

Perspectives on the international student experience: a review.

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Abstract

Networked Learning approaches are often associated with more participative, cooperative educational approaches. In such approaches more complex dynamics are likely to be generated because students are involved in making choices and decisions with each other and with tutors. The paper reflects on the reasons for using participative methods and how their introduction into international programmes adds a further dimension of complexity, experienced by tutors and students as adding difficulty as well as cultural richness. In particular, the paper reviews the very different perspectives on which academics draw in their research and educational practice in order to understand and work with the complexities of the international classroom – whether face to face or virtual.

Keywords

Participative, multi-national, social and cultural perspectives.

1. Introduction

There is currently considerable interest in understanding international students' experience of higher education in English speaking settings and the increase in numbers of students visiting the UK for undergraduate and postgraduate education has made tutors more aware of the problems they and their students encounter – from dealing with language to adjusting to different educational and social customs. A particular aspect of this interest is the interconnection between the international classroom and the application of participative methods in that the increased interaction such methods involve makes difference of any kind a more significant element of the classroom experience.

This interconnection between difference – whether of gender, nationality, culture – and participative educational methodology - is equally important for us to understand in the context of Networked Learning, especially when it draws on pedagogical traditions with an emphasis on learning as 'collaborative', 'cooperative', or invokes the concept of 'community' (see Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005 for a discussion of these positions). The application of these methods usually involves a less directive role for the tutor and a more involving experience for the student. As a consequence, there will be a greater range of possibilities for cultural differences to play a part.

However, there is a further dimension, one which provides the focus for this paper. Elliott and Reynolds, (2007) have pointed out that our ingenuity in designing participative approaches in higher education – including those involving international student groups - may have outrun our understanding of the social and cultural complexities which characterise them. More to the point of this paper, the perspectives used to understand the complex processes of the international (especially participative) programme as researchers, may provide a basis for working with the same complexities as tutors. The specific aim of this paper is to review attempts to research tutors' and students' experiences of multinational programmes in order to identify the perspectives which would seem to offer most to those of us who work with international groups of students – including in a networked learning environment.

Some authors take a psychological position as a way of understanding students' responses of frustration, confusion and anxiety when faced with unfamiliar pedagogical approaches or focus on purely educational aspects such as student performance, language difficulties or the impact of stereotypes. Others emphasise the

interconnectedness of psychological phenomena with social and cultural contexts and important differences - whether as regards gender, religion or politics or place even more emphasis on students' experience as constructed from social and cultural differences, and of understanding educational experience as society in microcosm. The purpose of this paper is to review the range of perspectives available to us, and to examine whether some are more appropriate in informing our understanding of working with multinational student groups, particularly in a learning environment informed by cooperative principles. The next section will briefly summarise the reasons for using participative approaches and the reason for needing to establish or draw on frameworks which enable us, and students, to make sense of the complex processes these methods generate. This will be followed by a summary of different perspectives used to understand the experiences of international student groups.

2. Using Cooperative Pedagogies with International Student Groups

Reasons for using participative pedagogies

Participative methods are introduced for quite different reasons. Pedagogically, working in groups has long been thought of as a means of enhancing students' sense of involvement and interest. More fundamentally it is chosen as an approach which encourages students to learn from each other's ideas and experience. Ideologically, participative designs have been encouraged as supporting democratic values both in education and in society more generally. In the context of networked learning Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) have observed the tradition in theory and practice of collaboration, democratic values and in particular an emphasis on incorporating the values of 'community'. These principles can be traced to writers such as Hiltz and Turoff (1978) who noted the potential of computer mediated methods for reducing hierarchical power differentials amongst networked individuals and later, Boyd (1987) and Boshier (1990) who, drawing on Habermas's ideas of ideal discourse, emphasised the potential of networked learning as a medium for emancipatory and liberal education. More recently, Garrison (1997) wrote of CMC that 'meaning is constructed in an interactive community of learners' (p.10) and Mynatt et al (1998) that 'the promise of networked computational devices for collaboration and community-building is compelling'. It might even be said that over recent decades Networked Learning has become a forum for educators who still work towards developing pedagogies which embody and encourage democratic principles.

Participation and classroom complexity

Participative methods introduce complexity into the experience of tutors and students because of the varied and often unpredictable social dynamics generated by less hierarchical procedures. The nature of engagement expected of students is likely to be different from lectures whether in the lecture theatre or online. The interaction between students, and between students and lecturers involved in making choices and decisions and being asked to work together within collaborative arrangements involves the students in processes of communication, power and difference which are more varied than in more hierarchical settings. These approaches may well be unfamiliar and unnerving for students whose experience of school and university has been of a predominantly didactic pedagogy. The additional dimension of national and cultural difference must add to this complexity and the purpose of this paper is to identify different perspectives used to make sense of it.

In a participative pedagogy, students are asked to work with each other in various kinds of roles and relationships, not only with the tutor. A range of differences can be surfaced – whether these become explicit or whether they remain covert as part of each student's experience. As well as structural differences of gender, age, ethnicity and so on, there are different preferences, comforts and discomforts as to different working methods or relationships. These preferences may have to be negotiated and may in turn be expressions of different cultural/educational experience (Rigg and Trehan, 1999; Reynolds and Trehan, 2003). In short, participative approaches can markedly change the social and political dynamics of the 'classroom' especially if, consistent with a participative pedagogy, students are involved in some form of collaborative assessment (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000).

Participative methods, including experiential activities (See Champoux 2007 for an account of using experiential methods in a networked learning environment) have been sharply criticized for being based on overly simplified learning theories and for taking insufficient account of the complex social, political and emotional processes which are generated when they are used. Furthermore much of what is significant to the students may not be expressed at the time. Boundaries between the event and its context, the histories and futures of the students taking part, are more fluid than often seems to be assumed in the design and application of group exercises. Recent developments in experiential learning approaches have addressed these potentially problematic aspects (Reynolds and Vince 2007) but the additional dimensions introduced by multinational groups deserve more attention if we are to support students in making sense of their experiences of them.

How students experience a participative pedagogy

For nearly two decades at Lancaster we have developed a one year, full time MA in HRD for a student group of between 15 and 35 in number which has attracted an increasing number of international students. The course pedagogy is influenced by but falls short of the 'Learning Community' approach which we have used with the part time programme for more than 25 years. Significantly, it was as a response to students' discomfort with the Learning Community approach that some years ago we abandoned the possibility of students working with staff to identify and organize much of the course content, and assessment is no longer collaborative (in which students work would have been read and marked by each other as well as by a tutor). This discomfort seemed more pronounced as the programme became more international and with a higher percentage of students fresh from undergraduate courses. Nevertheless, there is still a strong emphasis on group activities – projects, simulations, role play and the like - as a means of illustrating the conceptual and research content of the programme. While collaborative assessment is no longer a feature of the programme, students are encouraged to read and comment on each others' work in tutorial meetings.

Even with this (to us) modest degree of participation, our pedagogy is unfamiliar to most of the students, welcomed by some, and irksome if not distressing to others. As tutors we have had to reflect on our practice and on the range of interpretive ideas we bring in support of our own and students' developing understanding of the complex dynamics which evolve - as do many of the students. Each year there are students who use assignments as a way of making sense of their individual experience of working with this approach – for some as a way of coming to terms intellectually and emotionally with the experience, and for others as a way of articulating profound misgivings through critique. This work is a source of insight to us as tutors because much of it would be otherwise hidden from our awareness. From students' accounts of their experience of a participative course design it is clear that our pedagogy can create problems regardless of nationality and educational history, but equally clear that there are important ways in which the additional dimension of national and cultural differences adds to this complexity, making the need to review accounts of related research and teaching experience more pressing.

From our review of students' reported experience these were some of the dilemmas which were salient for them and a brief summary of these is included to give a sense of the context from which the review of perspectives arose.

Working in groups: responsibility and choice.

A fundamental aspect of group work is the degree of discretion which students have over choosing who they work with. Choosing and being chosen are two of the ways in which power and control within the programme are enacted. As tutors, our dilemma is that on the one hand we wish to encourage students to take responsibility for such decisions, but on the other hand to exert control in the interests of students working with as many of their colleagues as possible through the year. An additional dilemma for some students is whether to choose to work with friends they already feel comfortable with, or to expand their experience by working with people they do not know well, as the following extract illustrates.

I work with my friends, and people that I have worked with before... It was the only way at the start of the year, you knew something at least about these people. That was hard because you wanted to know more about other people, and you could do that by working with them. But then they might not be good to work with, and you're stuck with them. I stayed with the same group, and then learnt more about others.

These choices were more difficult when assessment was involved – particularly the tutorial groups intended for planning and discussing assignments, including the dissertation. Perceived differences in commitment to the task were salient for students working in the context of assessment and the concern to achieve good grades was the deciding factor for some, and as it turned out, culturally construed.

I wouldn't like to just work with anybody, there are people on the course that I would try not to work with because I don't think they share my view towards work. I expect people to work hard all the time, and I think there are others who only put effort into assessed work that counts towards their final grade.

Difference, similarity and the international dimension

Being required to spend so much of their time working in groups, students were conscious that differences could lead to both positive and negative experiences. A way of resolving this dilemma was to mix with some who were different in some way, but to minimise difference in groups when assessment was involved. Difference was not limited to nationality but the more assessment became the issue the more language became a deciding factor. The following extracts illustrate a range of ways in which difference was experienced and responded to. This range of responses itself became a 'difference' students and tutors had to work with.

I think that it might be something to do with accepting everyone for who they are, which is really important on our course with the amount of differing people, and we are all different.... I suppose you could call that learning from difference, learning about other people and understanding how they do things.

Language is important. I need to be able to communicate with people, and make sure that what I'm saying is being understood. I've made jokes before that people haven't got, and half way through the course I was getting annoyed with translating things for people. They have to speak English well.

The Chinese stick to the Chinese, the Greeks to the Greeks. It's easier that way. I'm not saying this happens all the time, there are the odd exceptions, but yes – people work with their own.

Taking part, silence and intercultural differences

The difference between how outspoken some students are and how silent others seem to be is more complex than can be explained by fluency in language alone. It is one of the ways students mark difference and is often seen as cultural in origin and equated with an individual's 'contribution'. This observation, commonly associated in the literature and by students themselves as a characteristic of Chinese students, is accentuated by being asked to work in groups.

There are people who like to sit quietly and contemplate what they have learnt and what has been said, and there are individuals who are more vocal and prefer to discuss what they have learnt. I think that there are two main groups of people on this course, those who throw themselves into every aspect of the group and participate a lot in terms of discussion and the group exercises, and then the others who do not.

There are some people on the course who I have never heard speak in class, and I think that this marks them as being different, or different compared to myself anyway.

A Chinese student reflecting on this in an assignment drew attention to the value attached to silence in her own culture, as expressed in a Chinese proverb which echoes our own metaphor of 'empty vessels'.

Guard your mouth as though it were a vase, and guard your thoughts as you would a city wall.

She saw this value as a significant influence on Chinese students who seemed reluctant to speak in large or small groups and respect for authority as the underlying factor in their apparent reticence:

This high respect for authority may cause a Chinese student to consider whether he could challenge a theory. And of course, they usually have no such kind of experience of challenging authority or giving different opinions from others. To avoid criticism, ridicule, rejection, or punishment (simply for having different opinions), and to win approval, acceptance or appreciation, they (the Chinese students) need to make sure whether or not their opinions, before being prematurely disclosed, are safely the same as those of others....This may cause their silence in groupwork

The next section begins with a brief summary of some of the aspects of multi-national programmes which authors have focussed on and secondly, introduces examples of perspectives which place more emphasis on social, cultural and political dynamics which the examples in this section have illustrated.

3. Alternative Perspectives

Research has focussed on the difficulties students face when studying in a second language (e.g. Ledwith and Seymour, 2001), international students' academic performance (e.g. Morrison et al, 2005), and their experience of the university environment as a whole (e.g. Asmar, 2005). In their review Morrison et al (2005) have noted a tendency to problematise international students, with many studies making the assumption that these students lack the necessary skills and frameworks to succeed academically. Additionally, the lack of tutors' experience of work with multinational groups can result in difficulty to understand their own society from an outsider's perspective (Haigh, 2002). Some authors take a strictly psychological position, for example Richards (1997) whose emphasis is on the impact of stereotypes, and within the context of management education, Griffiths et al (2005) propose the phenomenon of 'learning shock' as a way of understanding students' responses of frustration, confusion and anxiety when faced with unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. As a general rule it seems that much of the literature proposes that the gap between student and tutor expectations of teaching and learning methods is particularly acute within classrooms where students' nationality and culture is considered to be the predominant difference. Case and Selvester (2000) note students' attachment to more directive learning approaches which they see as contributing to students' 'deployment of psychological defences' (p.19) such as repression, denial, projection and introjection, which 'inhibit learning by reducing complexity, by denying internal anxieties and concealing emotions'.

Emphasizing the political

The problem for researchers and teachers alike is whether the perspectives developed and applied in the context of the multi-national programme are up to the task of interpreting the degree of complexity we are likely to be working with. Case and Selvester (see above) interpret events in terms of defensive behaviour but take account of cultural and contextual factors in reminding us of the interconnectedness of individual, psychological phenomena with social and cultural contexts and the importance of associated differences such as gender, religion or politics. In their critique of contemporary western education as an instrument of 'global domination' through colonization of student knowledge, they advocate a post-colonial awareness and urge that we should 'embrace and celebrate difference rather than ... exploit in the name of it' (2000: 16). For Case and Sylvester this is not a prescription for an empty multiculturalism in which differences are denied but the basis of a pedagogy in which students are encouraged to be critical of course content which reflects the perspective of the host culture rather than import it unquestioningly – even if this means ending up with a different interpretation from the tutors.

A similar perspective might be applied to students' experience of the pedagogy more broadly, including the methodologies and relationships involved and specifically, the way differences are responded to. In writing in an Australian context of the experiences of Muslim students, both local and from overseas, Asmar (2005) describes the ways in which students are marginalised and seen as a 'problem' because of the differences in values and beliefs, and this can result in the added indignity of their then being seen as isolationist. Student guides from a host nation who can be heard introducing first year overseas student to their campus and city whose geography is primarily defined in terms of locations for alcohol and drugs, perpetuate this process. Asmar makes the point that 'some wish to be valued for precisely what makes them different' (p.306) and further, that a pedagogy which makes difference invisible is poor training for engaging with the 'global world'. Similarly Warwick (2007) points out that this isolation is reinforced in some UK universities as an institutionalised marginality when academics and administrators settle for a picture of overseas students as 'guests' or 'sojourners', accommodating this stereotype with a reduction in academic expectations and the provision of separate accommodation.

These interpretations offer a more adequate means of understanding the complexities involved when students and tutors engage in the social and political processes of the cooperative, multinational 'classroom' – whether face to face or virtual. The contrast between the psychological and socio-cultural perspectives raises the troubling question as to whether inadequate explanations amount to denial and by implication, discrimination. Archer and Francis (2005), in their study of educational policy, support this view. They have proposed a framework which acknowledges the different perspectives used in addressing the multi-national classroom and argue that these do not simply represent different but equally acceptable alternatives, but are significant in that they predispose educationalists to quite different responses, socially and politically. Archer and Francis identify discourses which can be seen as distinct responses to diversity: a *compensatory* response – as when implicitly positioning students as in some way deficient, needing help to conform to the 'home' behaviour norms; *multicultural* – as when celebrating or subjugating cultural differences in the interests of establishing a collaborative learning environment; and *anti-racist* – which would involve acknowledging difference and confronting instances where difference is used to marginalise or otherwise disadvantage minority groups. The notion of an 'anti-racist' discourse is particularly troubling because of its implication that the other discourses are in some way ethnocentric and discriminatory.

Ethnocentricity takes different forms and, it would seem from these studies, can present in the guise of well intentioned attempts to make up for perceived deficit in language, social or academic ability, or as blatant prejudice on the part of students and staff who impose simplistic (often psychologised) interpretations on difference. How we as tutors choose to intervene in our work with students in a participative course design will depend in part upon our pedagogical and ideological positions. For example Cathcart and colleagues (2006) report on the tendency for UK management students to fall back on the notion of 'social loafing' when S. E. Asian students appear to be less prepared to 'pull their weight' - which often means joining in aggressively with heated discussions (p.19). These authors point to an alternative explanation for different levels of contribution in that S. E. Asian students are more inclined to support 'weaker' group members than drive them to the margins. But this difference is in part fostered by psychologisms such as 'social loafing' which are disseminated through the management studies curriculum.

In an earlier section quotations from students on our own programme illustrated the difficulty experienced by some in taking part and the different ways other classmates interpreted this. Certainly a common stereotype educators hold towards Chinese students is that they are passive and will not participate in classroom-based discussions. The way in which we, as tutors, interpret individual learner responses might be based upon our views of likely learning approaches associated with students' respective national contexts. Applying Archer and Francis' framework, if taking a *compensatory* perspective we might not expect Chinese students to challenge openly other students', and tutors' ideas because their previous experience of the educator-student relationship in China involves a greater power distance than we like to think we encourage in the west. But as Jin and Cortazzi (1998) point out, Chinese teachers employ a variety of processes to encourage classroom interaction 'which might easily be overlooked by Western observers' (p. 739). Alternatively, adopting a multicultural perspective, we might encourage the students to subjugate cultural differences in the interests of

establishing a democratic milieu. But this carries the assumption that regardless of their different contexts, students will assimilate the values and norms of the 'home' culture. Conversely, viewing the responses through a lens that highlights the positioning of individuals according to ethnicity requires us to recognise the racialised assumptions upon which dominant discourses regarding different ethnic groups are based. We might therefore assume, for example, that the silence of Chinese students is an outcome of their hesitation in speaking English in public, or even a lack of engagement with the subject at hand.

4. Implications

Examining the ideas we use to inform our own and students' understanding of these issues is critical. Multicultural and compensatory perspectives are reinforced if we seek to interpret complex dynamics in the classroom through de-politicised and individualistic explanatory frameworks. In our own field of management studies the literature on group behaviour still leans predominantly towards ways of explaining group processes from a psychological perspective rather than one which acknowledges social, political as well as unconscious processes. Furthermore, perspectives are needed which enable tutors and students to identify and understand how different cultural contexts intersect with these processes. Power, authority and difference are intrinsic to the dynamics of group activities in which students are asked to take part and tutor roles, responses and their emerging relationships with students should be open to critical reflection and discussion.

But why does all this matter, especially when the students we are concerned not to disadvantage often come from backgrounds of such privilege most of our home students (at Lancaster) can only read about? One response to this is that our overriding interest in learning is the provision of an opportunity for all students, not some subgroup and that we use our own understanding and skill to realise this. To this end there are examples which describe ways of working with complexity which would seem to avoid the pitfalls which Archer and Francis warn us about. For example students can be asked to write up their experiences of group work or of working in an online 'learning community' (Cathcart et al 2006) especially if supported by an adequate range of explanatory concepts - including some which deal specifically with accounts of cross-cultural groups. Group assignments can be devised in which students are asked to draw on each others cultural contexts (Devita, 2000). Peelo and Luxon (2007) advocate an approach in which tutors value students' prior experience of learning and are alert to treating their own educational principles as 'taken-for-granted' by being open and clear about (or example) the nature of a critical perspective and the reasons for expecting students to demonstrate it in their work. They propose this as one way of avoiding an interpretation of difference as deficit by encouraging students in the deconstruction of the educational philosophy in which they are engaged. This is in contrast to any approach which involves the

Renunciation of original culture norms and their replacement by the norms of the host culture, being the only option open to students if academic success is to be achieved. (Brown, 2007:245)

There is a further reason for working explicitly with the differences student groups bring with them and which emphasises the significance of the social processes that evolve within the course to future work and social experience. Vince (1996) points out 'all educational contexts represent and replicate, within their own internal processes, external social power relations' (p. 124). So that the dynamics of power and equality that occur within management education for example might be seen as reflecting parallels with broader social systems (Elliott and Turnbull, 2005). This is learning for its own sake, including learning about cultural differences – an opportunity which is lost if differences are suppressed or denied. Educational experience is in many ways the experience of society in microcosm and important differences in the social context will be re-created in relationships between tutors and students working within the educational milieu (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003).

In the context of management studies, the widespread use of group work can expose the relative inexperience of some tutors in working with and making sense of complex group processes. This can be a problem in student groups drawn from the same nationality, but one which is exacerbated in using participative approaches with multinational student groups the prevalence of cooperative pedagogies in networked learning

carries the same implication. As a profession we have demonstrated considerable creativity in designing cooperative and group-based opportunities for learning. Sometimes, this skill appears to outstrip our ability to make sense of and work with the social processes which result. This gap is more pronounced when we introduce participative methodologies into a cross-cultural context and Ledwith and Seymour (2001) recommend that staff be trained and developed to become more effective in working in these settings. However strongly we believe we can argue the rationale for a participative element in education, student experience can remind us how difficult this can be for them.

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