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Constructing Pedagogic Identities: Versions of the Educator in AE and HE

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the relationships between pedagogic identities in HE and AE, suggesting that HE could build its social purpose orientation and reclaim pedagogy by learning from the AE community.*

Context

Adult education (AE) and higher education (HE) in Britain still retain their identities as “separate spheres,” even when AE is provided through universities. It is important to bear this in mind when considering the pedagogic literature of the two sectors. Whilst much North American research and writing on AE is actually about programs provided by, and faculty employed within, HE institutions, the majority of AE provision in Britain is organised outside universities, and the tenor of AE writing tends to reflect this. To compound the confusion, 58% of all HE students in the UK are over the age of 25 (DfEE, 2000) and would probably be considered “adult students” in many other parts of the world; in Britain however, an implicit and rather disorienting distinction persists between “adult students” (in AE) and “mature students” (in HE). This distinction has a considerable impact upon the particular configuration of HE pedagogic literature apparent in Britain.

The evident differences between AE pedagogies and those emerging in HE aroused our curiosity and formed the impetus for our ESRC-funded research project, “Models of the Educator in HE,” which ended in 1999 (ESRC project no.R000222794) The project was a literature-based study intended to develop theoretical frameworks for analysing pedagogical writing, and to trace the commonalities and divergences between pedagogic models evident in AE and other established sectors of education, and those emerging in the relatively new – and relatively undertheorised - field of HE pedagogy. This, we hoped, would provide the basis for an analysis of the consequences of divergent development for both adult and HE teaching. The study was UK-based, but utilised sources from throughout the Anglophone world, and to a lesser extent from European writing originating outside the UK.

In this paper we consider the potential influence of AE-based pedagogic ideas on the emerging literature of pedagogy in HE. Throughout the project we have tried to encourage conversations between the two sectors, and part of our aim has been to bring critical and social perspectives from AE pedagogy to bear upon pedagogic writing and, in the longer term, practice in HE. In the UK, adult educators have worked hard to open up HE for adults, but the consequences of expanding HE to include a more diverse range of students have had little attention within the pedagogic literature of British HE. As AE researchers working within HE, we are concerned about the divorce between policy (e.g. moves to recruit more adults into HE) and practice (e.g. the frequent absence of student identity and social diversity from pedagogic discourse within HE). The common separation of faculty development from established departments of educational research further exacerbates the split between AE theory and HE pedagogy. International comparisons are problematic, given the different structures within which HE pedagogy has developed as a specialism; however the growth of HE pedagogy as a distinct (and, we would argue, inadequately theorised) area of study and practice, artificially separated from AE and other pedagogic traditions, does not seem to be a purely British phenomenon.

Framework

Our research has identified a number of pedagogic ‘identities’ in the HE literature we have surveyed:

- The educator as reflective practitioner
- The educator as critical practitioner
- The educator as situated learner within a community of practice
- The educator as psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning

- The educator as assurer of organisational quality and efficiency; deliverer of service to agreed or imposed standards

These identities, or “versions” of the educator, are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but represent the range of understandings of pedagogic work apparent in the “mainstream” HE literature.

In the process of arriving at and analysing these identities, we used a number of conceptual “dimensions” (some more useful than others) along which we could locate the characteristics and implications of each identity:

Learning in a community	↔	Individualised learning
Disciplinary community	↔	Pedagogic community
Moral/social accountability	↔	Organisational accountability
Learner-centred evaluation	↔	Objective measures of learning
Focus on process	↔	Focus on product
Content contested	↔	Content as given
Social orientation	↔	Psychological orientation
Educator as person in the world	↔	Anonymous/invisible educator
Learner as person in the world	↔	Anonymous/invisible learner

A more detailed account of both the models and the process of analysis has been given elsewhere (Zukas & Malcolm, 1999). Our growing awareness of the consistent distinctions between the two fields of AE and HE pedagogic writing has led us into a further exploration of the “communities of practice” within each of these sectors (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and of their distinctive ‘academic literacies’ (Lea, 1998). These ideas provide socio-cultural and pedagogic “lenses” through which educational practice can be viewed, and help to clarify the reasons for the development of these intercommunal and epistemological splits (Malcolm & Zukas, 2000). However our concern here is with the potential value of AE to pedagogic practice and research within the academy.

In this paper we will compare two common conceptualisations of pedagogic identity in the respective literatures of HE and AE: the educator as “critical practitioner,” and the educator as “psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning.” These polarised pedagogic identities are familiar to the AE community of practice, representing the extreme positions in an ideological tussle which has rumbled through the field for several years. They are chosen precisely because they are illustrative of a major difference between the two bodies of pedagogic literature: the identities are both strongly represented and contested within AE, whilst in HE, one identity is dominant, and the other is barely visible.

In each case, we explore the prevalence and characteristics of the identity within HE and AE writing, analysing in each case the reasons for inclusion or exclusion of particular perspectives. We then utilise three of the dimensions shown above, in order to gauge some of the implications of each identity for pedagogic practice: learning within a community vs. individualised learning; educator as “person in the world” vs. anonymous/invisible educator; and disciplinary community vs. pedagogic community.

The Educator as Critical Practitioner

The political roots of AE and its strong social purpose tradition, from the activities of the Chartists through to contemporary discussions of “diversity,” have ensured that the “why” and “what” of AE have always been as important as the “how;” in fact content, purpose and process have been seen as inseparable elements of practice. The current generation of AE writing has borrowed from a range of political traditions to bring a variety of critical, including feminist, social understandings to bear on pedagogy, and to produce various conceptualisations of critical practice. Postmodernist understandings can be seen as deriving from this same critical tradition. These diverse approaches consider the content of classroom practice as embodying and manifesting the power-knowledge relations which exist beyond the classroom. Of course, this is not to suggest that all AE writing could possibly be char-

acterised as promoting critical practice; AE has its share of dull and mechanistic writing on decontextualised classroom techniques. Our point here is that it is a recognisable, familiar and easily accessed “angle” on the pedagogy of AE; adult educators are not generally surprised to be asked about the *purpose* of their pedagogic work as well as its processes.

Our reading of the HE pedagogic literature has revealed a markedly different picture from that evident in AE. There is a long and respected tradition of critical writing on the purposes of HE and its various social, historical, epistemological and technological functions. In Britain, Barnett’s prolific recent work on HE and on “critical being” (1997) is a major contribution to the debate on HE as a social and political *institution*. In (inter-) disciplinary fields where different positionalities have challenged and transformed the nature of what counts as knowledge, e.g. in women’s studies, critical pedagogy has emerged inevitably from the questioning of disciplinary discourses, structures and power relations. (“Critical” here includes feminist approaches – although the debate on their divergences continues [e.g. Gore, 1993]). Thus it is not difficult to find writing on feminist pedagogy, but it tends to be found within the specialist literature of the discipline itself, rather than in the literature of mainstream or ‘straight’ pedagogy. When we turn to the ‘straight’ pedagogic literature of HE, which generally takes ‘teaching and learning’, rather than knowledge or purpose, as its starting point, versions of critical practice are much harder to find; it is almost like looking at the literature of an entirely different field of study. There are odd exceptions: Webb (1996), Rowland (1999) and Walker (1999) are examples of writers on HE pedagogy who explicitly consider the ‘why’ of HE in conjunction with the ‘how’. Walker’s references to such familiar guiding lights of critical AE as Gramsci and Freire are almost unique in the field of HE pedagogy; her background in South African teacher education may be relevant. Beyond these few independent-minded exceptions, the educator as critical practitioner makes few appearances in the ‘straight’ HE pedagogic literature. The instrumental focus on ‘teaching and learning’, as if it were a subject in its own right, means that HE pedagogy has become fragmented and artificially dispersed over several distinct bodies of thought and literature.

The Educator as Psycho-diagnostician and Facilitator of Learning

Taking the first international exchange between British and N. American adult educators (Zukas, 1988) as a point for comparison, a notable difference between British and N. American AE was the absence of psychological models of the learner and the teacher from the British literature. Over the last ten years or more, this difference has been less marked as N. American AE has moved away from psychological models and frameworks, whilst AE in Britain has continued not to use them. In contrast, psychology has provided the dominant framework for HE pedagogic writing in Britain. There is a vast literature which begins with a focus on learners and educational transactions. It assumes that educators need to diagnose learners’ needs, e.g. by identifying or taking into account learning styles or skills (e.g. Boyatzis & Kolb, 1991), or other individual predispositions, according to a favoured learning theory (Brown, 1993). Once characteristics and approaches to learning are identified, educators facilitate learning by using techniques and tools which meet those needs (e.g., Gibbs, 1992; Grenham et al, 1999). With learning foregrounded to this extent, pedagogy itself is conceptualised as little else than diagnosis and facilitation. This diagnostic approach is favoured by many of the “founding fathers” of British HE pedagogic research. In such approaches, psychological theories are used as tools to inform the ways in which practice takes place; in other words, theory determines practice. But, unfortunately, such theories do not emerge from practice; indeed, they are remarkable in that they discount the context and purpose of educational events, and the disciplinary settings in which such events take place.

Of course, not all psychological theory ignores context and settings. Socio-cultural psychology has transformed school teacher education and clarified the relational elements of pedagogy; research on situated cognition (Brown et al, 1988) has also emphasised the significance of context for teaching and learning. Such critical psychological approaches have not had a significant impact on HE pedagogic writing. Why might this be? Tennant (1997) argues that, if the focus is on learning rather than on psychology, “it appears cumbersome and unnecessary to address the conceptual and methodological problems of psychological theory and research” (p.1). And this hints at another reason: if

HE pedagogic research is divorced from pedagogic practice, as it often is in UK institutional structures, teachers may assume that pedagogic researchers 'know' how it should be done – they are, after all, the experts. As in management education, they may demand to know 'how to'; and psycho-diagnostic and facilitative models offer apparently easy solutions. The contemporary concern with accountability and measurability (Malcolm & Zukas, 1999) encourages the search for such solutions, and the structural separation of HE teacher training from school, adult and further education teacher training also lessens the impact of research across sectors. Increasingly, the commodification of HE encourages a conceptualisation of learning as product, rather than process.

Analysing Identities

Learning within a Community vs. Individualised Learning

The "critical practice" identity is not difficult to situate along this dimension. It focuses on learning within a community; students and teachers are considered to be social and cultural actors with identities emerging from their wider social experiences. The nature of and relations between their communities are likely to be contested, and this will have a bearing on the processes and content of classroom activity. The conscious social orientation of much AE practice means that 'student-centred' pedagogy has to involve the consideration of community identities. The 'educator as psycho-diagnostician', on the other hand, inevitably focuses on the learner as an individual - specifically, as a manifestation of psychological tendencies, processes and dispositions which can be understood and utilised for the purpose of learning. Whilst this perspective does acknowledge relations between individuals, it does not generally extend its scope beyond the classroom transaction to the broader social or cultural context, or the community identities to which this gives rise.

Educator as "Person in the World" vs. Anonymous/Invisible Educator

The educator as a person in the world - as someone with social identity, and conscious of the "worldly" baggage present in the classroom - is perhaps such an obvious element of pedagogic identity in AE that it is taken for granted. We agonise over power relations with students, and conduct vigorous debates about how our gender, class, sexual, or ethnic iden-

tity affects what and how we teach. These concerns extend to the content and inclusivity of our disciplines, doubtless informed by the social purpose tradition of AE and the sociological perspectives which have informed its growing body of theory over time. The 'educator as critical practitioner' is indisputably a person in the world, and this may account for the appeal of, for example, Brookfield's work (1995) to teachers; he addresses them as real people, with real anxieties and frailties. If we turn to the 'educator as psycho-diagnostician', the teacher's reality is generally absent; the teacher has a pedagogic function rather than a social identity. The focus is on the (equally anonymous) learner and the processes occurring within the learner that enable learning to take place. Thus HE *pedagogy*, where this model is dominant, detaches itself from those issues, such as diversity, that are addressed through social purpose approaches to HE *policy*.

Disciplinary Community vs. Pedagogic Community

HE teachers usually conceive of themselves as members of a disciplinary community. The critical practice identity enables teachers to question the content and purpose of their teaching, just as their research questions orthodoxies within the discipline. Within AE, the knowledge-content of and between disciplines has been interrogated, precisely because the pedagogic role of adult educators could not be divorced from the content of teaching. Critical practice thus allows educators to inhabit 'knowledge-practice' communities which are simultaneously (inter-) disciplinary *and* pedagogic. The educator as psycho-diagnostician, on the other hand, separates the pedagogic from the disciplinary role, assuming the existence of two separate communities. This assumption enables pedagogy to be analysed simply in terms of 'teaching and learning' rather than as an aspect of knowledge production, and in effect creates a superfluous community of (decontextualised) pedagogues. Even where pedagogy is discussed within a disciplinary context, for example in geography or chemistry, disciplinary content is assumed to be intact and unquestioned; the pedagogic role is simply to enable students to learn it. Again, the social purpose of HE is divorced from action in the classroom.

Construction Sites

The above discussion illustrates the way in which the dominant pedagogic identities in AE and HE

reflect the persistent conceptualisation (in the UK at least) of the two fields as distinct communities of academic practice. British HE in recent years has become increasingly similar to its US counterpart, in terms of massification, diversity and academic range; in short, more like AE. However, the developing theory of social purpose in HE has tended to ignore pedagogic theory and practice, and vice versa. Despite efforts to raise the status of teaching in relation to research, the removal of pedagogy from its habitat within (inter-) disciplinary knowledge production, and the consequent creation of a separate community of pedagogic practice, actually has the opposite effect. AE can offer a model for reclaiming pedagogy, demonstrating how critical practice brings disciplinary and pedagogic identities together in a meaningful whole. This could enable university teachers to construct an identity which integrates social purpose into HE pedagogy, as well as HE policy.

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