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The Measure of a Student (0221)

Introduction

Herder proposed that each person has an original way of being human: each person has his or her own 'Maß' or 'measure'. He connects this to the concept of 'Stimmung', signifying the special mood or state that is unique to an individual person. Stimmung is related to the etymon 'Stimme', meaning 'voice'. In this paper I link the process of recognising the measure of a student, in Herder's sense of understanding a student's unique way of being a person and a student, to the activity of listening in a particular and distinctive way to the student's voice.

Herder's work concerns the process of interpretation, the question of whether one person can ever accurately interpret or understand the measure of another. Herder believes this empathy is possible, but difficult to achieve. He proposes that the way to bridge a radical difference when interpreting is through 'Einfühlung', or 'feeling one's way in'. This implies that the interpreter may face a gap between his own perspective and that of the interpreted subject, and suggests a tentative approach for bridging that gap that is characterised by caution, reticence and no expectation of easy success.

Structure

My paper is organised around three questions concerning the concept of 'measure':

(1): What is measure?

 (2): Why does measure matter?

(3): How is measure recognised?

(1) What is measure?

What meanings are contained within an alternative interpretation of measure? 'Measure' as it is usually employed in higher education is both an evaluative term and one implying comparison with others. Measurement is therefore partly about regulation by others, or self-regulation. An alternative interpretation of measure is more concerned with recognition than regulation. This interpretation hints at a range of meanings that are different from performance and its assessment, and are about recognising the special inter-relationship of qualities that constitutes the unique identity, the state, of each person. One of the meanings of measure is connected with music, measure in the sense of a particular tune, tempo or beat. Herder's 'measure' suggests at its simplest level the notion of a signature tune, a unique harmony and combination of elements that can potentially result in a special expression of individuality for a person.

(2) Why does measure matter?

In what ways could this different understanding of measure matter for contemporary students, for example those in a large post-1992 higher education institution in the United Kingdom? Herder is linked with the Expressivist movement, at the heart of which is the notion of the self-unfolding subject. Expressivism recognises that the subject – the agent - is uniquely situated to express his/her own states, to reveal his/her special measure. An alternative construction of measure and measuring linked to responding to an unpredictable unfolding of the student – his/her process of becoming - in addition to measuring students

according to preconceived external categories, has implications for understanding and evaluating their experiences.

(i) 'Measure' and self-measurement

The first implication is that a construction of measure and measuring that recognises the notion of the self-unfolding subject incorporates the perspective of the person being measured, his/her self-measurement and self-evaluation, and takes into account his/her values about success and failure. In terms of measuring students, the student's own voice is given weight and listened to.

Appiah (2005:xii) suggests that the decisions and choices made in shaping a life belong ultimately to the person whose life it is. Individuals are the central and primary evaluators of their lives, in terms of their own goals and values. Creating spaces and openings for students themselves to articulate their own aims for their lives which, in Appiah's thinking, partly determine the standards by which those lives should be measured, can contribute to institutional strategies for improving retention through listening to the voices of diverse students, especially their values about success and failure.

(ii) Measure and identity

The second implication of an alternative construction of measure and measuring that recognises the notion of the self-unfolding subject is that it challenges familiar ideas and preconceptions about studenthood as a generalised category of identity. Pedagogical and cultural assumptions about studenthood may be probed and broadened out by the sometimes unexpected and surprising granularity and texture of actual students' developing experiences expressed from their own perspective and in their own voices. This is about diversity, and learning about diversity from listening to students, as well as through other institutional responses such as appointing academics or administrators as diversity champions, or establishing diversity committees.

(iii) Measure and measurers

The third implication is that challenging familiar ideas and preconceptions about studenthood has implications for staff as well as students. Values and judgements about the identity of studenthood espoused by individual institutions and external bodies potentially also impinge on the freedom of staff to inhabit their own roles and interpret their own identities, whether as teachers, mentors, researchers or administrators.

(3) How is measure recognised?

How might the measure of a student, in Herder's sense of the term, be recognised? One way is through listening. I suggest that renewed value is placed both on the practice of listening itself as having equal importance with the activity of speaking, and also on particular qualities in listening – mindfulness, empathy and openness to being surprised - through a disposition of beginner's mind, as a condition that fosters the discernment of measure.

Conclusion

Hearing things as if for the first time, so that new insights are possible, is an aspect of listening with creativity, being open to all the possible meanings of what is heard. In addition to the desirable characteristics of listening already noted, the property of respect is a further contributory factor to recognising the measure of a student. The concept of respect could function as an umbrella term for those other qualities, in the sense that they are expressions of a disposition of respect. An attitude of respect towards the other is a condition of listening, when listening is interpreted as an activity of recognising rather than regulating the measure of a student.

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