways in which these curriculum and pedagogical approaches increased student engagement and developed epistemic communities will be presented.