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Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies Symposium: Pedagogic practices and their implications for inclusion/exclusion (0108)

OUTLINE

The widening participation agenda has raised questions about pedagogies and the ways they might be developed to address issues of inclusion and diversity (David et al, 2008). Too often over-simplified notions of the traditional and non-traditional students hinder the development of truly inclusive pedagogies (Craig, Hall, Peat 2010). Moreover, despite the ubiquitous nature of pedagogy in higher education (HE), as a concept it suffers from ambiguity and the lack of a shared understanding of the term (Stierer & Antoniou, 2004). Shulman (1987) coins the term 'pedagogic content knowledge' (PCK), where PCK refers to an individual's ability to effectively communicate the content knowledge to learners in a way that makes it understandable and accessible. Gordon goes on to suggest that pedagogic content knowledge refers to the skills individuals have to facilitate the learner's construction of knowledge in a deep and meaningful way (Gordon, 2009). This is the understanding used in this paper.

These levels of learning can be seen to progress in terms of complexity from the basic taking in of information to the interpretation, understanding and application of it. More recently others (Race 2011, Brown 2011) have argued that the very notion of providing information for HE students then assessing their application of it is an inappropriate and dated pedagogic practice. They argue against what Beckett and Hagar (2002) refer to as the 'front loaded model' of education towards a more participatory more facilitated and situated pedagogic practice. Beckett and Hagar take this further suggesting that the 'historically-hallowed elitism' (2002:4) of universities leaves the formal academic sphere depleted of its learning capacity.

Barnett argues that one of the aims of 'higher' learning is the development of a more questioning, critical engagement with the world (Barnett, 1997). Most lecturers aspire to challenge and develop their students' cognitive abilities and help them to progress towards

this different kind of engagement, perhaps through confronting concepts of troublesome knowledge (Land, 2003) or providing opportunities for transformative learning (Nohl, 2009). Research by Hockings et al (2008) illustrates that the development of 'inclusive classrooms' and pedagogies must be sensitive to complexities in the student experience, whilst drawing on a range of student-centred practices. However, research (Bligh, 1972; Gibbs, 1981; Ramsden, 1992; Laurillard, 1993) suggests that in practice we are, in fact, communicating facts and concepts in the disciplines, rather than helping students to develop higher order skills. We are aware that learning requires active student involvement and engagement, but studies (Gardiner, 1998; Deslauriers et al, 2011) reveal that students are still subjected to non-interactive lectures, many of which they fail to attend and much of the information from which they fail to retain or apply.

Assumptions can no longer be made about level and prior experience of learning at the point of entry into higher education (Haggis, 2008). It is unreasonable to expect that students intuitively know how to study at this level or understand traditional university academic conventions. A reflective and responsible approach to learning is the one traditionally valued and rewarded in higher education, but how we convey this to a diverse student body, whose experiences of education before entering the academy may have been unrewarding, unchallenging and surface is an aspect rarely overtly alluded to. The jargon students encounter, considered quotidian in academia may, in fact, alienate some, despite implicit references in course material, which may remain unnoticed by students unfamiliar with academic discourses. Factors commonly identified in other research around effective teaching and learning (Hockings, 2009; Crozier, G et al, 2008; Zepke and Leach, 2007) include clarity of academic expectations and conventions; discipline specific help and advice; opportunities for active learning through an engaged pedagogy and an inclusive curriculum which recognises and values student life experiences.

David and Weiler (2008) suggest that the growing social diversity among students challenges us to think more deeply about pedagogies and practices and to develop new theories which critique essentialist notions of classed, racialised and gendered subjectivities.

Important interconnections have been made between formation of masculinity, femininity and other social, generational and cultural differences, which profoundly shape student

dispositions to and experiences of learning (Archer, 2003; HEA, 2008). Academic practices, such as writing, speaking and communication skills, tend to privilege those traits traditionally associated with masculinity, including boldness, competitiveness and individualism (Francis et al, 2003; Leathwood and Read, 2009) 144). However, when some male students encounter challenges with academic forms of communication, they might avoid asking for support, as being seen as 'needy' is often perceived to run counter to hegemonic masculinity (Leathwood and Read, 2009). David (2008) points out the complexity of the evidence about intersections of diversity and gender when considering lecturers in types of involvement and participation, as gendered teachers or pedagogues.

While this re-assessment of HE pedagogic practice seems urgent to us as researchers and educational developers, there seems to be no real consensus about the importance of pedagogic practice and colleagues remain sceptical about the benefits of investing time in developing new approaches, preferring instead, given the pressures they face to prioritise the content knowledge of their discipline (Trowler and Cooper, 2002; Simon, 2010)

The methodological approach taken in this project is participatory (Lather, 1991) and involved us sharing students' comments on their learning experiences with those who teach them. This approach has proved to be a powerful vehicle for encouraging discussion and reflection on pedagogic practice. Our interim findings suggest that, while recounting inspirational educative moments, students are at times bored and uninspired by approaches they perceive as monotonous, whereas the academic staff are often disappointed by the responses of the students and their lack of engagement and motivation. This has been interrogated in discipline-specific staff focus groups, using quotations from the students to illustrate their perception of the teaching to which they are exposed in their studies. This paper will argue that there is a disjuncture between some dominant pedagogic practices in higher education and who they are experienced by students in relation to aspects of identity.

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