

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Social Competence a new discourse to : Support student Transition through Higher Education ?

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: This presentation is based on an ongoing Erasmus+ project, exploring the Development, Assessment and Validation of Social Competences in European Higher Education (DASCHE). The project involves 6 partners, representing a range of Higher Education contexts and histories. In this paper, we focus on the UK context, and consider the place, role and status of social competence in higher education as a means of supporting student transitions. We explore how the differing discourses relating to the purpose of university education (e.g. marketisation, employability, student satisfaction as well as student-centered pedagogy and students-as-partners) might impact upon the way we think about transitions. We will consider how existing, frequently competing, discourses might prioritise certain forms of curriculum and pedagogy that facilitate transitions whilst others serve as barriers. In particular, we consider whether curriculum and pedagogies that foster social competencies might offer an alternative to current dominant approaches to understanding and supporting transitions.

Adams, M., Bell, L.A., Goodman, D.J., and Joshi, K.Y. (2016). *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. 3rd ed. Oxon: Routledge

Paper: Background

This paper draws on our ongoing Erasmus+ project titled 'Developing, Assessing and Validating Social Competences in Higher Education' (DASCHE). The project aims to support and promote learning policy between countries and higher education institutions within Europe. In particular, the project explores the place of social competence, as defined in the European Qualifications Framework For Higher Education (EQFHE) in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment frameworks. In each partner country (Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, The Netherlands, and the UK), the researchers

analysed the national qualification frameworks, and conducted case studies with HE institutions to explore the stakeholder (senior management, academics, students) understandings and perspectives of social competence development through learning, teaching and extracurricular activities. In our presentation, we will primarily focus on the UK HE setting and consider these issues in relation to two key aspects: a) the construction of social competences within the context of competing discourses, and b) the relationship between social competence development and student transitions within and through HE.

Social competence development in HE

Firstly, we will explore the place of social competence within current dominant discourse about the role and function of higher education. We will consider how the rise of pervasive neoliberal approaches that have predominated in most Western countries (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Marginson 2013) might be at odds with the 'social competence' agenda. The emphasis such approaches place on employability, functionality and the individual being in direct competition with the social competence agenda and its emphasis on contributing to wider society and culture. We consider whether more traditional liberal discourses, such as that of Collini (2012), Barnett (2011) or Giroux (2012, 2014) who advocate for higher education as a place for developing socially minded and socially skillful individuals might seem to fit better with a 'social competence' agenda. Our approach to social competence development has a theoretical underpinning of critical pedagogy that sees education as a social practice. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, it also means that developing socially competent citizens requires a shift from pedagogical practices that enforce 'deposit-making' to learning and teaching that is co-constructed and relational as explained by Paulo Freire (1970, 81):

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people (Freire 1970, 81).

It is through meaningful interactions that the student and the teacher both become responsible for the processes of learning and change (Freire 1970). We argue that university education that is aimed to support social competence development and social empowerment requires active student engagement in examining the issues of justice/injustice in their own lives and society more broadly (Adams et.al 2016). It is about developing 'the educated hope' as vividly described by Giroux (2012, 122): 'Educated hope takes as a political and ethical necessity the need to address what modes of education are required for a democratic future'.

Student transitions into, through and out of HE

Having considered the place of social competence development in HE, we will then turn to issues of

student transition more specifically. Drawing on the model of transition proposed by Gale and Parker (2014) which suggests that in considering student transitions we should think of transition as falling into three distinct areas – induction, development and becoming. They argue that the view of transition adopted by individual higher education institutions will influence how they develop, implement and organise institutional policies and practices around transition. We argue that institutional views are in turn influenced by the dominant discourses surrounding higher education in the locale. We will draw on the four case studies conducted with the UK universities to provide examples of how the institutional discourses align and/or contradict with the national HE discourses. Institutions who see transition as being about inducting new students into the academy, and to studentship in general, will focus on the first year and tend to see transition as about a fixed point in time, confirming the existing scholarly work in the field (e.g. Burnett 2007; Gill et al. 2011; Kift et al. 2010; Krause and Coates 2008; Nelson et al. 2005; Wilson et al. 2009). This tends to affect the ways in which the universities plan and implement the social competence development for students. Furthermore, these rather instrumental approaches to student transitions (and social competence development) can and often will contradict with the views of academics and students who promote a more holistic approach to supporting student transitions through formal curriculum but also beyond the university education.

In our emerging findings, we argue that this view of transition as a holistic process does not fit neatly with the neoliberal discourses outlined at the start of the presentation, but it does allow for perceptions of the role and function of higher education to be taken into account. The social competence agenda as it is embodied within the EQFHE does not preclude the idea of individual development in the neoliberal sense nor does it contradict the idea of HE as a collective good. As such the social competence agenda might be used to facilitate a co-constructed approach to curriculum and pedagogy that acknowledges the significant part the academy has to play within wider society and culture whilst allowing for the fact that graduates need to be prepared for their own futures. In so doing we argue that we may arrive at a new co-constructed understanding of higher education itself.

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