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Making the Curriculum Culturally Relevant: Relations between the Global and Local

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Abstract: *This paper analyses findings from action research which explored the impact of devising higher education curricula which are culturally and socially relevant to marginalised adult learners. The theoretical framework draws on the relationship between globalisation and local identity.*

This paper focuses on one aspect of the research project. It first outlines the UK setting and theoretical perspective which informed the analysis. This is followed by a short discussion about the education curriculum in relation to certain social groups. The final part of the paper uses selected interview data to explore how these issues were addressed in one university adult education context.

The research took place in a university in the North West of England. The project team consisted of three researchers and one administrator, employing a number of sessional tutors and working with a range of community partners (colleges, schools, community organisations, state funded welfare organisations). Activities consisted of providing short 30 hour courses, each carrying an optional credit status for people who wished to submit work for assessment. Each course was developed through one of a series of university approved “skills” frameworks (enterprise, study, research, personal). Curriculum content was negotiated between community contacts, tutors and their students. Courses were provided throughout the year at a time, pace and place to suit the learners. Content would vary from advocacy courses to Islamic Studies, or research topics of individual interest. The findings for this paper use interview data from tutors and students from two sets of learners: working class white adults who attended a disability self help organisation and Muslim women of Pakistani heritage (some had been educated in Pakistan and others educated in the UK). Tutors were interviewed about their teaching approaches and students were invited to give a life history learning perspective plus

perceptions of curriculum and teaching styles presented on this programme. The impetus for the research derived from a policy agenda for widening participation and literature which discusses the future shape of a mass higher education system, especially one catering for adults in a lifelong learning mode. Of central interest to the research was how to justify a distinctively “higher” education which engaged with local interests. Whilst this debate is not new, the pressures of globalisation on this agenda are.

Globalisation and Local Communities

Briefly globalisation reflects the constriction of time and space brought about by the rise of the “network society” (Castells, 1996). We are now part of a global economy, mediated primarily by information technology. The extent to which economies, politics and cultures are converging, or not, is open to debate. Most agree that the effects of globalisation (the recasting of national communication boundaries, increasing mobility and transnational companies operating independently of national policy, the formation of new kinds of compressed time-space boundaries, relationships and hierarchies) impact on countries, regions and communities. Walters (1995) conceptualises the concept of a global village - where distant events can have their effect on different locations across the world (p.35). Bauman (1998) proposes that the reaction of people on the receiving end of these processes is to regroup, forming new, localised identities. Friedman (1994) explains that “local” is not self contained. It depends on its interface with other locales and wider net-

works. He suggests that where global trends may try and influence the culture of the local, the local also appropriates these trends for its own gain (p.12). In other words, people want to shape what they consume in order to fit their own identity and needs. This means, of course, that people and communities position themselves differently in response to global interference. Higher education is geographically positioned within local communities but also interfaces, through a ripple effect, with its region and the wider world. It needs to be sensitive to the economic and political consequences of attending to all these. It is also an investment resource (now competing with other players) for the development of society's future human capital (the skills and knowledge required for wealth creation).

The economic need to maximise the nation's wealth creating resources and minimise the demands from its loss-making dependency population has led to an increasing political interest in the causal relationship between education and the labour market. The solution has been to devise a range of strategies to decrease welfare dependency by increasing work capacity. In order to achieve this it is encouraging a lifelong learning culture whereby individuals develop an expectation that they will return to formal skills and knowledge learning throughout their lives as circumstances change. These rationales leave unaddressed the value of learning for unwaged work and for those who do not have much prospect of employment. Interest is now growing in the potential link between continuous learning and people's involvement in local activities - of a citizenship or social nature. This coincides with the globalisation theorists' perceptions of people's inclinations to re-group in the face of global re-ordering of society. There is therefore a renewed focus, in the UK at least, in the "local." It has been consistently hard, however, to link "higher" education with local learners in an inclusive way. One feature of this difficulty is the nature of the curriculum.

A Curriculum with Social and Cultural Relevance

Those who argue for a new kind of curriculum suggest that current ways of constructing and teaching knowledge are value laden and designed to privilege

only certain groups in society. Dominant power systems define who has authority to know and who determines what is valuable knowledge. The education institution perpetuates the status quo of this power relationship, thus making it difficult for those already silenced to get their voice heard (Goduka, 1998). Whilst the conclusiveness of this theoretical perspective is not without its critics it provides an explanatory rationale for claiming the need for the marginalised to be heard and made visible on their terms. Making the marginalised visible often means developing curricula which are outside academic disciplines. This point is of particular relevance to many of the students in this study and has been the subject of earlier debates on curriculum relevance for working class communities (for example, Jackson, 1980; Lovett, 1982).

It is the element of curriculum distortion in the education system which particularly features amongst critics on behalf of minority groups. Much of this criticism emanates from black writers who highlight the ethnocentricity of the teaching process. On the one hand existing knowledge is described as distorting the history of people's origins and development; on the other hand the black experience is either patronised or simply ignored. The effect is to deny the silenced person's identity and to create "disjunction between the values and beliefs about the nature of knowledge, its transmission, assessment and constitution" (Allen, 1997, p. 184). These sentiments are also expressed in different contexts for "working class ways of thinking and being" (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998), and for disability identities (Marks, 1994).

To address this, hooks (1994) proposes a particular teaching approach - "engaged pedagogy." She describes this as a learning relationship where "everyone's presence is acknowledged" (p.8). In this process teachers are regarded as mutual learners and the students' lived experiences are central to informing the academic material. The teacher-learner relationship encourages students to challenge what has previously been taught. The goal is to shift the traditional academic position of neutrality so that the marginalised social or cultural viewpoint becomes the position of neutrality, against which other values are compared and critiqued. Hill Collins' (1990) stance is to call this "situated knowl-

edge,” where the oppressed or unrecognised voices can have epistemological privilege. The point behind all these arguments is that knowledge is relational and the dominant discourse of academic knowledge is not value-free. Difference, though, must necessarily be seen as multiple, otherwise one suppressed discourse will simply claim privilege over another. These values of difference amongst marginalised groups need to be re-discovered from a starting point of trust and mutual respect if new curriculum initiatives are to grow. From this, it is argued, identities will strengthen, with consequent effects on community cohesion and social growth.

We looked for examples in the tutor and student interviews, of situated knowledge and aspects of “engaged pedagogy.” We wanted to see how people’s identities were being validated to give the students a stronger sense of self and place. We looked for the promotion of insider views in the teaching relationship and examples of mutual learning. This meant finding ways in which the student voice and lived experiences contributed to the construction of knowledge and the development of critical being.

Teaching as Engaged Pedagogy

Whilst hooks and others discuss teaching in terms of student-teacher relationships, the learners indicated that this was also somehow entwined with where they learned. Every student interviewed made reference to their local learning environment as a contributory factor to their positive experience. The environment gave them a sense of place in their locality, contributing to their identity and motivation to learn. Local space helps validate the fragmented identities of communities who are increasingly under pressure to respond to global definitions of themselves as homogeneous members of the wider (in the UK’s case) European community. Local courses have a symbolic as well as practical value. Arifa described this environment specifically in terms of her students’ religion, gender and practical needs:

They walk into the community centre, at that time there are no male classes, there is a crèche facility, they are all women crèche workers, they are all women tutors and its a real sense of community and belonging and sisterhood and

they feel comfortable, they feel that they own that place and they belong there.

The women were able to appropriate the dominant space and localise it with their own shared identities. Whilst each group had practical needs for nearby teaching locations, such as access or crèche facilities, they also valued the atmosphere created in their learning environment. The opportunity to have a say in where the learning should take place also meant they felt valued particularly in its organisation: “We feel as though we are part of the consultation.”

Those students who felt most marginalised in terms of their identity and culture were most appreciative of tutors who visibly shared something in the way of culture or physical appearance. For the Muslim students this was the starting point for building trust and engendering a sense of empathy. Tutor Arifa, for instance, said: “The women are still concerned about who has actually written this course ... I can understand their background and where they come from.” With both sets of learners their positive experiences hinged on being seen as whole beings and valued on their terms: “She wanted to know our opinion as well, she wanted to know what we thought” (Musarat); “The tutor was actually coming round and asking us what ideas we’d come up with ... so the tutor actually became like another member of the class itself” (Paul). For some students the sense that the tutor was interested in your opinion and the opportunity to discuss issues with other students was something they felt was not a part of more formal teaching situations.

These exchanges in themselves, of course, would not have been worthy of the label higher education. This came about from a combination of subject matter which was meaningful to each student as individuals and as members of a group – and a teaching strategy which encouraged student narratives to become part of the tutor’s educational tool. Tasneem said for instance:

Arifa she taught us how to learn, think about history of Islam really – we know these things but we don’t think about its history, how to put ourselves in the history, then pretend we’re there

and think about issues, why they were done and everything.

Similarly, in the other student group Mandy linked the opportunity to input herself and her particular disability experiences into the courses with her own development in the way she thought and contributed to those around her:

Because its a subject very close to my heart and something that affects me very badly and ... you see doing that, putting bits on paper about feelings and soon it did encourage me to get out there and help, to reach other people who have the same problem.

For hooks, this is part of a process which she calls “coming to voice”: “Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically – to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (hooks, 1994, p. 148). It is also another means of reconciling difference in a way that enables people to re-shape what they consume. Devising a culturally or socially relevant curriculum which simultaneously engaged with critical analysis, the student voice and reflexivity could be potentially insular. The trick was to build on people’s lived experiences as a knowledge base to construct new knowledge which was validated by and within their shared social or cultural heritage.

Situated Knowledge

In different ways tutors and students demonstrated how they explored knowledge which was specific to their “social situatedness.” Arifa saw curriculum relevance as validating the student voice, using the learner’s insider standpoint as a position against which other views could be critiqued with rigour. Arifa explained how courses on this basis could apply the same principles across a range of issues:

A course which starts from the precept that you are looking at a particular group’s norms, beliefs, values, way of life, way of thinking from an insider view and you are developing a course with particular people in mind ... it could be about the impact of unemployment on unemployed people and you are looking at it from the view of unem-

ployed people. It could be about women in Islam so you are looking at it from the point of view not as an outsider whose looking in.

It was also about the value and status of such situated knowledge: “You are not saying that these are marginal views ... you are elevating those views to an important level ... by giving value to their beliefs and their way of life.” For hooks (1994), this process is critical to distinguishing between simply listening to those on the margins and according “their work the same respect and consideration given to other work” (p. 38). Alex, for instance, used his insider knowledge to critique from a unique perspective how non insiders might view disability:

I chose epilepsy because I’m an epileptic myself, I know what types of epilepsy there are – how people react to them and I know when people go into [a fit] – the colour of their faces changes ... I tried to find out inside people [their thoughts] who do not have epilepsy, how would they react if they saw somebody in one, would they know what to do

From these base lines, the students talked about how they critiqued and analysed issues, topics and perspectives which had little or no academic subject base but nevertheless were placed in a critical framework which meant that their analysis of situations was generating new knowledge. All these examples demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity.

The Reflexive, Critical Being

Being reflexive, as tutor Brenda said, also meant: “Giving students a perception in life that they had rights, that they weren’t to be put in a corner and dictated to and forgotten, that they were able to speak up.” Arifa developed this argument along phenomenological lines (Preece & Bokhari, 1996) which claim that her Muslim women’s sense of difference should also be celebrated:

They see themselves now as a different way of life but a very valued way of life ... its knowing your own history that empowers you ... they are exploring (Islam) and analysing it and they are repositioning themselves as Muslims in Britain.

The consequences of a globalising world in terms of time and space were particularly significant for the Asian women. Their personal boundaries had been reconstructed through Diaspora (the experience of living in a country twice removed from whence you originated). In a world where our identities develop from the discourses and images and attitudes of those around us the courses were a transformatory experience for women whose Islamic identity was marginalised by their social context in the UK but whose gender relations were also constituted differentially through “contingent relations of power” within their own families and communities (Brah, 1996). In this way the women would both benefit from and struggle against the recasting of time-space boundaries of their experience in the UK. The course content was both a reflection of the changing world and an opportunity for these women to regroup and regain some stability through a shared identity which they could link with their homeland through the global concept of Islam.

The students with disabilities revealed similar processes of personal reconstruction. Adult returners’ stories of identity transformation are usually in relation to their ability to conform to dominant values. Clearly there were aspects of this going on too in these courses as the students learnt to use academic conventions in their writings and gain grades approved from within the university. But they were at the same time validating their own insider knowledge and giving public credence to their own sense of difference, often radically different from the position they were used to.

Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from these snapshots of the students and tutors’ comments is this. A culturally relevant curriculum needs a teaching style which validates the learner’s experience as contributing to the creation of new knowledge. It can be explored in a critical framework through systematic inquiry and rigorous examination. But for marginalised adults this needs to be achieved in a context which allows people to be grounded in issues which directly connect with their own selves. This often means privileging the space of the local in order to contribute to more global concerns for social justice, civic awareness and shared values. Higher education tutors must also

engage in mutual learning and see students as whole beings - allowing their individual narratives to be part of the syllabus. For Hill Collins (1990) this kind of knowledge construction was particularly pertinent to the African American student. This paper suggests that it is also applicable for the higher education student as a critical, reflexive being.

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