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Troubling Knowledges and Difficult Pedagogical Moments for Students Learning

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Abstract

As HE professional educators in Social Sciences, we teach a curriculum which foregrounds inequalities. This includes inequalities related to diverse social groups and differences of race, class, gender, disability and sexuality, underpinned by global approaches. Learners are asked to reconsider the social world through a critical lens with perhaps very different explanations of inequalities and the (re)production of power. This paper illuminates early considerations arising from primary research of those teaching moments described as ‘difficult’ by our participants. The difficulty created for the teacher/student partnership is often experienced by us through the resistance by students who often cannot imagine a world view beyond their own. They can believe their way of knowing themselves in the world is how the world is for everyone. The critical educator recognises that in any given moment they are required to consciously manage the pedagogical illuminations of structural inequalities and individual agency. These difficult moments produce struggle for the student who is learning and pedagogical challenges for the lecturer. This paper captures a snapshot of some of the experiences of educators teaching diversity across a range of subject areas. We also reflect on the potential for professional development and possibilities for embedding best practice in preparing academic staff to deal with difficult moments.

Keywords : Diversity, troubling knowledge, pedagogy, in/equalities, justice, curriculum, difference.

Background

A small group of concerned staff met to discuss the problem and explore ideas that could better understand it as a pedagogical concern. The ‘ideas factory’ started following incidences that we shared as colleagues about moments of difficulty. During teaching and learning sessions on equality, diversity and social justice pedagogies, we discussed our strategies and techniques with each other. One of the first core ideas arising from the

meetings was the need to identify underpinning ground rules for engagement. In this process we shared encounters with ‘difficult moments’ when thinking pedagogically about equality, social justice and diversity across any of the specific subject matters we teach. We recognised that we were creating ‘alternative intersecting narratives’ from which the occupants of the classroom could (re) think their world. Often-singular logics underpin dominant ‘everyday’ conceptions of ‘Gender’, ‘Race’, ‘Class’, ‘Normality’, ‘Abnormality’ ‘Ability’, ‘Dis-ability’, ‘Sexuality’. The problem was defined as vocal or intellectual resistance to frameworks for inequalities. Difficult pedagogical moments were experienced by this group and we also found that the discomfiting pedagogies are experienced by the students across discipline boundaries. Tensions arise when our theoretical explanations for inequalities and power differentials clash with the students’ existing knowledge of the social world. For example, a common response from students would be that feminism or anti-racism theory was irrelevant or unnecessary in our modern world. This resistance was experienced differently by staff. The student who enters the classroom to learn about the social world brings with him or her an existing set of ideas which have, thus far, been unchallenged and are considered normal/natural explanations. The critical educator is in a position between agency and structure at any given moment. The educator who is teaching about inequalities is holding a position between two ways of knowing; First s/he recognises the existing frameworks through which the new student sees and understands the world and is present when the moment of illumination occurs for the student as a new paradigm is introduced. The weight of evidence for inequality challenges the student’s sense of agency as evidence for structural or systemic inequality is compelling. With the field of equalities and in education more generally, concepts of agency and structure are prolific and *‘Agency and structure are often presented as an oppositional pair of concepts in educational research, including the ethnography of education (Beach, 2001:573)’*. The research presented in this paper acknowledges the discomfiting pedagogical moment when both are in play at once. It is expected that our learning and teaching settings in HE will foreground critical thought, allowing students to consider the world in new and/or different ways. Particularly in social science education, students are encouraged to think creatively about often oppositional theoretical standpoints which are disengaged from the security of proof or an ultimate right answer.

Teaching and Learning the Social Sciences

Teaching diversity is an integral part of the experience of HE social science educators. Much research has been carried out in the area of critical pedagogies which has advanced the notion of education as a way to combat inequalities (Freire, 1970) but also highlighted the challenges associated with different approaches to these topics (for example; Kubota, 2014). While conceptualisations of these challenges are contested, models have emerged which suggest best practice for educators. The current study was developed and informed by consideration of these issues in pedagogical literature and the themes emerging from our data are conceptualised within this ongoing field. Pedagogical theory is at an historical juncture right now, as attention focuses on campaigns such as Black Lives Matter and there is mounting pressure to decolonise the curriculum (Begum and Saini, 2019). We are at a point where we need to reformulate, move forward and find new ways to embrace diversity with all its discomforts and contradictions.

This represents what Meyer and Land (2003; 2005) describe as threshold concepts – a portal which allows the subject to open up new ways of thinking about a topic. While this can have a transformative approach on the perception of the learner and can facilitate a more in-depth understanding of a subject, it can also prove ‘troublesome’ (Perkins, 1999; Meyer and Land, 2003) when the concept contradicts previous knowledge. Similarly, the social sciences are concerned with often controversial subjects, defined by Kubota as “social, historical or political topics that generate significant and often emotionally charged disagreement” (2014:225). Thus, teaching threshold concepts on controversial subjects can be profoundly troublesome and troubling, both for student and educator. This can then lead to difficult moments for participants and dilemmas for educators. Questions around teacher neutrality (Kubota, 2014), the classroom as a safe space (Boostrom, 1998), affect (Zemblyas, 2018), emotionality (Burke, 2017) and reflective practice (De Corte, 2003) permeate the literature regarding teaching diversity.

Tension exists between our expectation of independent, self-directed and critical learning and the school and college level education systems characterised by a more didactic, structured teaching style. While the transition from one type of education to another is a factor in student disengagement (Chipchase et al., 2017), when this occurs simultaneously with the introduction of troublesome knowledge, we create a doubly challenging environment for students. Ecclestone (2002) argues that developing learner autonomy can have a transformative effect on adult learners, increases motivation, enhances critical thinking and can be emancipatory. This is particularly pertinent for social science education which is concerned with inequalities

and social justice, yet there is little consensus on how this might be achieved. While the achievement of the threshold concept and the ability to display critical autonomy are key attributes in HE, these are not always wholly accepted in the wider world which can make students resistant to these processes (Brookfield, 2000 cited in Ecclestone, 2002). We suggest that the need to acquire dialogic learning strategies that avoid didactic teaching is important for the development of critical thinking for our students.

Walker (2006) suggests that in these respects we work within the ‘capability approach’ which requires the development of freedom of thought and the acquisition of a ‘rights’ language. This approach allows tutors to set up a classroom space in which the perhaps inevitable partiality, of both student and teacher, can be acknowledged, and challenged in respectful ways. Going further, it has been argued that the capability approach centres on learner agency and their autonomy to decide which roles or tasks - termed ‘functionings’ - have value to them (Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur, 2016). In the context of social sciences in HE, this can not only promote a more inclusive, learner-led educational experience but also serve to underpin theoretical diversity and social justice teaching by acknowledging difference and modelling practices of equity in the classroom.

A critical pedagogy approach, which enables learners to challenge hegemonic social structures and patterns of inequality, is also useful when teaching challenging topics. By forging trusting relationships and empathy with and between students, an environment can be created in which learners feel supported to consider their own opinions and contextualise them within the dominant social landscape (Freire, 1970; Barnett, 2011). That said, there are issues with the implementation of critical pedagogy, not least the potential for discomfort caused by new ways of thinking, troublesome concepts and the potential development of an adversarial relationship with the educator (Jay and Graff, 1995). It has been argued that teacher neutrality is beneficial when teaching divisive topics, yet the socially constructed nature of society renders this almost impossible. Indeed, to downplay or ignore our own biases or preferences when explicitly discussing those of others smacks of inauthenticity. Kubota (2014) highlights the difficulties in maintaining teacher neutrality when adopting critical pedagogy – if students are encouraged to consider themselves within a social context, history and culture, it seems paradoxical for the educator to remain decontextualized. Yet there are difficulties in not inhabiting a neutral space, which will be explored in more depth in relation to our findings.

In HE sectors, we must consider student engagement and the capacity for independent learning. The moment when a student is made uncomfortable by a topic of discussion in the classroom, disengagement and the interruption or even termination of learning processes can be discerned, perhaps as a way of dealing with stress (Mann, 2001; Singleton and Hays, 2008). This has further implications in the neoliberal environment of Higher Education, particularly in relation to the commodification of university education and the conceptualisation of the student as a customer. Students may not expect to be challenged or to feel uncomfortable during an experience in which they have invested considerable sums of money and this may have repercussions in terms of student satisfaction and the reputation of the institution, a chief concern in the current landscape (Wong and Chiu, 2019). Empathy and trust in the classroom is vital when teaching and supporting learning in areas where lifelong beliefs are placed with a critical plane.

Much pedagogical literature has focused on the importance of creating safe spaces in the classroom to support diversity education. Holley and Steiner describe this as “a classroom environment in which people are willing and able to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues” (2005: 49). While they acknowledge the difference between feeling safe and feeling comfortable, the notion of what constitutes safe space and how helpful this can be has been contested in the literature. Boostrom (1998) argues that if the space seeks to prevent conflict, then discriminatory views cannot be challenged, critical thinking cannot be developed and students cannot grow and learn. Holley and Steiner (2005) suggest that if honesty and sharing are to be facilitated, it becomes difficult to ensure that all students feel appropriately supported, particularly when one student’s contribution may be harmful or upsetting to another. This is particularly important when teaching diversity and taking into consideration the many potential oppositions – such as the conflicts between some religious beliefs and homosexuality. It becomes clear that the idea of a safe space, while familiar terminology to many students, is somewhat at odds with the necessities of social science education. Arao and Clemens further this discussion saying;

“Facing evidence of the existence of unearned privilege, reflecting on what degree they have colluded with or participated in oppressive acts, hearing the stories of pain and struggle from target groups members and fielding direct challenges to their worldview from peers can elicit a range of negative emotions, such as fear, sorrow or anger. Such emotions can feed a sense of guilt and

hopelessness. Choosing to engage in such activity in the first place, much less stay engaged, is not a low risk decision and, therefore, is inconsistent with the definition of *safety* as being free of discomfort or difficulty” (2013: 139, italics in original).

They go on to advocate for a linguistic change by adopting a ‘brave space’ framework as opposed to expectations of safety for group members. This approach can highlight that the coming topic may be controversial and/or challenging, that there may be difficult conversations and the possibility of discomfort or negative emotions. Singleton and Hays, talking specifically about race but applicable to a range of ‘dangerous’ topics, argue that educators must also accept discomfort as part of a “courageous conversation” (2008).

Similarly, Zemblyas and McGlynn (2012) also testify to the need for teachers to embrace discomfort but suggest that we continue to address the process that ensues; that is to say, managing the complexities of addressing internalised beliefs and asking students to re-examine those beliefs through a questioning, social science lens. Work by Brooks (2017) highlights the role of students around the world in recent protests and campaigns for social justice, similarly, educators often assume that social injustices will be important to students. However, engagement with material focused on inequalities depends on the student’s current ontological positioning. Some evidence suggests that students, and in particular White students, do not consider gendered or racial inequalities to be a priority (Twenge, 2013 in Niehuis & Thomas-Jackson, 2019) indicating that some students feel that these injustices are no longer important, relevant or ongoing, although this is surely changing in the current climate of Black Lives Matter campaigning. This disconnect between what is taught and what the student wants to learn has implications for both participation and receptivity to new knowledge, which creates potentially ‘troublesome’ moments.

Boler and Zemblyas (2003) suggest that we should take the student out of their ‘comfort zone’ but with professional reflective practice, keeping in mind the question: “how appropriate is it to engage students in pedagogical activities of discomfort?” While acknowledging and managing this discomfort, it is posited that educators also bear a responsibility for ensuring that such discomfort is resolved and that harm is minimised (Niehuis & Thomas-Jackson, 2019), thus creating ethical dimensions to decisions around engaging with pedagogies of discomfort. These are considerations with particular pertinence to teachers of children (Zemblyas and McGlynn, 2012) with implications for safeguarding and protective regulations

in the school sector. In HE, while safeguarding is not such a paramount concern, it appears that embarking upon a social sciences degree course can still be profoundly troubling to the ontological security of learners and has implications for engagement and attainment. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine staff experiences with difficult moments in diversity education and further discussion on best practices for supporting students and teachers with the acquisition of troublesome knowledge. To explore this further a qualitative small-scale in-house research project was conducted with HE educators from a broad range of subjects.

Approach to the research

The Principle Investigator's earlier experience and principles of standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1987) and community-based research were used to create powerful dialogue spaces in the participant focus groups. The method was created with these research principles of creating a powerful learning environment (De Corte, *et al*, 2003). The practice also prepares the researcher to respond to emotions that may be evoked during discussion of difficult moments. Developing professional competencies with inequalities and sensitivities surrounding differences is central to the PI's teaching and participatory research practice. It was necessary, for this study, to create a focus group environment which allowed each participant to be comfortable and that they at ease discussing difficulties. The dialogical method (focus groups) was shaped by values of mutual respect, equality and was designed to enable voices of the teachers to be heard on these issues. In line with the principle of positioning oneself in the research the PI also took part as a participant in one of the focus groups. Time management and facilitation included techniques for responding to and supporting emotional feelings evoked for participants. The PI recognised that during this type of research participants in focus group settings and semi-structured interviews are often apprehensive about discussing their understanding of their own identities and views on inequalities. For this reason, the creation of a 'dialogic' (Focus group) required setting some rules of engagement, invitation to share of experiences and an acknowledgement at the outset that these issues are often emotionally and professionally difficult. These preparations very important in allaying fears about being open and crucial to establish in the setting up of the focus group.

The Study

Qualitative methodological approaches were utilised. These included; thematic design for creation of initial Ideas Factory staff focus group.

Following intensive thematising of literature in this field a qualitative method was designed by the PI. First, a draft semi structured focus group questions and discussion schedule.

The PI then sought permission to conduct in house pedagogical research and permission was granted. Following permission of the university to conduct research 'in-house', access to participants began. This was achieved with a straightforward sampling process. The criteria for participation were simple -we specified '*You are a HE educator and you have experienced difficult moments in teaching diversity*' and sent an Information sheet about the project. This was circulated with the support of administrative staff and reached all staff of the university. Then we achieved this significant sample through participant self-selection. The consent form assured anonymity and information about the background and aims of the study were provided. The call was distributed across all faculties and two UK campuses. One of which is in the north of England and the other in the south. The response was very quick and within a month and we had 37 lecturers from subjects' cutting across discipline boundaries and including social sciences, education business and applied sciences. At this stage the focus groups were facilitated by the PI and a researcher using the principles of creating a powerful space for dialogue (De Corte 2005) and standpoint positionality (Harding , 1987). This required that researchers position themselves within the research and explain their own background aims and personal interest in the project. In addition, assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were given. The PI explained the background to the research and many of her own difficult moments. Sharing our experiences at the outset was useful to build trust and open the discussion. Together , the PI and participants collectively acknowledged that this research was a positive move forward towards enhancing our pedagogical practice and not simply critiquing it. In each focus group there was a declared and shared agreement that working through these difficulties could only add to our teaching in a positive way. The researcher working with us at that time observed some of the sessions at the outset and eventually facilitated the second half of the sessions with the same principles of engagement and with the same format. The recorded discussions were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Thematising of the transcripts was completed with the use of Nvivo software and the full data set is rich, complex and provides a multi layered and in-depth snapshot of experiences of Higher Education teachers. The initial analysis of the data produced findings of this project and these are discussed in the second section of this paper.

The data was analysed with a second level reflexive coding of data also by using Nvivo for a nuanced and thematic analysis. By using first and second level coding we resisted the tendency to 'know' the theoretical conclusions and to be open to the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006:4). Key categories for analysis emerged from the coding, including; troubling knowledge, difficult moments, dangerous topics, critical pedagogy, threshold concepts are troubling concepts, authority of the lecturer, emotions and discomfoting pedagogies. These emerged as categories and were produced as a result of the frequency with which these issues were talked about by the participants in the focus groups. Having completed the open coding stage, the priorities of the participants were reflected (Charmaz, 2006:5). Some of the themes emerging during this phase of coding the data seem to occupy much more time than others. These were eventually collapsed into four core categories: Troubling Theory- challenging the 'truth'; The Manifestation of the Troubling Moment; Weight of Representation and Strategies for Support. These emerged as core categories are a result of the frequency with which these issues are talked about by the participants in the focus groups. These are discussed further below. Thematic reading of the data was arranged into these three broad categories.

Troubling the Theory/Practice Hierarchy – challenging 'truth'

Participants in this study highlighted that students often encounter a dissonance between the social science curriculum and their pre-formed knowledge. Dominant ideologies are embedded in individual lives from a young age and this is supported by personal experiences and the social norms of their culture and environment. This results in a self-perpetuating cycle of 'truth' and 'normality' – the more practices are visible, experienced, understandable to an individual, the more true, normal and natural they appear and therefore, the more likely they are to be reproduced. When learning counteracts these established 'truths', it becomes "troublesome knowledge" (Perkins, 1999 cited in Meyer & Land, 2003). It is when troublesome knowledge is presented in lecture content that a space in the classroom is opened for resistance and confrontation;

“After the lecture on race, they left me a note telling me how wrong I was....that was probably the worst moment I have come across....complete resistance to any sort of ideas that challenged them”

“We were discussing issues on stereotypes....One of the things I did was to put up an image and I asked them to explore that a bit. This student responded as if I had been discriminatory in raising this issue to be discussed and challenged me in the middle of a lecture”

In the above examples, the teacher is troubled. Zemblyas and McGlynn describe how “discomforting emotions play a constitutive role in challenging dominant beliefs” (2012:41). Familiar norms and beliefs hold a certain emotional attachment which can be difficult to release even when faced with evidence that these (re)produce inequalities and injustice. In Higher Education, students have held these beliefs for longer and at times, have come to rely on these to make sense of the world. However, in order to facilitate a more critical understanding of the social world, dominant ideology must be challenged. Therefore, HE social science educators must carefully manage student’s emotions in the classroom to ensure an optimal learning environment (Del Corte, 2003). The difficulty created for the teacher / student partnership is often experienced by educators through the resistance by students who often cannot imagine a world view beyond their own. Both educators and learners can be in this situation. They can believe their way of knowing themselves in the world is how the world is for everyone.

Participants reported angry reactions to material which conflicted with students’ established views and contradicted their lived experiences. The following quote highlights the tension between the perceived ‘truth’ of unfamiliar theoretical perspectives and familiar practical knowledge;

“One of the worst ones was around disability and what it must be like if you are discriminated against if you are disabled and.... people who were involved in pushing people in wheelchairs said there was no discrimination, you can get anywhere in a wheelchair and they were really angry, shouting at me”

Herein lies the challenge in contradicting the lived experiences of the cohort. Students who were employed in care roles and who had a wealth of experience with wheelchair accessible

venues were resistant to the idea that others may be subjected to discrimination and that all places may not be suitable for wheelchair users. Their real-life knowledge means the lecturer's theoretical viewpoint is disregarded and, as in the previous quote, there is the suggestion that they are promoting discrimination by acknowledging the issues. In this way, practical experience produces knowledge which, for students, takes precedence over 'book-learning'. Interestingly, in this case the lecturer was able to refute these challenges by referring to experiences with their own disabled child, although this may be argued to further reinforce the knowledge/experience hierarchy – the lecturer's standpoint becomes more authentic when supported by lived experience. This links to Kubota's (2014) work on educator neutrality, in this instance the lecturer's perceived neutrality hindered learning. In order to legitimise their standpoint, the lecturer is compelled to give up their neutral stance by disclosing personal details, something which can in itself be discomfiting. In this scenario the teacher needs to be ready to back up claims with evidence.

While students' emotional response was acknowledged as sometimes disruptive, there was also the appreciation that anger, worry or distress should be an expected outcome and that this should be managed by the lecturer;

“Most of our students are local and if they have grown up here, I am not surprised they get upset because we are throwing all these things at them, completely challenging everything they see in their lives as normal, We shouldn't be surprised they get upset and that some of them get angry about it.”

This acknowledgement that students' discomfort is, in many ways, understandable and to be expected resonates with previous research highlighting the importance of an educators' ability and willingness to consider a student's prior knowledge (Freire, 1970). As Bransford, Brown and Cocking argue;

“There is a good deal of evidence that learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to a learning task, use this knowledge as a starting point for new instruction, and monitor students' changing conceptions as instruction proceeds.” (2000:11)

It would then follow that students' learning could be enhanced *despite* the difficult moment if the lecturer is prepared to acknowledge the starting point as valid and therefore the anger or distress as somewhat justified. While this is challenging if the educator perceives the starting point as prejudiced or discriminatory, there is still value in the recognition that their view provides a grounding for subsequent learning. As one participant shares;

“In a way difficult moments can be welcomed in class in that we are open to challenge exploitation and degradation and we should welcome the idea that we can challenge each other and bring it up and talk about it. So difficult moments should be welcomed as part of the pedagogical process”.

Similarly, a recognition that difficult moments can give the opportunity for greater cultural awareness and a more global outlook can support moves away from the White cultural hegemony present in many aspects of Higher Education (Burke, 2017).

“A difficult and challenging issue for me is when I am talking about colonialism and new colonialism with different people who have been subject to that and when I am talking about it from a British point of view...they are seeing things that are very different to me. I think that is really challenging if you are not aware of it and the kind of issues around that. I think a lot of people make assumptions that what we say about cultures is right, but it is open to challenge”.

In order to move to a more expanded understanding of social processes, there has to be some re-evaluation of one's own previous knowledge, viewpoints and behaviour and a by-product of such assessment can be feelings of shame. This can be the shame of both feeling exposed as having been wrong about things but also feelings of shame around one's collusion in the oppression of others (Zembylas, 2019). It is the latter conceptualisation that is particularly pertinent in social sciences, which aims to highlight social justice issues.

“I think what is useful is the teaching about whiteness because they go ‘what whiteness?’ and it has not occurred to them that this might be a problem. It is quite jarring for them”

Students' discomfort with discussing whiteness was one which recurred in focus groups, with statements such as "all the students freaked out", indicating a particular difficulty with acknowledging one's own privilege. Whether or not this is linked to the discovery of one's (unintentional) collusion in the perpetuation of inequalities and thus feelings of shame cannot be asserted without consulting with students themselves, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, that educators highlight this as a "jarring" experience for students suggests there is some disjuncture between established views and newly presented epistemologies.

The Manifestation of the Difficult Moment

The dissonance between prior established knowledge and the social science curriculum raises questions about legitimacy and authority for us as educators. It is, in itself, a problem of epistemological authority because the discomfort experienced by majoritarian students can be used to challenge the authenticity of the teacher who has disrupted dominant mono framed normativity. As the critical moments appear, normative values re-assert their authority, leaving the teacher's voice to be designated as marginal and transgressive of majoritarian legitimacy. At this point a silence pervades the space with the collision between the certainty of the student – their culturally produced world view - and the opening up of critical forms of knowing. How these moments are managed speaks directly to the legitimisation of the epistemological authority left in charge.

Participants in this study often struggled to counteract the idea that lecturers were preaching their own personal views rather than a particular theoretical framework. In these instances, it would appear that students found the taught concept troubling and potentially at odds with their established world view, but by attributing the content to the lecturer's personal opinion, this was somewhat ameliorated.

"I teach mainly gender to undergraduate students and very occasionally there will be a resistance to what I am saying, so I can be presenting an argument and they regard that as being my personal view"

This conceptualisation presents twofold challenges. While in critical pedagogy, HE educators are actively engaged in encouraging students to think critically and question source material, considering academic material as a representation as a personal view obviates the

need for evidence or reflection on theoretical framework. It also imbues the interaction with emotion, leading to defensiveness, shame (Burke, 2017) and perpetuating a cycle of challenge and counter-challenge.

“I don’t think I was quite prepared for the degree of active vocal resistance because I thought it was pretty basic about a range of diversity issues....The response the students have come back with is really angry, like you are challenging their world view and they feel very defensive, ideas about racism, sexism, disablism – a vocal minority really shocked me in some of the things they were saying”

Furthermore, the lecturer’s own identity becomes a crucial part of the educational environment, both in terms of how concepts may be received and/or how they are challenged. The authority of the lecturer can be delegitimised when students concentrate their attention on a particular aspect of the lecturer’s identity as an explanation for what they are saying, that is to say when theoretical perspectives become personalised. This can exacerbate the difficult moment by disengaging the subject for consideration from the social world, and placing it as a consequence of the lecturer’s identity.

“A lot of the time they just saw me as a bra-burning lesbian (laughs). This is something they could not get beyond, this perception that they saw me as hating men”

The above quote illustrates one way in which the lecturer’s *perceived* identity impinges on the educational environment. Students filter the person delivering the content through a firmly established consciousness of the world which can work to (de) legitimise the epistemological authority of the lecturer. Instead of introducing gender as a variable which shapes the social world and gives rise to inequalities, the above lesson is stalled by the “hating men” perception of the “bra-burning” lecturer. The lesson is then more easily dismissed as the personal viewpoint of the lecturer, preventing wider consideration of gendered inequalities and the attainment of the threshold concept.

Similarly, lecturers can be considered to be teaching content simply because they are personally invested in it, using the taught session to further their own agenda. As some elements of a lecturer’s identity are not visible, there are implications here for the learning environment. The

following quote, from a lecturer who is not out to her students, offers an opportunity to unpick this further;

“I am a lesbian and I am a mum and I teach family. So, when this comes up, I have students in the room saying ‘lesbians having children? They are just playing at it, selfish and they don’t think about the children’. Inside I am thinking, that is so offensive but as a teacher I have to say ‘can we look at that?’”

Again, an incident where the troubling feeling is with the educator. If the lecturer in question was out to her students, this may inhibit students from overtly challenging or expressing views which may be considered homophobic or discriminatory, and thus avoid the difficult moment. It could be argued, however, that this would also inhibit the learning that comes from students’ sharing their world view and being supported to ‘look at it’ in greater depth. Furthermore, if students were aware of the lecturer’s own family structure, teaching on this topic may appear to conform to the lecturer’s agenda or be more likely to be perceived as the lecturer’s own personal view. Indeed, the lecturer in this case would become the embodiment of the concept, if her identity was apparent to the students. When the personal life of the lecturer is obscured, there is a perceived distance which may make the content less easily disregarded.

Similarly, if lecturers are deemed to be teaching their own viewpoint or agenda, it then becomes more acceptable for students to also refer back to their own established knowledge rather than striving for a more critical understanding. This can then produce further difficult moments as lecturers are confronted with sometimes prejudiced or discriminatory contributions from students which then need to be challenged;

“I have had students make comments that have been quite racist and one really bad that was disablist and she was wanting to be a social worker”

“I have had uncomfortable things said in seminar settings....I think what is difficult is when you have challenged someone’s views that are really prejudiced, or they are coming out with something racist – quite often they don’t see themselves in that way.....that is quite a difficult psychological position to put someone else in”

This illustrates multiple layers of discomfort which need to be acknowledged and skilfully managed by lecturers. Discomfort can come from the student's opinion which may upset both the lecturer and other students in the classroom and therefore should be challenged. This is particularly true when students may be engaged on professional courses which aim to produce work-ready graduates. That said, the challenge must be sensitively handled to avoid upsetting the original contributor, who may be discomforted by the insinuation that their views are prejudiced or simply, incorrect. The lecturer's challenge may also discomfort other students, who may agree with the original statement or may feel the safe space of the classroom is threatened when student's contributions are contested.

This illustrates the contradictions and complexities apparent in constructing the classroom as a safe space (Boostrom, 1998; Arao and Clemens, 2013) and elicits the question – who's safety is paramount? Yet, the language of safety permeates the responses of the participants and the necessity of creating a safe environment for students' discussion is underlined by participants who discuss the difficulties associated with teaching sensitive topics;

“Students need to know they can say the wrong thing and not feel bad about it and that it can be discussed in a safe place”

“The students have to be comfortable with one another, don't they, and feel safe”

Similarly, participants highlighted students' fear of being judged on their contributions to discussions, particularly on the topic of race;

“People get very anxious and nervous about saying anything”

“White students don't want to get involved in the conversation for fear that they say something wrong, don't engage”

It is interesting to note that lecturers repeatedly reference saying something '*wrong*' and the fear of this which prevents students from engaging in discussion. This conceptualisation of the potential for 'wrongness' harks back to the educational model presented in most UK

schools, one in which young people learn facts and can therefore, be right or wrong. While discussion in social sciences often focuses on oppositional frameworks and theoretical debate, which precludes binarised notions of right or wrong, this educational model is deeply embedded in both students and educators. When the above quotes use the term wrong, they could equally have said insensitive or offensive, but it is significant that they do not.

This also links back to Zemblyas' (2019) discussion of shame as a pedagogical tool – the fear of being judged by others as being wrong can inhibit participation in discussion and can limit learning opportunities as students search (in vain) for the 'right' answer. However, there is also political and social transformative potential if “pedagogies of shame” are recognised and used effectively, allowing empathy with previously unacknowledged Others (Zemblyas, 2019). There is scope for more research in this area, particularly on the gendered, raced and classed elements which support a pedagogy of shame.

The Weight of Representation – Being Seen and Heard

As discussed above, the lecturer may come to represent the threshold concept for students who confuse the theoretical perspective with the lecturer's own identity. This embodiment of concepts can also be applied to any students who form a minority in any given cohort, and the data shows that both lecturers and other students sometimes default to this position. This was most recognised in terms of race, but also apparent with other visible differences such as gender and religion. It is interesting to note that when difference is visible, the difficult moment is presented as one of looking – both too much and too little;

“She said ‘she could feel the eyes on her’, such as white students looking to see how she was reacting” (feedback from the only black student during a discussion of race)

“I found as a black lecturer if I have a black student in the class.....I may have one black student, and when I bring anything up about race they don't look at me, especially if it is just the one student in the class.”

“We have had some students from Zimbabwe and Nigeria and what some of them fed back was what they find in lectures is that the lecturer, when they talk

about race, actually avoid looking at the black students....They think some people are so frightened of offending them when they mention Black or colour, they won't look at them. “

The above quotes illustrate the many issues with looking and being looked at in terms of visible difference. The student who felt other's watching her reactions is given the weight of representing Blackness in an overwhelmingly white cohort. This shows some support for our earlier point regarding how unfamiliar concepts can be made more palatable when conceived as lived experience or personal view. The over-zealous looking of white students could be argued to represent their attempts to take their cue from someone with personal experience of the concept being discussed. If discussion of whiteness causes students to 'freak out', perhaps this shows an acknowledgment of the discomfiting nature of discussions of race and recognition that perhaps the one Black student in the class has epistemological authority on this topic. While this can only be supposition at this stage, what is clear is that the difficult moment for the student was provoked by her visibility.

In contrast, the subsequent quotes show the absence of looking as problematic. A Black student avoids looking at a Black lecturer, perhaps in an attempt to avoid being asked to contribute and therefore representing the concept. A lecturer avoids meeting the eye of Black students in an attempt to avoid the potential offence that can come from discussions of race. While the weight of representation provokes a difficult moment, the same can also be said of the opposite – when difference (and therefore knowledge and experience) is rendered invisible by the lack of looking, epistemological authority is denied.

The data also highlighted attempts by lecturers to make use of students' perceived authority and use their identity as a teaching moment, albeit unsuccessfully. The following quote illustrates the issues with making assumptions about both how students identify and the extent to which they want to be seen;

“One of the things I do is about identity and what is important for people about their identity and a few times I have had people from BME backgrounds and they were the only people to put their ethnicity down as a key part of their identity.....In one class there was one person from BME and I thought 'this is too much pressure to put on one person', but she didn't

put down ethnicity and my entire teaching point of that exercise was gone. A part of me felt a bit angry...”

It is possible that the student did not count race as an important part of her identity. It is also possible that, cognizant of the potential consequences of highlighting the very factor that made her different from the rest of the cohort, the student intentionally sidestepped the potential difficult moment. While the intention has been to expose the student to increased looking, she has in actual fact, made herself invisible. That the lecturer is so keen to bring the student into view, in spite of the pressure, suggests an acknowledgement of epistemological authority brought by lived experience.

Another issue faced by students in the minority is one of voice. The following quote illustrates the lecturer’s perceived need to act as the voice for lone female students;

“If the sport guys are going on and they are making, well, overtly or sub-consciously sexist comments I feel there is more of a need to step in and be protective than I would be if there were more women in the group, they would tend to come back to the guys and challenge it anyway”

The participant notes that this is not necessary if there are more women in the group as in these cases, the women are able to challenge sexism themselves – there is presumably safety in numbers for minority students.

It has been remarked in the literature that discussion of race proves particularly problematic. As Singleton and Hays highlight, White participants are sometimes cautious of causing offence and Black students feel ‘it is unsafe or futile’ to speak up (2008: 20). This was also described by a participant, who recalled a conversation with a Black student who was particularly knowledgeable about Black feminism but who did not speak in class. While some difficult moments occur ‘onstage’, this represents an example of ‘offstage’ discussion, in which the student feels comfortable to raise the issue, only out of earshot of her peers;

“She said, ‘there would have to be more of us’. I pushed that a little and said ‘who are us?’. She said ‘more Black’. I said ‘okay, how many would there need to be?’

She said, ‘at least six. There would need to be six of us before I felt okay to say anything’”

In this instance, the student in question has epistemological authority both by virtue of her lived experience and her extended reading on the topic, however she is not able to claim her voice in the class. Her stated need for at least five other Black students to create a space in which she felt comfortable contributing her voice, reflects how the fear of the weight of representation impacts the educational experience of all.

As in the previous quote there was a perceived safety in numbers, this quote highlights the problematic nature of being a lone representative. Here, if the student feels ‘unsafe’ to speak up (Singleton and Hays, 2008), we need to look closely at the concept of a ‘safe space’. The perceived lack of safety for this student in this classroom is not something which can be controlled by the educator, despite concerted efforts to facilitate a supportive environment.

Strategies for Support?

Participants acknowledged the difficulties in challenging prejudice in the classroom and recognised it was not a simple task, but one which required continuing reinforcement, positive regard and support over the course of a student’s HE experience. The following quotes show participants’ acknowledgement of the lack of resolution following difficult moments. Singleton and Hays suggest that educators must support students to appreciate ‘that the classroom cannot provide closure for a topic that is not closed in the real world’ (2008: 21);

“You do get students who are prejudiced and this is embedded in their lives so this is not going to be dealt with in one lecture. It is gentle, ongoing supported teaching and learning that staff need to be prepared to deal with.”

“You have to be positive about them even if you are worried about certain aspects of their thinking or view, you don’t condemn them....actually it is very, very complicated. The whole society and structure is deeply embedded with all these things. You are not going to solve them overnight with one argument. You have to show you value the person”

Striking a delicate balance between valuing both the student and their contribution, while also challenging discriminatory views and ‘wrongness’ regularly featured in participants’ discussion. This was underpinned by the recognition that difficult moments, and their associated emotional response, are a powerful tool for learning which should not be ignored, although there was no consensus on a successful strategy;

“We learn through our relationships, working and talking with others, building and thinking about others’ feelings, the impact of our knowledge, skills and behaviour on them. So I think we cannot, not acknowledge it, manage it and deal with it but how to do that is incredibly difficult”

“I have tried to bring my own views and values to the classroom, to students and staff, to work with them to be more open and transparent...to allow for conversations to happen, if they can, so we create an environment that potentially has the power to actually open up and share some of those difficult moments and perhaps move on and learn from them”

Nevertheless, this is not always a straight forward process and participants often described being caught off guard with difficult moments and struggling to know how to respond;

“I think you feel like you are not quite prepared for it and I was annoyed with myself as I felt I couldn’t be articulate with the debate and that is the basic elements. I wasn’t prepared for that and I got annoyed with myself”

“It was really uncomfortable. I think it was more uncomfortable because I blamed myself as usually, I am quite sharp on these sorts of things, and I wasn’t, I slipped up there”

“I was mentioning critical pedagogy so I brought in queer theory and there was a couple of my sports students, who study that alongside teaching, sniggering and I felt like I was back with fourteen-year olds, how do I deal with this? I had completely forgotten how I would have dealt with it”

This highlights the importance of structured teacher training or continued professional development in supporting lecturers to feel able to acknowledge difficult moments and work through them in productive ways. While Wong and Chiu (2019) are mindful that previous experience will often shape a lecturers' pedagogical framework, they also acknowledge the key role that institutions play in the shaping of teaching practice and approach. However, in this study, when participants described their ability and confidence to deal with difficult moments, this was framed in terms of experience from previous employment or personal lifestyle, rather than formalised institutional training;

“I draw on my social work background to help me with difficult situations”

“I am from Youth work....working with 14 year old boys who go ‘well, that’s gay ain’t it?’ or ‘you puff’ and I would go ‘what is that?’ and challenge that....”

“I was teaching before I came to the University so that helps”

“Because I was a games player or team player and I have come through that culture, I see it, but I feel competent to manage it. So I am quite happy to take them on if I need to”

Participants also suggested a forum to discussing difficult moments in the classroom would be beneficial and would allow for members of a team to learn from the practices of more experienced colleagues. However, in line with Niehuis and Thomas-Jackson's (2019) recognition that this may be more difficult for junior members of staff, participants in this study were sometimes sceptical of the outcomes of discussion within the institution;

“You cannot do it with one off sessions, or a training day sort of thing, you need constant ongoing staff development where people can come to sessions and say; ‘I

am struggling with this, or I am not comfortable with this area of gender or racist issues”

If there is a lack of institutional support, formal training or space for discussion it is perhaps unsurprising that the anxiety around potentially saying the wrong thing is not limited to students but affects lecturers too. While it was suggested that lecturers needed to dehumanise themselves to some degree, participants were also cognisant that individuals were not without prejudice themselves – that lecturers are not neutral (Kubota, 2014).

“I have a shameful list of assumptions I have made, wrong assumptions. I find it mildly embarrassing that I make these assumptions, but on the other hand, it is a human reaction”

“Where there is an issue about race or sexism, I then start to feel like I am doubting myself about what I should say in response. Am I saying the right thing? ...I have done a qualification in teaching equality and diversity and I still don't feel totally confident in how I respond to a student that makes a comment from within their culture”

Conclusion

Teaching diversity in Higher Education is infused with difficult moments. This paper has presented data from interviews with HE teaching staff which outlines the commonalities of experience across a broad range of subjects. We have highlighted the challenges present when new knowledge and perspectives conflict with long-held beliefs, which can lead to troubling moments for both student and educator. We have mapped the problems associated with minority visibility, both too much and too little, and the issues that arise when individuals feel the weight of representation.

A professional squeamishness around saying the ‘wrong’ thing has implications for the very culture of the University as an institution and opens up questions around the future of Higher Education. If potential difficult moments are pre-empted and then avoided or ignored, what effect might this have on the educational experience of the student and their subsequent ability to negotiate the workplace and wider society? In a context in which students are increasingly

seen as customers (and the customer is always right), where is the space to challenge viewpoints and provoke difficult moments?

Furthermore, we cannot lose sight of the fact that data collection took place in a post-1992 University which centralises a widening participation agenda. As the majority of students are first in family to engage with HE and with a disproportionate number of mature students who have been disengaged from education settings for some years, creating a perceived safe and comfortable learning environment is of particular importance. Educators, therefore, must strike a delicate balance between being welcoming and enabling, but at the same time opening up potentially uncomfortable discussions of injustice and inequalities because these are fundamental in the humanities. We want to continue to open up dialogue between all of us in academic communities and across disciplinary boundaries. We aim to support each other in teaching these increasingly important perspectives. Moreover, we suggest that continuous professional development opportunities should offer opportunities to become aware and develop skills in this field. If this were embedded in PG Cert and other HE staff development programmes, skills needed for teaching diversity would be part of forward thinking in HE. As we teach diversity on a diverse world, discussions are opening across the world about the need to decolonise the curriculum, queer the curriculum and gender the curriculum. We need to practice interdisciplinarity and intersectionality in our approach to pedagogy keep these discussions open.

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