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Felt and attentive practice: how universities can actively cultivate citizenship that is critically conscious

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Despite the wealth of data on how students' civic habits and dispositions change there is very little attention to how universities can actively cultivate citizenship. This study aimed to discover what form of citizenship education can help nurture civic identities and agency. It used an action research methodology drawing on transformative pedagogies using authentic reflection, critical incidents and Forum Theatre. The data includes examples of participants reversing processes of othering and critiquing university systems. The crucial medium was experiences of empathy and compassion – being present for others. This process is termed 'felt and attentive practice', a rethinking of how civic identity entwines with civic agency that produces powerful examples of deep learning. This provides a rare example of how universities can nurture citizens who are critically conscious of the links between social issues and those on campus.

Full paper

Introduction

Young people's identities, political views and democratic habits are shaped by their participation in higher education (Bynner et al 2003, McFarland and Thomas 2006, Sloam et al 2020). However, there are very few in depth qualitative studies on how universities can intervene to nurture the civic transformation of students. This paper attempts to address this gap in the literature.

Conceptual framework and literature review

Osler and Starkey (2005) categorise citizenship as a status, feeling and practice. This helps identify the necessary legal or formal position, the felt sense of citizenship – such as feelings of belonging – and the role as an agent in the public space. The focus on identity

(feeling) and agency (practice) is justified by the role of university education in shaping the beliefs, norms and values of learners, and their capacity for agency (Ashwin et al 2016; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016; Taylor et al 2019). Several studies suggest students' civic identities and agency are pulled in different directions by a student's discipline, interaction in student life and employment-oriented values (von Berg, 2019; Brooks et al 2022; Muddiman 2020; Ryan 2011). How this process can be affected by an educational programme is largely unknown. Where universities run global citizenship education programmes, civic values are diluted by employability (Hammond & Keating, 2017), leading to a disconnect with students' everyday lived experience (Sen, 2020). This suggests a research question of how an educational intervention might cultivate the civic identities and agency of undergraduate students that is critically conscious.

Methodology

Pedagogical research facilitates how young people express their views and experiences in authentic learning experiences, and provides data to inform practice (Starkey et al 2014, p.428). It is led by a teacher-researcher who is transparent about their aims, and co-creates new stories around civic identities and experiments with civic agency. The emphasis on exploring identities and agency led to the use of authentic reflection exercises (Freire, 1970) and critical incidents with marginalised groups in society (Mezirow, 1990), to question norms, beliefs and values, and, Forum Theatre to experiment with behaviour (Boal, 1998). Pre and post interviews and focus groups allowed participants to relate their experiences around questions directed to senses of citizenship and possibilities for agency. Credibility is founded on consultation with participants on the research design, regular engagement over a period of six weeks, anonymous feedback, and member checking in a report back session.

Data and findings

The students perceived the effect of their participation in the project in two ways. Firstly, it led to questioning of norms, values and beliefs that excluded others; and, secondly it led to expressions of solidarity and collective agency over shared senses of injustice at university.

The first theme emerged from students' critical incidents with marginalised groups. They reported how it challenged their sense of self and community: how 'it's made me feel as a person that I shouldn't be such a singular person'. They started to empathise with homeless persons stating 'They feel alone. They can't open it out to the world'; and humanise refugees, who were 'normal people, chatty, friendly, laughed'. They found that those who are othered and excluded 'just wanted somebody to listen to, and I was happy to sit there and talk to them'.

This value of being present for others was transposed and critically reflected in a Forum Theatre play on mental health at university. They depicted in their play how people were

not present for others in distress. They said civic agency involved 'just guiding [others] and being there'. This led them to question the lack of support for transition to university, the poor resourcing of support services and the alienation in large classes.

Conclusions

This in-depth qualitative study provides insight into the potential causal mechanisms for shaping civic identities and agency at university. The students acted agentically with feeling, attending to the experience of others empathetically and compassionately; and, secondly, where this was a critical incident, it generated experience that enables one to question one's identity, and so agentically reimagine or reinforce it and imagine new ways of acting towards issues in one's own life. This combining of practice and feeling is termed 'felt and attentive practice'. This is a significant addition to the literature on citizenship education at university. There are very few studies that show a practical example of how citizenship can be nurtured that allows students to be critically conscious of issues on campus through becoming more aware of pressing issues in society.