

Learning and teaching for diversity and difference in higher education: towards more inclusive learning environments

This project explored the implications of increased diversity in higher education. It investigated teachers' and students' conceptions of themselves, of each other, of learning and teaching, of knowledge and of their ways of knowing, across two universities, one pre- and one post-1992 and in a range of disciplines. The aim was to work alongside university teachers to help develop strategies to improve academic engagement and participation, to create more inclusive learning environments and to inform policy and practice in university teaching.

- Students value teaching that recognises their individual academic and social identities and that addresses their particular learning needs.



University teachers need to develop inclusive pedagogic practices and curricula that take account of the diverse interests and needs of students in each class.

- The dominant notion of traditional and non-traditional students creates oversimplistic understandings which limit the development of inclusive, engaging teaching.



Academic developers should help create a more sophisticated understanding of diversity that reflects students' range of social, cultural and educational backgrounds.

- University systems designed to assure quality and maximise the economic efficiency of teaching constrain teachers' capacity to create inclusive pedagogies.



University leaders need to ensure that systems do not limit the learning of students from diverse cultural, social and educational backgrounds.

The research

The key questions addressed were:

- How do teachers and students see each other in their respective roles?
- What conceptions of learning and teaching, and of knowledge and ways of knowing, do students and teachers have?
- How if at all do these conceptions influence teaching practice and academic engagement?
- How can a deeper understanding of oneself as a teacher and knowledge of one's students as individuals improve teaching practice and the academic engagement of all students?

In this project we used a number of concepts and terms in specific ways. They include:

Academic engagement

Academic engagement is a way of understanding learning and teaching, associated with 'deep' approaches to learning, but which also takes account of disciplinary, economic, social, political and historical factors that influence learning. It includes the ways in which students and teachers come to know and how they bring their own identities, backgrounds and experiences, and those of their peers, to the learning task.

For the purposes of this study, the student who is 'academically engaged' appears intellectually, socially and personally involved in learning that appears to have meaningful outcomes for them. She or he appears to adopt an approach to learning in class which involves reflecting, questioning, conjecturing, evaluating, and making connections between ideas. This involves drawing on their own and others' knowledge and experience, backgrounds and identities. The student is likely to appear alert and animated. By contrast, a student who is academically disengaged appears to adopt a surface approach to learning. They might copy out notes, focus on fragmented facts, and concentrate on getting 'correct' answers, accepting information or views unquestioningly. The disengaged student may also appear distant or isolated, distracted or distracting to others.

We do not see engagement and disengagement as an on/off state of mind or being. There may be different signs and levels of engagement and disengagement over a continuum. There may also be multiple reasons for disengagement. We do not make connections between disengagement and the fact that a student comes from any particular group. Nor do we see students who appear to be disengaged as inferior, deficient or problematic.

Diversity

In this study we use the term diversity to refer to a class or cohort of students who come from a wide range of social, cultural and educational backgrounds. A diverse

group of students could include people of different age, class, ethnic origin, faith, and ability or disability, and with different entry qualifications, prior knowledge and experience. Such a cohort would include both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students. However, we have tried to avoid these terms since they mask the complexity of the student population. For example, is a black, female, mature, middle class student with A-level qualifications a 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' student? Although we recognise that students from working class and some minority ethnic backgrounds are under-represented in pre-1992 universities, we believe that classrooms in both pre- and post-1992 universities are more diverse than they were before widening participation. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the diversity represented within eight large first-year modules in two different UK universities.

Difference

We are interested in the ways that individual students and teachers negotiate their identities by marking themselves out as similar to or different from their peers. We want to see how difference is used both positively, as the source of diversity, enriching the lives of others, and negatively, as the reason for isolating and marginalising those who do not fit and who are 'outsiders' or 'others'. We focus on how teachers, pedagogy and curricula encourage or discourage the expression of individual differences.

In doing this, we have found it difficult to avoid the use of binary oppositions that mark difference in terms of the relative value that we or others might attach to the characteristics of individuals. For example, we have used terms such as engaged/disengaged, deep/surface, student-focused/ tutor-focused, but we have done so in a way that makes our own values and those of our participants transparent.

Widening participation

Our interpretation of widening participation is focused on how students from a wide range of social, cultural and educational backgrounds participate and learn within

formal learning environments at university, and the ways in which their teachers encourage and support them to do so.

Research Design Phase One – Pre entry students' conceptions of higher education

In the first phase of the study, data were collected from students at four Post-16 institutions (one school, a sixth form college and two further education colleges local to the two universities in the study) in the year before they went to university. Each institution had a socially diverse population in terms of class and ethnicity. Between them they offered a range of entry routes to university including A-level and vocational qualifications. Four broad disciplines were covered: IT, Science, Health and Social Policy, and Business. These subjects provided a mix of natural and social sciences and attracted socially, culturally and educationally diverse groups of students. Data were gathered from 225 questionnaires, 10 activity-based focus group sessions involving around 100 students, and 14 semi-structured pre-entry student interviews drawn from the focus groups. Focus group activities required students to draw, present and discuss their ideas of a good and bad university lecturer and a good and bad university student. (See Hockings et al 2007a for an exploration of pre-entry students' expectations of HE). Pre-entry conceptions and expectations of university were compared to experiences of first year students in phase two.

The key themes arising from the pre-entry focus group discussions and activities were presented to the four participating university teachers from each university. These eight teachers shared and compared their conceptions of first year undergraduates, with reference to the pre-entry data presented by the research team members. The meeting provided the opportunity for them to reflect on their teaching practice and to consider any changes they might wish to make in light of their reflection prior to the start of the new 2006/07 academic year.

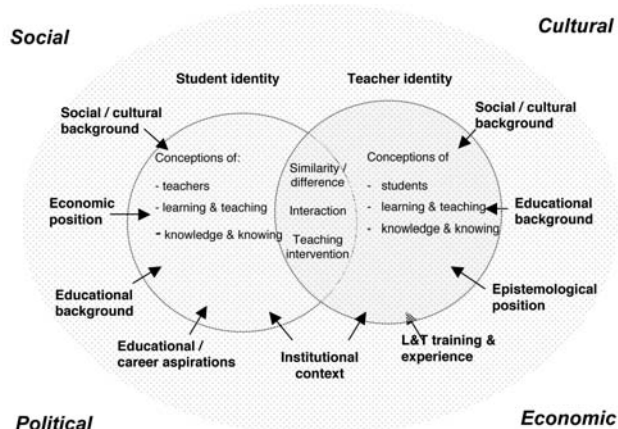


Figure 1: Factors influencing academic engagement

Research Design Phase Two – University learning and teaching in diverse student groups

Phase two of the research focused on first-year undergraduate students and their university teachers in broadly the same subjects as those chosen for the pre-entry phase, in this case Biosciences, Business, Computing, History, Nursing and Social work. Participating teachers in these subjects were taking or had recently completed a postgraduate certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE or had carried out equivalent CPD. They all had a keen interest in continuing to improve student learning and in their own teaching practice. The main objective for this phase was to see how students' and teachers' identities as influenced by their conceptions (see diagram above) played out in the classroom, and how, if at all, they influenced teaching practice and academic engagement. We also wanted to compare the pre- and post-1992 university contexts to see what each could learn from the other.

Over semester one of the academic year 2006/7 we observed and video-recorded a total of 24 teaching sessions and around 50 hours of video data, making three sessions per participating teacher. Following the majority of these observed sessions, the non-participant observer would hold and record a debriefing with the teachers to explore issues arising from the session with regard to the research questions. Teachers from both institutions paired up, where possible by common subject, and reviewed their own as well as their partner's video-recorded sessions to compare and contrast approaches to teaching, the teaching environment, and their respective groups of students. Both sets of teachers participated in three joint meetings to discuss teaching, learning and diversity issues arising from their sessions and to consider the implications of the research findings for their practice (see Hockings et al 2007b). At the end of the second semester the teachers completed an open-ended questionnaire in which they reflected on how their participation in the project had influenced them.

Data were also collected from the students in these observed sessions. Within the first five weeks of the year over 270 students had responded to a questionnaire to provide details of themselves and their families, their conceptions of higher education, their chosen subject, the learning and teaching they had experienced so far, and their ways of knowing. They also described ways in which they felt the same as or different from other students in the group.

Whilst observing the classroom sessions the researchers noted incidents in which individuals appeared less engaged than other students or appeared in some way to be excluded, isolated or different from their peers. Post hoc interviews with these students shed light on their thoughts,

Major implications

Diversity extends beyond the traditional structural divisions of class, gender and ethnicity. It also encompasses, amongst other things, diverse student entry routes to university and the different arrangements which students make for combining life, work and study (See Cooke et al 2007 a and b). The picture of diversity among the students in the study varied between the two universities (see chart below) and between subjects. However, common themes have emerged from this study that have implications for student learning and for the improvement and enrichment of inclusive learning environments.

Learning Students seem keen to fit in at university and tend to focus on the similarities between themselves and other students. But when it comes to classroom learning, they value having their individual academic and social identities acknowledged and their particular needs addressed. They appreciate teaching that does this. There is potential for students to feel alienated and withdrawn when the teaching and curriculum overlook their identities and differences. Students often rely on informal peer support networks to make up for a lack of attention to their individual needs or interests in class.

This has implications for university teachers. There is a need to develop inclusive pedagogic practices and curricula that take account of the diverse interests and needs of the students in each class. This requires more than a simple technical response. Teachers need the opportunity to reflect upon their own identities as learners and teachers, to consider issues of cultural, social and educational diversity and difference among students, and to be aware of their impact on the learning and teaching environment.

feelings and experiences during these sessions. Some of these students also participated in the focus group meetings that were set up part-way through the semester for each class.

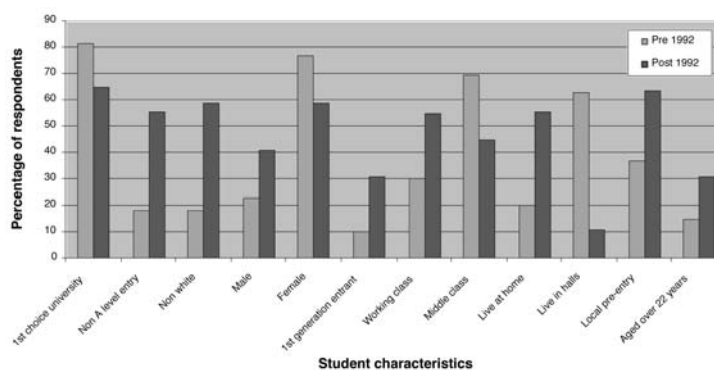
Selected episodes from video recordings of classroom sessions were described and student and teacher talk transcribed. These 'live' data were combined with the researchers' observational field notes, analytical memos and subsequent video analysis to form one composite document per classroom observation. All phase two

Improvement Some university teachers think that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds lack the cultural capital, prior knowledge and study skills to excel at university, and that their job is to remedy this 'deficit'. This study shows, however, that the notion of the traditional and non-traditional student is over-simplistic. Teaching strategies and curricula designed on this assumption are likely to disengage the majority of students who do not fit this model.

The prevalence of this approach has implications for those responsible for academic development. University teachers need to reflect on their conceptions of students from diverse backgrounds. Academic developers need to support this activity in a climate in which teachers and their mentors can debate their ideas and beliefs and challenge practices and discourses that inhibit the creation of inclusive learning environments.

Enrichment Increased student diversity offers a rich classroom resource of knowledge and experience that can enhance students' understanding and increase academic engagement. But university systems designed to assure 'quality' and maximise the economic efficiency of teaching resources reduce teachers' scope to make the most of this potential learning resource, and constrain their capacity to create inclusive pedagogies.

This has implications for university leaders concerned with resource planning, quality enhancement, and learning and teaching. They need to invite challenge to the status quo, and value teachers' lived experiences. They should try to prevent systems and policies from limiting the learning and teaching of students from diverse backgrounds.



data, including composite documents, student and teacher interviews, focus group transcripts and questionnaire responses, were grouped by module (e.g. post 1992 university biosciences) and combed through for instances where students appeared, or spoke about being, academically engaged or disengaged. The circumstances surrounding these instances were explored and key issues emerged. (See for example Hockings et al. 2008). Meta-analysis of all subjects across both institutions is currently under way.

Further information

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The warrant

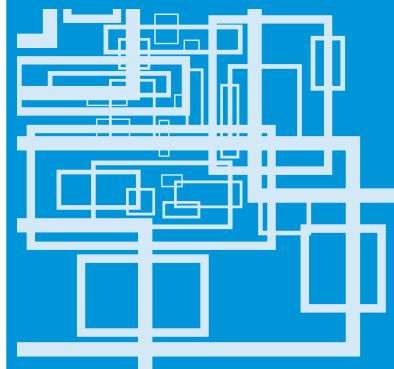
This ambitious project has drawn on three major theoretical perspectives in making sense of academic engagement in the context of widening participation and mass higher education. Data were analysed through sociological, pedagogical and epistemological lenses to provide a more complete understanding of academic engagement than would have been available from a single theoretical perspective.

One of the strengths of this project is the use of video to record classroom sessions. These recordings, together with the researchers' observation field notes, have provided a unique source against which interview, focus group and questionnaire data have been triangulated. Data collection has involved a significant amount of participant involvement with some co-development of appropriate instruments. Individual researchers worked with the same teacher and student participants in order to build trusting relationships and to minimise disruption. Where possible, transcripts have been returned to the interviewees to provide 'member checks' and 'catalytic validity'. In addition, there have been regular opportunities for teachers from both institutions to share, analyse and reflect on video and anonymised interview data.

Researchers have taken a team approach to developing codes and tools for analysis, with regular peer review to ensure reliable coding and sharing interpretations. This close co-operation in working with the data, together with regular team meetings to review methods, techniques and skills, has facilitated the development of a robust framework for analysis.

Biannual Advisory Group meetings (see membership below) have provided a forum for scrutiny and debate. The involvement of a number of university professional development staff has added to the peer review process.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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TLRP Directors' Team
Professor Andrew Pollard | London
Professor Mary James | London
Professor Alan Brown | Warwick
Professor Miriam David | London
e-team@groups.tlrp.org

TLRP Programme Office
Sarah Douglas | sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk
James O'Toole | j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk
tlrp@ioe.ac.uk

TLRP
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5577



Project website:

www.wlv.ac.uk/teaching4diversity

Project team:

Dr Chris Hockings, Sandra Cooke, Dr Marion Bowl, Hiromi Yamashita, Samantha McGinty.

Advisory group: Professor Jean Gilkison (University of Wolverhampton), Professor John Brennan (Open University), Dr Joyce Canaan (University of Central England), Professor Miriam David (Institute of Education and TLRP), Professor Mary Fuller (University of Gloucestershire), Professor Caroline Gipps (University of Wolverhampton), Professor David Hartley (University of Birmingham), Professor Viv Wylie (Aimhigher West Midlands) and a representative from each of the pre-entry institutions in the study.

Project contact:

Dr Chris Hockings,
c.hockings@wlv.ac.uk
+44 (0)1902 518766
University of Wolverhampton

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