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Creating a Transformative Space in the University

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Abstract: In recent years the idea of the university as a safe space has been quite controversial, with some identifying the university as a space to be exposed to new ideas and others seeing it as a space where controversial ideas should be kept out of the 'safe space'. Indeed, some might argue that the university should be a space where students and staff are encouraged to challenge knowledge and the status quo by engaging with different perspectives. This paper will explore the idea of the university as a transformative space, one that can provide a safe space to explore new ideas through freedom within a structure (Woods, 2005). As well as drawing on research on learning spaces (Savin-Baden, 2008; Cousin, 2010), this paper will use primary data from interviews and observations with nine critical educators in higher education to consider how educators can create a transformative space in the university.

Paper: Creating a Transformative Space in the University

Savin-Baden (2008) considers learning spaces, such as the university, as a place "in which one can hear things differently" (p. 8). Learning spaces in a general sense can be physical or metaphorical spaces in which learners can see issues in a new way, reflect on their beliefs or thinking, and be exposed to challenges to their current ways of thinking (Savin-Baden, 2008). The potentially idealistic perception of the university as a place for personal development would align with this view of learning spaces—offering a new environment for students to explore other perspectives and have their fundamental views about the world challenged by others. As the purpose of the university seems to be shifting from one of self-exploration and development to one of economic competition, the space for transformation and alternative ways of thinking is slowly closing up. While there is a significant body of research on the changes in higher education due to the introduction of student fees and market or managerial language and systems and how this affects society's perception of HE (Williams, 2012; Brown & Carasso, 2013; Temple, 2012), these changes also affect the space of the university itself. In this paper, I would like to explore how the university can continue to be, or become again, a transformative space for students and academics.

According to Fielding (2004), "transformation requires a rupture of the ordinary" (p. 296). Transformative learning is often seen as a situation that involves or causes an ontological and conceptual shift in the learner (Cousin, 2010). Both Cousin (2010) and Savin-Baden (2008) mention transformative learning in relation to threshold concepts, which are conceptualised as transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome. When learners are exposed to threshold concepts (which can be different for different people), they occupy a liminal, "unstable space in which the learner may oscillate between old and emergent understandings" (Cousin, 2010, p. 3). Savin-Baden (2008) further distinguishes between transitional and transformational learning spaces. Transitional spaces are those where the learner is moving from one place or position to another, which can be very difficult, but can lead to personal change. Transformational spaces, on the other hand, are "spaces where a sense of coming into oneself occurs – there is a sense of identity construction, of self-realization and of seeing the world anew" (ibid, p. 108). To achieve transformational learning, Savin-Baden suggests, learners must be exposed to problems that inspire them to reflect on their perspectives and identities. My question is, does the university still offer this kind of space? And if it doesn't how can educators encourage this reflection?

I came to these questions about transformative spaces while collecting data for my PhD thesis, which focuses on critical pedagogues in higher education. As I read through the transcripts, an interesting theme emerged that I wasn't expecting—space. In some cases, space was conceptualized as the space for educators and academics to teach in radical ways, in others it was about the space between students and academics. But in every instance, the participants talked about the university as a space for challenging knowledge, challenging the status quo, and exercising freedom within the constraints of the university. Although there are many challenges to the transformative space described above, the transformative space and the pedagogies associated with it can actively push back against those challenges and boundaries to construct the university as a space where students and academics can hear things differently and occupy a space that encourages a negotiation of the space between learners and old and emergent understandings.

Taking issues that were raised around space in the interviews, I will then offer some suggestions of how to address them based on practices I observed. The concept of space seemed to come into play on several levels: physical space, the space between students and teachers, and creating a safe space where students feel a sense of belonging.

Many of the critical educators found the structure of the university to be restrictive, from the size of the class, the layout of the classroom, or even the spaces in which they came into contact with students. A serious concern of many of the critical educators who participated in my study was that of class size, and how this affected their engagement with their students. Large classes make it difficult to connect on an individual level with students, making it hard to create a space where they trust and are willing to take risks, which are essential to transformation. However, this idea of

creating a 'safe space' might be problematic in itself, as several educators expressed a struggle between making students feel comfortable enough to engage in discussion while at the same time creating a space for students where their ideas about the world could shift fundamentally.

While there are challenges to creating transformative spaces in universities, the practice of the critical educators involved in my study offered examples of how this might be possible. In line with the work of Woods (2005), many of the educators seemed to create a space where students had a significant amount of freedom and autonomy, but within a structure. This was achieved by involving students in decision making about their own learning, like choosing essay topics or presentation topics, which gave them a sense of ownership over their learning. For this to work, and for students to think they have the ability to make these decisions, it was important to acknowledge that students have valuable knowledge to share through encouraging them to engage in dialogue with their peers and the teacher. Most importantly, these freedoms need to operate within boundaries or a structure of some sort—giving students choice and power goes against most of their previous experience in education, therefore it is key that they have some clarity around the boundaries so they feel supported and also know how far they can push at the boundaries to do something more creative.

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