

‘Coming from somewhere else’ – group engagement between students and academics

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Abstract

The present political and economic climate for universities can promote competitive learning and anxieties about individual students' academic achievements. It can inhibit the enjoyment and skill in shared learning. Group work can provide a creative, empowering avenue so students become proactive in their learning and engage more equally with academics. It has potential to enhance intellectual ability as well as social and emotional wellbeing, yet careful planning is essential to achieve this. This paper addresses the shortfall of prioritising assessment over relationships and identifies how relationships are central in preparation for assessment. It draws upon an ethnographic, qualitative and emancipatory approach to research. This approach enabled students to initiate the research focus and design of the last session. The paper identifies how the group was set up, developed and what it achieved. It makes recommendations for overcoming some tensions and fears that can inhibit effective group work so that social and emotional equity inspires intellectual development.

Keywords: group work; belonging; empowerment; social and emotional wellbeing; equality; ethnographic; increased confidence in learning.

Introduction

University is the chance in a life time – expensive yet expansive: socially and intellectually alive. Yet these characteristics are not inevitable. Universities evolved as communities of

scholars and teachers, and yet Biesta (2014) argues that the contemporary economic focus on students as consumers, and on 'learnification', inhibits these ideal communities developing. He argues that the dialogic process depends upon the development of 'subjectification'. Subjectification involves the development of individual initiative, action and responsibility, culminating in freedom and emancipation for learners so they engage more effectively with teachers. Learnification ignores the purpose of education and the need for students to direct their own learning. Biesta (2014) argues that this individualistic focus abstracts learning from its context, and that by contrast education is about a communal activity. If students are recognised as active learners in a community, their wellbeing and engagement with the university is valued. Consequently, if they experience a lack of identification with the university's culture, this becomes of concern as their confidence and initiative may not flourish. Inclusive practices need to be embedded in the university's culture so that all students have the confidence to question, take risks and develop mentally and socially (Cotton et al., 2013; Mamas, 2017).

This paper is based upon a research project that aimed to address discrepancies in power between academics and students. Laurillard (2002) and Noddings (2003) highlight this potential barrier to communication. It was therefore imperative that the methodology and ideological aims of the research corresponded. Our ethnographic, emancipatory model (Boog, 2003) aimed to achieve this. Post-structuralist and critical ethnographic approaches challenge the cultural hegemony in conventional ethnography (Kincheloe et al., 2011). This critical approach acknowledges the dialogic engagement between researcher and participants (or co-researchers) that develops, and aims to equalise the relationship for all engaging in the process. This highlights the importance of 'writ[ing] the researcher into the text' (Gordan et al., 2002, p.197). As lecturers and leading researchers, there was an ethical responsibility to be transparent about our ontological reflection. This related to our professional integrity and involved disclosing some personalised material. Therefore the design and engagement in the group process positioned us as part of the work. This rationale affects both the style and content of this paper.

This rationale made it implicit that I, as the key researcher, should expose my motivation and ideological stance. As a child with an Asian appearance growing up in North Norfolk in the 1960s, people saw me as 'coming from somewhere else,' and I grew into the position of being an outsider. This sense of not belonging reverberates in other contexts for other people. I surmised that some students may well experience being an outsider. The

potential to feel alienated and not belong may well inhibit engagement. Primo Levi (1987, p.15), in the preface to *'If this is a man'* (his profound book on the holocaust), writes: '...every stranger is an enemy'. This perceived suspicion implies that developing connections with others may require some negotiation and courage, finding common ground, and overcoming a sense of difference. As a counsellor I had learnt that students' capacity to exchange experiences and thoughts increased confidence and diminished a fear of other students. Our previous experiences and beliefs may underlie this capacity.

Experience of being bullied at secondary school was a common reason for students to take up counselling at university (Weale, 2017). Bullying erodes confidence and can affect academic attainment (Ladd et al., 2017). Furthermore, when students arrive at university they may know no one, and may feel isolated and anxious about their presentation. Goffman (1967) draws our attention to our 'performances' in different environments. He identifies how the concept of 'face' affects our sense of self-esteem and dignity so that we are invariably looking for approval from others in terms of who we appear to be. Self-consciousness, compounded by the experience of being bullied and lack of identification with, or sense of belonging to the university, may inhibit confidence and initiative. Universities aim to address potential alienation in their 'Fresher's' week, but after this valuable start, checking up on students' sense of belonging, or integration into university, may begin to fade as the academic curriculum and pressure take over.

As Reay et al. (2005) note, not all students may come from a cultural background that has primed them for what to expect, how to behave, nor where they may feel a sense of belonging. They can become socially isolated and withdraw from the institutional habitus of the university because their social world and experience is often excluded from the curriculum (Reay et al., 2005). Thomas (2002) considers the role of 'institutional habitus' which intensifies the difference between the positions of students from poorer disadvantaged backgrounds, who face financial hardships with increased fees. She also notes the cultural hegemony within universities that blames the student for not achieving by ignoring their disadvantages, rather than critique its own selective limitations. Academic hierarchy and elitism is inherent in universities. For example, Bourdieu (1992) considers the socio-political complexities whereby certain cultural values are reified at the expense of others. He talks of 'cultural capital' and 'symbolic violence' within educational institutions that prejudice certain knowledge and values over others, thereby silencing and undermining other cultural values. This can sanction and consecrate 'elite' and middle

class perspectives and power, maintaining social inequality. Murphy and Costa (2016) critique this generalisation, and argue for a more nuanced appraisal and examination of what specific cultural elements may affect access to cultural capital. However, Laurillard (2002) concurs with the concern raised by highlighting the difference in expectations. She clarifies how academics have expectations of 'higher level thinking' which may well be unfamiliar and daunting for certain students.

Students and lecturers may have quite different expectations and identification with the university. Therefore working in groups, implicit in the delivery of lectures and seminars, can be affected. The assumption that learning will occur requires further examination. Robinson et al. (2015) studying group work notes the contextual factors that can heighten fear of failure. Lecturers themselves may experience some anxiety around the presentation of their lecture (Scott, 2007). This dialogic dilemma and shared trepidation is invariably unspoken. Here then is an opportunity, yet success is in the balance.

Cultural discrepancies between students and academics, the university's values, and bias can affect communication implicit in group work. We set out to examine group processes that would address the cultural discrepancy and power imbalances that can inhibit learning.

Our group work

The context for our group work gathered students who may well not be as confident as others and, may be unfamiliar with the universities' expectations. It included a set of eight students on the BA Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree. These students are invariably more interested in becoming practitioners and this can affect their academic aptitude, as fewer enter university with A levels (several have diplomas). The Plymouth University Strategy 2020 and Office For Fair Access (OFFA) agreement (Plymouth University, 2013-14; 2017-18) identify ways to address these challenges and thereby overcome cultural disadvantages and power imbalances. Nonetheless, early childhood, with its implicit awareness of our shared vulnerability and humanity, provides a fertile platform for uncovering connections and discovering insights.

Drawing upon our shared interest in early childhood we chose to adapt and reinvigorate group work in specific ways (Chanda-Gool and Mamas, 2017). We noted the positive attributes of group work as outlined by Williams et al. (1991), Johnson et al. (1991) and Gibbs (1995). Group work is understood to have the potential to promote a sense of belonging and social integration which ultimately affects wellbeing (Jaques, 2000). Winchester-Seeto (2002) note peer evaluation in groups is a useful tool for developing student's analytical and evaluative skills. Yet as Robinson et al. (2015) have noted, group work can also create tensions and anxieties for students. Students' progress and achievement is assessed individually and it may not feel safe, or reassuring, to work collaboratively (Rock, 2009). Without careful consideration of the dynamics, power relations, and expectations, group work can become tokenistic.

Harrison and Cairns (2008) argue student-centred approaches are central to student participation. Laurillard (2002) sees the importance of situating knowledge in terms of a student's experience, and Healey (2005, p.194) notes students often see themselves as the 'recipients' rather than the producers of research. Our group work located students as co-researchers and participants. Students initiated parts of the research, and their own interests, as well as those of the course, were included. The aim to empower students to feel confident entails a holistic approach in terms of who the students are and how they may learn (Tinto, 1993). Tinto highlights the value in informal and formal dimensions of learning as a means of increasing students' motivation and engagement with academic work. This study aimed to synthesise the experiential and personal to develop intellectual exchange. It recognised underlying tensions, dismantled hierarchies, and developed a sense of fun and enthusiastic engagement.

Approach

In this study, group work takes a developmental approach and thematic progression. The ultimate aim was to encourage students to take the lead. The ethnographic approach aims to enrich understanding and capture the complexity of cultural exchange. It entails a deeper exploration of a particular group – studying the culture within its own terms. Our emphasis on self-reflection and group awareness was central to the dialogical approach, where meanings develop through the interaction between the researched and researchers.

Extrapolation of shared meanings (Vermunt, 1998), the dialogic, conversational exchange of ideas (Tedlock and Mannheim, 1995), were central to the methodology.

Criticality was embedded in the planning and throughout the research process. For example, as lead researchers prior to and post all sessions, we evaluated our degree of participation. We considered to what extent we were to engage, how much of our personal life was relevant or suitable, and how did we interpret what had happened and consequently plan the next session? Argyle (1992) suggests that the enquiry that ensues, when data is open to a range of perspectives, keeps an intellectual debate alive. Also, critical intersubjectivity retains the 'open-minded, responsive to evidence, accountable, critical-seeking manner' (Fay, 1996, p.221). All participants were encouraged to be 'active' in the research design, delivery and identification of topics

Design

Prior to students agreeing to commit themselves to the group work, each student was given an half an hour interview. This ensured their ideas were implicit in the design, helped students prepare themselves for the group work, and consider what they wanted to bring to the group work. Five group work sessions ensued and these lasted two hours each.

The data was composed of: transcripts of one-to-one interviews with each participant prior to the group work, and a group work transcript; anonymised feedback from participants; and reflective interviews of the researchers themselves. The transcripts and anonymised feedback aimed to triangulate findings, and the reflective interviews aimed to interrogate the findings and interpretation of material, to increase epistemological integrity between the researchers.

The procedure entailed ethical approval from the university to access the participants and to ensure they were not disadvantaged by the researchers' position as assessors of course work. Also, that the participants were fully aware of what the interviews and group work entailed. A departmental professor helped to evaluate what we were doing and developing.

Prior to the interviews, accessing the participants proved to be challenging. We had initially accessed first year students and presented our plans to them. The response was muted and we later realised that second year students may well be more responsive because they had to complete a piece of research themselves as part of their coursework.

However, the most effective means of encouraging students was to communicate with students we already knew, and they in turn drew in other students. Thus 'snow-balling' (Becker et al., 2012), where we deferred to the students' networks and realised our position as outsiders, enforced a student-centred approach. Therefore, despite the limitation of partial representation, snowballing was an effective and appropriate means.

Researchers

In accordance with the ethnographic approach, the researchers themselves need to declare their bias and interests, this was part of the reflective notes and recorded interview we shared. My childhood experience of racism (see Chanda-Gool, 2006) gave me an embodied link to other disadvantages the students may face (see Oliver, 1990). My co-researcher comes from a research background specialising in inclusive practice, with a particular interest in friendship networks and relational dynamics. We both wanted to create student-led, relational, active learning sessions to develop deeper learning through a dialogical approach (Calkins and Light, 2008).

Both in design and delivery I drew upon my counselling experience and knowledge; staying with emotions when there is social tension to maintain the safety and trust that may develop. We structured the sessions to start with and set out mutually agreed ground rules, identifying boundaries and safety of participants. We explained that this was not a therapy group and, if something uncomfortable arose, there were other sources of support outside the group, yet within the university. Confidentiality was crucial to the wellbeing of the group.

We aimed to identify themes that could be analysed and processes that could be evaluated. The processes centred on establishing a collaborative environment through the one-to-one interviews, and then using a developmental approach to the sessions to increase the confidence and initiative of students. Furthermore we lead and modelled the first two sessions to ensure turn-taking. We also exposed the confidence we had, as the

academics, to have different opinions which we were both interested in. This dialectic was essential to encourage the students to voice their individual differences and challenge without causing discomfort. This dialectical approach also helped to develop a culture of belonging and connection. The data analysis and findings emanate from an inductive, dialogical process to develop shared understandings.

Findings and discussion

Key themes that emerged from the participants' feedback were: the importance of safety; increased trust and voice; increased initiative and engagement with diversity and difference; and enjoyment in learning. These findings endorsed the potential for group work to enhance communication, shared understanding and wellbeing, as articulated by Williams et al. (1991) and Jaques (2000).

Importance of safety

As identified above, a key ingredient to the success of the study depended upon clear boundaries, confidentiality, and clarity around the lack of assessment. These features developed the sense of being safe. As one student expressed:

...it was being able to talk openly on sensitive subjects... knowing that I won't be judged. However, this was done when we first discussed the ethics concern right at the beginning [there was a safe base].

Also the initial interviews, anonymous feedback, and the group work comments identified anxiety around group work. For example:

I become very nervous when meeting and communicating with new people, so on the first session I felt very poorly and didn't contribute as much as I could have done to the discussions. As the sessions carried on..., I contributed more and was able to present my own findings and ideas to the entire group, this made me feel like I had really accomplished something and I was very proud of myself.

The initial anxiety concurs with Rock's (2009) awareness of tensions around group work:

... What I learnt from the experience was that I am able to engage in-group work activity as I always thought that I was a shy person... I showed myself that I do have the courage to open my mind and to be able to share my own opinions on things.

These responses identify how feeling safe (through increasing the sense of equality) increased courage to speak out and related to the trust that developed. The comment 'Thank you for sharing your opinions/ experiences with us as well' registered the students' appreciation for our more equal setting, thereby, overcoming some of the hierarchical structure inherent in universities that Bourdieu (1992) and Thomas (2002) articulate.

Increased trust and voice

Students voiced this increased trust in the group: 'I have learnt that I can trust people', registering a transition and development through the sessions. For some, increased trust was a considerable development:

I started to hate group work, because I was bullied... and I've always been scared of group work since. It's really nice here, to actually feel like no-one's judging me, and I can actually contribute... and feel equal.

The trust and sense of equality that developed also increased confidence and ultimately the capacity for initiating the session. For example:

I learned that I have a voice, and that I have opinions and ideas that can be valuable to the group, as previously my self-esteem was quite low about my abilities.

Most importantly an informal approach (see Tinto, 1993) and dialogical approach (see Calkins and Light, 2008) helped to increase the participants' sense of voice, and ultimately engendered confidence to ask the tutors about academic work, which they had not felt able to before:

I liked the dynamic with the tutors, as it felt like everyone was equal and we all engaged to the same extent with the topics we covered, and the work that we did, and it also felt like we could be a lot more open about issues that we were having to do with our courses, and other areas of our lives.

Again this increased confidence and openness to engage was enhanced by our decision that all participants should choose their own subject to present, and bring their depth of experience and thinking into the session. Students became more able to look outside themselves and open to learning, as one student said: '...being part of this group allowed me to put my personal feelings regarding the situation to one side for a minute and consider the bigger picture'. Increased confidence and self-worth, through voicing anxieties and gaining support, helped to develop evaluative and analytical thinking.

Initiative and engagement with diversity and difference

Valuably students did refer to their academic work and material spontaneously. There were references to course work and themes such as diversity, racism, TED talks and prejudice, as well as self-evaluation with reference to disadvantaged groups and other relevant themes. Students initiated discussions and integrated academic reflection with personal perspectives. The focus on what 'normality' could possibly mean encapsulates this, as outlined below:

The quotations articulated below are represented by 'L' for lecturer and 'S' (1-5) for particular students.

S1: I want to discuss normality. From my interview with Sofia, I assumed that I had a normal family, and then going further into the interview, I was like, oh, okay, my brother's gay, my sister's got special educational needs, I've been temporarily disabled twice, and my parents are still together but they're full-time foster carers now. We've got two children living in our family and my dad's also got long-term illnesses and stuff. And I just assumed because that, for me, has always been the norm, so I thought that was normal. And like, I just wanted to see what everybody thought about what makes normal 'normal'?

S2: I have a question... As a child, had you thought about it at all? Had you thought about being a normal child, or not a normal child? Because I thought about it quite a lot when I was a child. This idea of wanting to be normal...

S3: This is kind of a general point for me, because I am trying to see how children think today, whether they think they are normal or not. How us adults can help them to feel fine with themselves and not feel like, you know, I'm not normal.

S2: Because that's been your main area, hasn't it, to do with disability and inclusion and wanting to know how to make people feel part of society rather than outside it?

Initiating this discussion ultimately made the student feel as follows:

S1: To start with, I did feel like... there wasn't much contribution to begin with but once other people got into it I definitely learned a lot. Yeah, it was cool.

Enjoyment in learning

Scarfe (1962, p.120) identifies how 'play itself is education' and refers to Einstein's words: 'All play is associated with intense thought activity and rapid intellectual growth'. This playfulness emanating from productive thought was captured by an increase in laughter as the sessions progressed. At the end of the discussion on normality, this playfulness is captured in the exchange below:

S1: Yes. But we could spend hours [on the topic of normality].

L: Yes we could spend hours on this one. Obviously ..., you did brilliantly!

S1: It helps that I was very good!

Finally, on departing one student expressed the enthusiasm and engagement she had experienced:

S5: It's been great. I'm so glad that I did it. I've learnt more about myself and stuff, I've learnt more about everyone. Not just my friends, but I've made new friends and I've got to know you guys and I think that's an opportunity that's priceless. You know, you pay all this for Uni, but signing up for things like this, I think that's what makes it worthwhile, yeah. I'm grateful for it.

Limitations

Paradoxically, as the engagement and enthusiasm increased, so did the need to hold on to structure and timing. Students' initiative still required monitoring and facilitating by lecturers.

Students were not assessed. The lack of assessment, though a strength in terms of creating a more trusting environment, limits the relevance of our findings in terms of lectures and seminars that entail assessment. They are therefore only relevant to building the foundations for group engagement. However, we do believe that fostering social understanding and engagement is essential for working in groups that are later to be assessed. The discussions between researchers prior and post sessions were crucial to the success of these sessions: boundaries, issues of confidentiality, timekeeping, and monitoring of process were regularly assessed. This requires time, commitment and evaluation. The one-to-one interviews established the value in all participants' contributions but again this is time consuming, and also requires some pastoral skills academics may not always be trained in.

This was a small scale study with participants that are unrepresentative of the general student body. Our participants all volunteered which may have an influence on their motivation to engage. Further research is required to ascertain how to engage all students. In this instance the rationale for the group work was set up as an opportunity for research experience, and thereby integrated into the syllabus. Nonetheless we did experience a challenge in engaging students generally.

This carefully considered approach is vital to build relationships. As Tinto (1993) and Harrison and Cairns (2008) argue, peer evaluations and student initiatives are highly attractive to students, and are more likely to develop out of good relationships and

communications. The students themselves recommended more task orientated collaborations once the group had been securely formed.

Conclusion

We were all surprised and inspired by our engagement. Both students and academics became more relaxed emotionally, socially integrated and interested in each other. The process became transformative, students led and we all learnt more about our shared worlds. We developed a group identity and sense of belonging, we learnt about our differences and connections, and shared our mutual enthusiasm for learning. Trepidation was transformed into trust and confidence. As the main researcher, my own sense of being an outsider dissolved and I walked into large lectures with a new sense of connection with the many students present. Our shared humanity was more apparent to me.

Diversity lay at the heart of our particular group and yet all of us revealed an ability to step out of our 'comfort zones'. Differences were embraced rather than experienced as problematic. 'Coming from somewhere else' was transformed into an opportunity to share, celebrate learning, and develop understanding.

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