

Chapter Nine

Academic Identities

Conversations across the Cracks

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Introduction

The academy in late modernity continues to be a site of multiple contests. One such skirmish broke out for us in 2014 (Jones, 2018), when seven people, three students and four academics, collaborated in a modestly funded small-scale research project reflexively investigating the ethnic representativeness of the curriculum that said students studied and said academics delivered, at least in part. The students volunteered for the project, proposed its focus, conducted the fieldwork research and wrote-up and disseminated the results. The collaborating academics for their part contained and catalysed the process and would through varying efforts seek to champion the spirit of the research over the ensuing years. Such a demarcation is too neat, but it offers a possibly useful heuristic with which to begin. The synergy that developed in the project was considerable. It was, we argue, a reciprocal liminal process through which all the principal parties were to some degree changed. In the context of our considerations of togetherness, this deserves a brief preliminary discussion.

Containment, Transformation and Collective Praxis

Our understanding of the synergy that emerged in our working together rests on various foundations, one of which is the concept of containment and the dynamics of the container-contained relationship (Bion, 1959, 1962a, 1962b), and a second is the notion of collective praxis (Smith, Salo and Grootenboer, 2010). In his psychoanalytically inspired formulation, Bion advances a model in which primitive inchoate mental states (proto-thinking) require an other's receptive mind (or 'reverie', in Bion's terms) to transform them qualitatively before both contents and process can be internalized, thus building a capacity for thinking and for the understanding and tolerance of feelings. Here, the container-contained model offers an idea of a resilient

interpersonal and intra-psychic dialogic learning process. This process of containment is essentially a meaning-making activity, which will inevitably be coloured by other factors such as the character of the relationship between the parties and the ebb and flow of our emotional lives and our subjectivities in all their complexities (Bion, 1963).

Smith, Salo and Grootenboer's (2010) discussion of collective praxis resonates with this view, albeit in different language, in its foregrounding of mutuality, authentic collegiality and commitment within a non-hierarchical communicative space as one means of sustaining creativity, academic vitality and productivity in what may be a less than hospitable environment. Part of the challenge here is in how we might sustain our being, our existential selves and an openness to others (something Hegel, Martin Buber, Kojève, Honneth and others working within the Continental tradition in philosophy have had much to say about). While Smith, Salo and Grootenboer's (2010) work reported principally on relatively elite networks of academic staff, augmented with an occasional doctoral researcher, our work goes beyond these parameters to encompass work with undergraduate students as partners in research, curriculum development and pedagogic praxis.

Broadening the Curriculum

Among the outputs that ultimately flowed from the project were recommendations to broaden or enrich the curriculum underpinning the programme through increasing the international ethnic and gender representativeness of its literature base and to diversify pedagogic examples of praxis and educational outcomes. These were not unusual challenges to curricula within the academic zeitgeist, wherein, sometimes pejoratively, dead white men (Hughes, 2006, pp. 348–9) supposedly still exert a zombie-like grip on the minds of the living. Thus, elsewhere, others were voicing similar ideas, in, for example, the panel discussion 'Why isn't my professor Black?' at University College London (UCL, 2014; Jahi, 2014), the subsequent 'Why is my curriculum white?' student campaign, also there (Peters, 2015; Andrews, 2016), and more recently the 'Rhodes must fall in Oxford' campaign (RMFOxford, 2015), all arguably part of a wider movement seeking a decolonization of curricula (Jivraj and Simpson, 2015; Le Grange, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Kennedy, 2017).

The particularities of each situation are important. So too in our case. Our student researchers came from Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic backgrounds. This created particular resonances within the matrix of our work group, which were heightened by events on the world stage, on the British national stage and locally. These included, among other things, the campaigns of al-Qaeda, so-called Islamic State or Da'ish, and their affiliates, on the one hand, and the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the persecution of Rohingya peoples in Myanmar, on the other, in the global context. In Britain, on the one hand, the government was rolling out of an educational policy on promoting 'fundamental British values' and its anti-radicalization Prevent strategy, while, on the other, there was a rise in Islamophobia, xenophobia and hate crimes. Locally, there was the so-called Trojan Horse affair, a fake plot to Islamize schools in

Birmingham. For their part, the ethnic backgrounds of the staff were Indian, Irish-American and white-British, which all carried their own inevitable resonances.

Why had these *particular* students, out of all those on our programme, stepped forward to work with us? Their own overriding response centred on the concept of leaving a cultural legacy: a sense of connection or togetherness with future generations of students. Within our own institution the student body is ethnically diverse. Considering just those students enrolled on our programme over a five-year period (435 students from 2010/11 to 2014/15), an examination of demographic data showed 36 per cent defined themselves as coming from a Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) background, with British-Pakistani students forming the largest single cluster therein (15%). How did these students fare on the programme itself during this period? Using degree classifications as a *very* crude proxy of academic achievement, and just considering those who achieved either first-class or third-class and pass degrees, white students *appeared* disproportionately represented among those gaining firsts (78% though they comprised 64% of the student body), while the preponderance of *some* BME students was conspicuous at the other end of the classification spectrum (46% though they comprised 36% of the student body). Notably, Pakistani students appeared evenly distributed across these classifications. We do not wish to make too much of these patterns as yet (further statistical analysis is needed), but merely wish to note them here as perhaps bearing on the question of the potential differential impact of the curriculum on student achievement across groups and as more general food for thought. This attainment or awarding gap is something the British Office for Students has now identified as a national issue to be addressed as a priority (OfS, 2020; Amos and Doku, 2019; Dale-Rivas, 2019; Akinbosede, 2019; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

With students themselves soliciting curriculum development, indications that some sections of the student body were failing to thrive on the existing curricular diet, and our own commitment to a praxis based on togetherness, we disseminated project recommendations to review and revise reading lists and praxis on existing modules and developed two new innovative optional modules, titled 'Education in Birmingham' and 'International education', to run in the second and third years, respectively, of the undergraduate programme.

What follows focuses substantively on what we have so far learned through the latter efforts. We will explore three themes: recognition of the sociopolitical context, situated learning in Birmingham and some of the challenges of assessment.

Recognition of the Immediate Socio-political Context

Education is commonly regarded as one of the key ways through which 'society transmits its accumulated values, knowledge, skills, attitudes and customs from one generation to another and influences how an individual thinks, feels and acts' (Mortimore, 2013, p. 3). There is a wealth of literature on how educational theories, content and practical activities influence, reflect and embody differing societal values

(Halstead and Taylor, 1996). Similarly, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) suggest ways in which education is implicated in the reproduction of society (Sullivan, 2002), through fostering the transmission of certain cultural values.

The International Education module, subtitled 'Global diversity and educational inequality', is explicitly surrounded by such values given the degree to which the current political climate seeks to influence the English education system. Headline initiatives here include the controversial policy to 'put the promotion of British values at the heart of what every school has to deliver for children' (Gov UK, 2014), in order to promote social cohesion on the one hand and support the anti-radicalization and counter-terrorism Prevent strategy on the other. British values are defined in the government legislation as centring on: 'Democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind' (HM Government, 2011, p. 44).

Nonetheless, others cogently argue that such purported British values are actually universal values, values which are inclusive and non-negotiable (Bari, 2014). Given the globally connected, multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of much of Britain, according differential rather than equal recognition and esteem to bona fide groups essentially perpetuates power relations very much akin to that between colonizer and colonized groups, with the latter invited to adopt an essentially subaltern position (Gramsci, 1971; Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1985). This hegemonic hierarchical structuring in Britain, a country that has been traditionally riven with social class distinctions, is no surprise. Seriously voicing this in the academy, however, potentially gives rise to considerable cognitive dissonance for some students. This is particularly so for those aspiring to careers within the state education system, which is substantially dominated by neoliberal policies. The entailed regulatory practices all too often disempower students and teachers, the demands for compliance in exchange for position subverting agency and compromising integrity of praxis. Such dissonance is, of course, intersectional, as Crenshaw (1989) would emphasize, with gender and class divisions for example further problematizing the desire for authentic collaborative togetherness.

This dissonance was further magnified locally in Birmingham by the previously mentioned 2014 Trojan Horse affair (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018). With Da'ish campaigns in the Middle East and elsewhere in the headlines, as well as well-founded concerns about terror attacks on the British mainland, an alleged plot by 'hard-line' Muslim 'Islamist's' to take over some Birmingham schools became breaking news. The Trojan Horse letter appeared in March 2014, claiming that some schools in Birmingham 'had been deliberately targeted by Muslims standing as school governors in order to replace school leaders with heads who would adopt a more Islamic agenda in running the schools' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). This swiftly led to Birmingham City Council and Department for Education inquiries into the stories and snap inspections at fifteen schools. Such regulatory gaze came hand-in-hand with a prejudicial preformed transference and hegemonic narrative about the supposed failure of multiculturalism and its subversion by radicalized Muslim separatists, which was widely and largely uncritically reported in the media. It was only in mid-2017 that the cases were abandoned following the emergence of clear evidence of abuse of process (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018). It was rich and powerful material, in relation

to which some of our students were insiders with various ties to the schools involved and all had a view. Seminar discussions inevitably revealed disconnections, mistrust and misunderstandings among participants, the recognition and dialogic working through of which facilitated collective praxis (Smith, Salo and Grootenboer, 2010).

In the classroom this process involved considering with students the contemporary socio-political context as inherently linked to collective histories, which of course included consideration of the rise and function of education systems internationally, particularly through the conceptual lenses of imperialism, colonialism, globalization and gender. Taking just colonialism here as illustrative of the challenges these concepts entail, its reach is substantial given its recurrence across world history. By the 1930s its European iteration at one time or another stretched across over 84 per cent of the world's land surface (Loomba, 2015; Rizvi, Lingard and Lavia, 2006, p. 250). With education as a key agent of past colonial control (Gramsci, 1971; Viswanathan, 1992; Andreotti, 2011; AbuHilal and Abu-Shomar, 2014), contemporary education often continues to obscure and perpetuate colonial legacies (Dei, 2010; Dei and Simmons, 2010). Here teacher and taught risk becoming proxies for the colonial master and subject, while traditional education itself arguably bears some of the hallmarks of a colonizing discourse (Dei and Simmons, 2010; Hoerder, 2014).

We thus raise the question of the extent to which these living educational legacies, which shape identity (Fanon, 1952), social relations, freedom and various forms of discrimination (Gilroy, 1987; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Pajaczkowska and Young, 1992), for example, persist in impacting on contemporary educational experience and attainment. Their impact on recent socio-political and cultural contexts in Britain, including Brexit, is another story.

Situated Learning in Birmingham

One of the key findings of the initial research included the desire for a locally based representation of education, exploring local theory, research, praxis, institutions and educational trajectories. This expression we saw as intimately related to the preceding discourse on power, with its implicit critique of relations between the metropolitan centre and colonial margins, prominent dimensions in both colonialism and contemporary globalization. One effort to meet this desire was our construction of a second-year undergraduate elective module titled 'Education in Birmingham'. Staff were enthusiastic about this development, designing the module to incorporate content such as Paul Willis's landmark 1976 study *Learning to Labour* about disenfranchised youth in 'Bricktown' (Birmingham), the progressive Steward Street School experiment (Burke and Grosvenor, 2013), the Trojan Horse affair (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018), through a host of studies of gangs, child protection tragedies, terrorism, diversities and flagship initiatives.

Exciting stuff you might think. We thought so. Yet, when the module was actually offered, very few students enrolled and, as a consequence, it was deemed under the university regulations to be unviable to run. How might we understand this apparent

falling away of interest? For example: were the responses in the initial research on this point overblown? Were the alternative module options just more attractive? Had we failed to adequately promote the module? Was it, in some way, perceived as a step too far? Were the university regulations on module viability partisan and the institutional climate rather lukewarm in this context? While the reasons behind the lack of take-up and institutional shelving of the module are likely to be complex, our experience of student struggles on the International Education module with formative ethnographic fieldwork across the region was suggestive. This latter activity was a further way in which we sought to achieve the curricular ambition to rebalance academic attention towards the local.

Assessment, Ethnography and Risky Practices

The International Education module offers students a comparative interdisciplinary perspective on the topic. We adopt an explicitly compound focus, examining indigenous educational practices in England alongside case studies of education elsewhere (e.g. Israel, South Africa, Pakistan, Finland). At the same time we strive, like C. Wright Mills (2000), to make the familiar strange, illuminating markers of ethnic diversity and otherness that exist often quietly in the indigenous scene. In an effort to achieve this in a grounded manner, students on the module are tasked with undertaking an ethnographic walk (O'Neill and Roberts, 2020) in pairs or small groups, the findings from which experience they are to subsequently report to and discursively unpack with the class.

The material thus gathered, captured often in the form of photographs, sometimes snippets of conversations, reported associations and subjective affect states, etc., is sometimes very rich indeed.

Our first example was a photograph of a language school advertisement incorporating a 1939 British motivational poster ('Keep calm and carry on'), that resurfaced in 2008 to become an anthem for austerity resilience and was quickly adapted to serve a plethora of other markets (Hatherley, 2017). In this case it was being pressed into service to sell English language lessons. Trading on the imaginary, on nostalgia for a lost heroic identity and an injunction to manage, if not repress, feelings in the face of adversity (the stereotyped 'stiff upper lip'), the advertisement resonated widely in the seminar. The conversation thus touched on national identity, esteem, a new (linguistic) empire in which English is dominant, commodification, marketization, McDonaldization, inter-ethnic tension and the decline of minority languages among other issues. As such, the image engaged the seminar in a joint (Freirean) enterprise in an accessible and visceral way, in part as this student-produced resource, a found object, was embedded within the local community.

Some students were able to document changes of use in local buildings and in this way chart changes in community ethnic demographics, while opening up conversations on migration, community cohesion, racism, xenophobia and co-existence. Two photographs, for example, partly illustrated this in their depiction of a former public

house in Bordesley Green, Birmingham, which more recently became an Islamic Centre and mosque. Such sites, while of course often encompassing learning establishments of varying degrees of formality, offer grounded insights into the lived lives of communities which are also served by mainstream educational provision.

This is important in contributing to the professional formation of aspiring teachers, or indeed other human services professionals, sensitizing them to a sample of issues their future constituents may face and helping to consolidate empathic resources and understanding of affective and broadly psychosocial dimensions in the process.

Our third student example was an image of a war memorial commemorating local soldiers who died during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, just one of several war memorials that have featured so far in students' documentation of their localities. Such memorials engaged us in discussion of the age of empire and colonization, of politics, ideology and power, of identity, of social class, of personal troubles and public issues. In the contemporary multi-ethnic context, such sites of memory are potentially ambiguous signifiers, sometimes representing triumph and defeat to different members of the same class; as memorials to the dead however, to other young local people who lost their lives from violence or disease, they were also moving human sites evoking a greater degree of togetherness.

In considering such material, we, as teaching staff, did not necessarily have advance warning of the nature of these offerings to the class or their potential relevance or meanings. Neither did others in the class. Yet *these very features* offered opportunities for students and staff to encounter each other and each other's work afresh within a local, national and international context and to engage in a meaning-making process. Such engagement was often fraught with hesitation and uncertainty, which process ultimately required emotional and intellectual containment (as Bion might talk about) for deep learning to evolve. Staff were at times viewed with scepticism or confusion: were we simply indulging pet ideological views rather than engaging in serious praxis? Were we inviting them to join us in some sort of risky practice (Enright et al., 2017), jeopardizing crucial final-year grade possibilities? We would regularly need to engage with subaltern silence (Spivak, 1985) or politeness in response to ethnographic offerings, posing our own questions or thinking aloud to scaffold discussions and shore up confidence.

That this was so ought, in some ways, to be no surprise. Our students are facing a high-stakes assessment within the hierarchical marketized university system, well aware of its inherent inequalities, where others hold the structural power to mandate assessment modes and focus, where commodification is commonplace, and where attempting to anticipate-and-satisfy covert staff expectations in assignments is sometimes believed to be a *sine qua non* for securing good grades. These tensions were equally, if not more, evident in moving from the formative- to the summative-assessment component of the module. Here again student uncertainty emerged, particularly over our encouragement to further develop their formative ethnographic work into a more comprehensively written-up paper. There was increased checking and validation seeking over submission foci. Some students opted for 'safer' alternatives, such as mainstream comparative analyses of two national education systems. Others were able to sustain their earlier dialogic engagement, despite its uncertainties, and

emerge perhaps not with higher grades but with an enhanced degree of filiation or togetherness.

Conclusion

In moving from research, through curricular development to a praxis that incorporates further joint research, we have here sought to build on the previously discussed notions of containment and collective praxis. Our construction of potential spaces for exploration, alongside conceptual support and emotional encouragement, was important throughout. As with Smith, Salo and Grootenboer (2010), the endeavour has been productive, sustained and creative, though its extension into pedagogy has highlighted more interpersonal and systemic uncertainties.

This again is unsurprising. A majority of our students are on a trajectory into teaching and the developments here are to an extent disruptive of some of the mainstream models of transmission legitimized in ITE programmes, which model practice ‘inauthenticity’ (Freire, 1970; Glass, 2001). Focusing here on togetherness, intercultural learning and the promotion of opportunities for fostering empathy, through dialogical, democratic engagement, facilitates – we argue – the growth of important human and professional capacities (Kemmis and Carr, 1986, p. 190).

Response from Marina Tornero Tarragó

I welcome this paper from Roger Willoughby and Parminder Assi and I have personal experience of working with them during May 2019, when I contributed sessions on education, internationalism and bilingualism. The range and scope of courses in education and multi-professional practice at Newman University extends student engagement beyond the familiar narrow notions of academic engagement to embrace collegiate membership of social and learning communities in higher education. The curriculum is focused on the interrogation of educational policy and practice for greater social justice, equality and inclusion.

During my visit I contributed to the module ‘International education: Global diversity and educational inequality’. In this work, active student participation is central to teaching being based around close discussion of material and experience. The group Parminder kindly invited me to participate with was keen on learning new perspectives about how the co-existence of languages and cultures in the same country very frequently leads to struggles, especially for minorities. This has happened in the past in Spain, the country where I come from, with Basque and Catalan, languages that were severely repressed during the Franco dictatorship. In their text, Parminder and Roger describe a ‘hegemonic hierarchical structuring in Britain, a country that has been traditionally riven with social class distinctions’, and that is relatable to many other countries, including Spain.

Midway through the module, students undertake an ethnographic walk to critically explore a chosen area of the environment, the results of which are presented in the

module to deepen understanding of sites of contest and the ways in which history and ideology are reflected in our everyday urban geography.

It is encouraging to see that student experience and engagement is reflected in this paper and that the learning, teaching and assessment processes used serve to foster a sense of belonging using dialogical and critical pedagogical approaches which recognize student expertise and experience. For instance, the use of visuals in class to provide examples of – and assist in exploring – the topic provides the students with meaningful tools with which they can connect immediately as it is basically the language of their generation, as discussed by writers such as Buckingham or Livingstone in their work on the concept of ‘media literacy’.

Letting them learn through pictures that, moreover, they have taken from their surroundings (such as the sign of ‘Keep calm and learn English’ or the change in patterns of use of a local building) link them to their reality, since one of the most illuminating factors of this module is the capacity it holds to make young people understand the diversity they live in and have a critical, mature position about it. The students are, thus, experiencing an immersive learning.

Roger and Parminder have taken an initiative commenced as a ‘Students as partners’ research project in 2014 to increase opportunities for collaborative learning which exploits the diversity within the student population. The work to incorporate multiple perspectives by including the ideas of Black and Asian thinkers and academics from local, global, past and present is very clearly represented. I wholeheartedly commend the curriculum and assessment design of the work done by Roger and Parminder which enables students to identify and relate learning to diverse experiences. It is very satisfying to see this ongoing work being developed into this text on critical pedagogy.

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