

Pedagogy, Learner Autonomy and Student Experience: A Case-Study using Oral History Methods

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Abstract.

This paper discusses a case study which focuses on a group of predominantly mature female Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students studying undergraduate degrees in Health and Social Care and Health and Social Policy. It is an evidenced-based case study exploring the educational experiences of a group of 15 students using oral history research methods. The interviews highlight their experiences in higher education and in particular their backgrounds and values, distinct knowledges and insights that they bring to higher education. We explore their answers to interview questions including: What is it like to be a student? Do you experience a sense of agency at university? How compatible is the experience with your values and how far do you think it allows you to achieve your goals? In our analysis we investigate the extent to which the interviews reveal whether student backgrounds support or limit their experiences in higher education; and also, how far are these backgrounds are ignored, underutilized and/or dismissed, both directly and indirectly, as a result of the organization and delivery of the curriculum. The case study focusses on a specific module, Ethics and Research in Professional Contexts, taken by all students in the second year of their degree. This provides scope for reflecting on and challenging aspects of the ‘hidden curricula’ in HE (Skelton, 1997) as this module foregrounds student experience and promotes group-based responses to a series of ethical dilemmas.

The paper draws on the concept of relational autonomy (Khan, 2014) and considers the role of the group in developing ideas and a classroom experience; and, secondly, critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011), the latter in order to illustrate the organizational and pedagogical features of the module and the scope for students to challenge and resist hierarchical relations and imposed identities through collective, critical thinking. We also explore the idea of a decolonizing curriculum, insofar as it invites us to think about the implications of a more diverse student body in terms of pedagogy and achievement. In focusing on a single module on a particular course in a post 1992 UK

university, we do not dismiss the wider institutional and policy landscapes that remain integral to continuing forms of injustice and disadvantage (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Foucault, 1981), which are themselves compounded for this specific group of students. The fact that they are studying health and social care degrees in higher education inevitably involves means of assessing performance that are more or less standard across the sector. (Quality Assurance Agency, 2018). The choice of health and social care degree means that many are aspiring to a professional career in a sector which is characterized by low pay, precarious contracts and attracting disproportionate numbers of BAME women. Moreover, and not coincidentally, many of them are already working part time in the sector whilst studying for their degree. However, the paper concludes with examples from student testimonies that show that, far from simply honing their skills of compliance and acceptance of institutional and professional norms, they develop confidence and understanding to challenge existing legal and professional frameworks, both in a health care setting and beyond (for example, in their roles as family members, community activists and informed citizens).

Keywords: Critical pedagogy; learner autonomy; oral history; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student experience.