

Engaging with International Students An Account of practice in On-line Learning

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Abstract

Increasing attention is focusing on the value of Critical approaches to enhancing networked learning (Hodgson & Fox, 1995, McConnell, 1999, Trehan & Reynolds, 2002).

This paper examines how critical approaches to on-line learning and psychoanalytic processes can be harnessed to produce valuable insights into some of the social processes involved in participative on-line learning, and challenges, the implicit assumption that such practices necessarily bring about equality. Interculturality and diversity in student groups influence power relations, which in turn are likely to affect the process of on-line participative learning and its outcome. Psychodynamic perspectives not only explore underlying power and control issues but also actively engage in an examination of political and Inter-cultural processes affecting the development process. Such perspectives provide an opportunity to participate creatively in a collaborative sense making process, where understanding emerges by experimentation and through engagement with diversity and intercultural perspectives.

Psychodynamics and Interculturality

The interplay between psychodynamic approaches and network learning provides an opportunity to explore participative on-line learning at an individual, group and community level as conscious and unconscious processes. Psychodynamic perspectives illuminate approaches that differentiate between behaviours and activities geared toward rational task performance and those geared to emotional needs and anxieties. The application of this approach emphasises the importance of understanding human relationships through the idea of connectedness and relatedness. In doing so, the emphasis is placed on "learning from the conscious and unconscious levels of connection that exist between the self and others, people and systems" (French & Vince, 1999, p7). To develop our understanding of interculturality within participative learning, we need to find ways of exploring the nature of authority, the exercise of authority and power, the relationship of individuals and the learning communities to their social, political, cultural and economic environment. We also need to examine how emotions (e.g. humour, fear, anxiety) reverberate on the relational nature of participative learning and impact on the International student community.

Applying psychodynamic ideas to participative learning means not just exploring assumptions of power and control but actively engaging in an examination of political and cultural processes that impact on the learning process in an intercultural context. Another critical aspect of psychodynamic theory to the study of on-line assessment is the interrelation between emotions and International community dynamics. Emotions and the study of the International learning community are central to psychodynamic theory because it reveals emotions as the prime medium through which people act and interact.

The intended contribution of this paper is to explore and identify ways in which the interplay between on-line participative learning and psychodynamics can provide an opportunity to evaluate and reflect on the relevance and impact of interculturality within the learning process. In doing so, I am proposing an approach that illuminates the quietly spoken aspects of interculturality as a backdrop for unveiling the hypocrisies and

contradictions of engaging in on-line participative learning, which can create isolation, exclusion and discrimination in programmes that encompass students from a variety of International cultures.

The paper firstly explores the ways in which interculturality, diversity and difference have been examined in management and adult learning literature. Secondly, the paper illuminates how multi-cultural student groups influence power relations, which in turn are likely to affect the process of participative learning and its outcome. The final section cultivates a proposition for learning from psychodynamic theory as a vehicle to understand the complex political and social dynamics that surface within on-line learning.

Exploring Interculturality, Diversity and Difference

Interculturality, diversity and difference are central themes in any discussion of contemporary multi-cultural education. Educational institutions are faced with the challenge of how to ensure that the diversity of perspectives of different student groups are effectively heard, incorporated and managed. A key aim of multi-cultural education has been to promote knowledge, recognition and respect for different cultural tradition (Bonnett,2000). However Reynolds and Trehan (2003) argue that whilst difference has achieved the status of shibboleth, a social good, a source of richness, a resource to be welcomed, worked with and managed, contrary to such rhetoric management education seems to have largely ignored differences that surface in the classroom, or contributed to its suppression. Cousins (2008) highlights some key questions in relation to interculturality, namely, 'Does the term invite an overdrawn view of cultural difference? Does interculturality line up with the politics of identity and does the concept implicitly posit stable, homogenous cultures?' (p.1) The premise of this paper is to examine whether alternative, more participative pedagogies such as on-line participative learning reinforce values off consensus that potentially diminish the importance of difference or is the cosmopolitan classroom a microcosmic manifestation of the very processes that lead to divisions and exclusion.

Unravelling Difference and Diversity

What do we mean by the term 'difference'¹ and how is it related to interculturality? This question has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (see, for example Reynolds and Trehan, 2003, Kondola and Fullerton, 1998, Gavin and Lorbiecki, 2003 and Jay and Jones, 2005) and is one that does not yield a simple or discrete answer, a fact testified to by the scope and remit of the studies highlighted above. Reynolds and Trehan(2003) refer to difference as not only to those such as gender, race or formal differences of role within a course but also to the varying and sometimes conflicting values and beliefs which people bring with them about learning and learning relationships The concept of difference has become of strategic interest in the education sector as International management programmes with culturally diverse intakes on postgraduate and undergraduate management courses grow and are being replicated in universities up and down the UK and in teaching institutions of other developed economies.

Diversity describes the range of visible and non-visible differences that exist between people. Managing diversity harnesses these differences to create productive environments in which everybody feels valued, where talents are fully utilised and in which organisational goals are met (Kondola and Fullerton 1998).Valuing differences, particularly those of structural origin such as gender, ethnicity or 'race' is not a prominent feature of management education, particularly as much of the rhetoric of managing diversity is just that – an intention to 'manage' difference rather than to understand or work with it (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). So there is a case for foregrounding any difference as an essential element of people learning together and as an opportunity for learning that might be applied to the workplace.

In exploring difference the work of radical and feminist educationalists provide some important insights, Feminist pedagogies in particular have contested the fiction of equal relationships implied in propositions of 'classical liberatory' forms of education (Weiler, 1991, p. 450). Similar challenges are made in critiques of idealized claims for equality in communication (Fraser, 1994), and of concepts of community (Young, 1986) in

¹ Here we use the term 'differences' as broadly defined by Michael Reynolds and Kiran Trehan (2000) to encompass gender, race or sexual differences, as well as differences in values, cultures or beliefs.

which differences 'in the sense of the basic asymmetry of subjects' are denied (Young, 1986, p. 10) as in the likelihood of voices of the other becoming 'lost or silenced'. Earlier propositions for dialogue based on trust and a commitment to social equality had met with similar criticism for discounting the destructive effects of asymmetrical relations on aspirations for democratic classroom 'dialogue'. Not least in discounting the consequences of differences in power and influence between students and tutors (Ellsworth 1989). As Lather (1992) points out, '...to deconstruct authority is not to do away with it but to learn to trace its effects, to see how authority is constituted and constituting' (p.124). If not addressed, differences and their relationship to interculturality may well undermine possibilities for equal dialogue. If they are confronted, and space protected for marginalised discourses (Beyer and Liston, 1992), a common interest in learning may be sufficient for respect, understanding and dispute to coexist. From this point of view, rather than from the perspective of critical theorists, and in stark contrast to the psychologising traditions of much management education, it becomes important to know how intercultural impacts in the education process, on what basis, of what kind, and with what consequences for an individual's experience and subsequent action - whether as student or tutor.

In the section that follows I develop some of these arguments, and relate the issues back into an educational context and consider how differences manifest themselves in the learning experience of International management students. As illuminated at the outset of this paper, the author teaches on an International management learning programme, one that has representatives from a variety of different nationalities.

On-line Participative Learning

The concept of participative learning in on-line environments is based on several assumptions according to McConnell (1999). In participative learning students are actively involved in decisions about how to learn, what to learn and why they are learning. They are also involved in decisions about criteria for assessment and the process of judging their own and other learners' work. The practice of on-line learning has raised critical debate with reference to programme design (McConnell 1994), the role of tutors (Hardy, 1993) and gender differences in on-line groups (Hardy, 1994, McConnell, 1997). However, attention to issues specifically concerned with assessment is to be found to only a limited extent.

McConnell (1999) argues that collaborative assessment in on-line learning environments is often a difficult process for students and staff to implement. On-line collaborative assessment involves learners having to assess their own and others' learning through the negotiation of criteria and methods of assessment. Whilst this approach is designed to enhance learning and to be developmental, it can also create anxiety, uncertainty and stress (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000). Students are often concerned about their lack of knowledge and experience in relation to assessment and feel uncomfortable with the prospect of assessing their own work, and the work of others. Yet as was observed earlier, whilst these are important issues, there is limited discussion of the implications and impact such issues have within on-line learning environments particularly in a multi-national context. In the main the literature on participative learning tends to focus on practicalities of group work and on offering guidelines for future practitioners.

In the rest of this paper, in order to illustrate the interaction between on-line participative learning, and the complex political and social dynamics of learning groups, I examine the aims of interculturality and difference in an on-line environment in the light of the experiences on an International Postgraduate programme.

Learning to be silent: The dis/empowering impact of on-line practice

Anyone could feel anxious about the learning context; an outsider in the management class; different and outnumbered by others. There are likely to be certain, if rare, situations that silence even the most confident extrovert. But I am not talking of this. Silence most affects those who are 'different', characterised as:

...the presence of historically constituted relations of power, privilege and lack of understanding on the part of members of advantaged groups, and reasonable grounds for mistrust on the part of members of disadvantaged groups. (Narayan, 1998;p.35)

Whilst anyone might occasionally feel out of place, a lifetime of 'difference' informs the language and identity of women, of people from different ethnic minority communities generally. Understanding contribution and voice is therefore not just a question of the numbers, in the sense of having groups where women or multi-national students are not a minority; in the hope they feel confident enough to find their voice. As Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) observes, the idea of each person having a single voice is a fallacy, since for each of us a 'voice' is a multiple construction. I will argue in this paper that silence cannot be understood without a power/knowledge perspective (Michel Foucault, 1980). I will draw from feminist and post-colonial literature to argue that silence needs also to be understood, at some times as a form of resistance, at others as having no voice, and at others as being emotionally frozen in response to anxiety within the on-line learning context.

Those who think of community only in a positive sense should remember the intrinsic limitations of such an order. Traditional communities can be, and normally have been, oppressive. Community in the form of mechanical solidarity crushes individual autonomy and exerts a compelling pressure to conformism. (Giddens, 1994:p.126).

In recent literature the concept of the learning community has been increasingly examined from both a critical pedagogy and postmodernist perspective². For the purposes of this paper I do not intend to elaborate on the latter perspective although it undoubtedly adds additional insights into notions of the learning community. From a critical pedagogy perspective Fox (2001) e.g. claims that Learning community based pedagogy aims to maximise student and/or pupil participation in the framing of the topic of learning and the skill of critique. He points out that without participation, and its consequence, the problematisation and customisation of content, the individual teacher and student confronts bureaucratically standardised intellectual curricula and are alienated from the process of learning just as the worker is alienated from the means of production.

He further claims that the learning community seeks to reverse the alienating effect of traditional authoritarian education and quotes Hooks (1994: 8) who tells us:

To begin, the professor must genuinely value everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community.

The on-line learning community concept involves increased levels of participation: each individual is recognised, their presence valued and their contributions produce resources which enhance the collective good. Further, the learning community concept involves "... some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics" (ibid). The professor cannot escape a higher level of responsibility for these dynamics, but ultimately "... excitement is generated by collective effort" (ibid). On-line Learning community based educational philosophy and practice required a sharing of responsibility for learning methods, the curriculum followed, and assessment procedures adopted. And, while these participative practices take time, they allow participants to customise their own pursuit of learning helping to prevent the estrangement of the person from the knowledge they produce and own. Yet the majority of the literature on multi-national groups and learning communities, if it does not entirely ignore the theme of difference deals with it superficially or neglects alternative explanations.

A sense of powerlessness in relation to others

On-line learning groups are imbued with and surrounded by social power relations, which contribute to the construction of individual and group identity. As McGill & Beaty say of action learning sets, they:

Have a political dimension in that they replicate interpersonally and in the set, the sense of power and powerlessness that is found in any other group or organisation. (1995:p.191)

² Barbara Thayer-Bacon and Charles S Bacon, Philosophy Applied to Education (New Jersey: Merrill, 1998)

Action learning groups tend to mirror the sociodynamics of wider society, so the influence of race, class or gender on the habitus students enact at university, often serves to recreate oppressive environments that silence and disempower some people. All groups develop norms and establish a dynamic of influence and hierarchy, despite any rhetoric around equality. Such norms derive from the most influential members, those with higher status within the group, and act to create a boundary of inclusion/exclusion. Bordieu's concept of habitus,

... 'a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures' which provide individuals with class-dependent, predisposed ways of relating to and categorising both familiar and novel situations. (Brubaker, 1985:p.758, Shilling, 1993:p.129)

is useful in explaining the origins of patterns of thinking and their potential to subconsciously exclude those with 'other' ways. Our habitus is the way we have developed and internalised ways of approaching, thinking about and acting upon our social world, it is;

...formed in the context of people's social location and inculcates in them a 'world view' based on, and reconciled to, these positions. As such it tends towards reproducing existing social structures. (Shilling, 1993:p.129)

Bordieu argues that the habitus is embodied in ways of walking, talking, moving etc. In a group in which diversity/interculturality of speech or bodily demeanour is not dominant, it may well be interpreted negatively, as inappropriate or inferior. Marshall (1996) describes the sexual stereotypes of Black women in Britain, and the pressure on women to either conform or outrightly reject, rather than there being space to negotiate identity. Bordieu (1987) argues that the level of prestige, or status individuals are perceived to have within social settings is associated with their symbolic capital, a combination of their economic capital, cultural capital (derived from 'legitimate' knowledge and behaviour) and social capital (derived from relationships and connections). Whiteness, Blackness, culture, ethnicity, class and gender all afford greater or lesser amounts of capital in different contexts.

For those whose position is constructed as marginal within a group, they are likely to feel vulnerable and this can lead to fractures, usually along the lines of ethnicity, whereby they form smaller enclaves with the few on the course with whom they share some cultural capital. Thus familiarity, linguistic and ethnicity, becomes the inevitable backdrop when collaboration proves to be difficult.

This is illustrated by the following Chinese student's comment;

Some of the group think Chinese students refuse to speak out during the on-line discussion, but we do not get a chance, some people speak more and we wait but they do not listen.

Many writers have argued that differences imbue a radical sense of powerlessness (e.g. Gilroy, 1987, hooks, 1994, Murray, 1987). If the position of an individual within the learning social system is adversely affected by being different in some sense, they may feel there are more political consequences for them than for those in the mainstream, from 'taking the lead', or 'sticking their neck out'. This in itself can be silencing, as Magda Lewis puts it, they 'spare themselves the pain of "outsiderness"' (1993:p.38)

The social context is an oft-neglected perspective on learning. Some authors have argued that learning should always be understood as occurring within a social context (e.g. Jarvis, 1987), and Vince (1996) criticises Revans' and Kolb's lack of analysis of the social and political context of experiential learning (Revans, 1982, Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning requires students to take responsibility for learning, which Vince (1996) suggests has psychological implications in the sense that the individual may need to overcome fears of, for example, speaking out, challenging, risking negative responses from others.

The social context of learning is inevitably shaped by race, class and gender and Bourdieu's concept of capital helps us understand that there may consequentially be more emotional risks for those who are not part of the

dominant group. In that sense the habitus 'different' students may carry into a mixed academic environment may reinforce '...the feeling of being a stranger in the academic universe' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, quoted in Mirza, 1997; p.230) describing Black women's experiences in white male academia).

Another area for consideration is the issue of trust, which can be exacerbated by the mutual incomprehension deriving from cultural diversity in on-line learning. On our programme we encourage the development of multi-cultural teams (each with four to five members), and many of the assignments require the participants not only to demonstrate learning about content (for example, HRD models and perspectives, organizational learning). They also are asked to reflect on the process issues they experienced in the course of undertaking the tasks (particularly group projects), such as how they made decisions, what happened in their group, strategic exchanges that occurred in the on-line discussion or how they felt. The group itself is seen as a source of learning about intercultural dynamics, what Reynolds and Trehan (2001) have termed 'classroom as real world'. Because of the diversity of the student population, the group is typically a source of gender, ethnic, age and occupational diversity, where issues mirror some of the patterns in organizations and society. Students are encouraged to reflect upon, act on and learn from their feelings and experiences of the ensuing value and power dynamics, as the following extract illuminates:

... On reflection it allowed me to develop two things, the ability to self assess subjectively, objectively and to think about the process of group work and who contributes, and why; this sponsored interesting debates. (extract from on-line discussion)

Reflections

The challenge of working with a multi-national student community on a Human Resource Development programme is that issues emerge which might not be obvious for more homogenous student groups, or those who embark on a programme already with some political awareness. My observations reinforce the criticisms of feminist pedagogy, that participative learning environments are not a utopian, non-hierarchical environment; the concept of a learning 'community' can be problematic and has often been presented naively in a multi-national student context. The experiences of multi-national students poses challenges to the aspirations of interculturality. Ideas and learning from feminist pedagogy help to explain the complexities of interculturality within the programme but, given our context, they do not necessarily deal with the extent of diversity within the programme. Participants are not embarking on a Women's studies or Black studies course, and, typically are not very politicised. This is very different from working with Critical feminist pedagogy in a more homogenous environment.

Interculturality and difference in on-line learning has to be appreciated as far more significant than traditionally understood within management education and learning. I am arguing for a fuller recognition of how power relations are critical in constructing individual positions within international student groups, and how this shapes communication and interaction in an on-line environment. Through engagement, interaction or silence particular social interests get promoted, whilst others are rendered invisible. Learning from experience is central to psychodynamic approaches. Psychodynamics engage participants in a process of drawing from experience to make connections between their learning, work and life experiences, and to understand and change interpersonal and organizational practices. Thus psychodynamic approaches open up for critique the core values of interculturality, such as equality, openness and trust, which are challenged by the imbalance of power, status and social cultural capital which exist within the growing multi-national classroom. Silence and participation within on-line learning provides an opportunity for learning about and working with the complexities of inclusion, contribution and resistance within education.

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