Resisting the Binary Divide in Higher Education: The Role of Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

The article explores the landscape in higher education in which old binary divisions are officially denied yet have been reinvigorated through a mix of conservative and neo-liberal policies. Efforts to resist such pressures can happen at different levels, including, in this case, module design and classroom practice. The rationale for such resistance is considered in relationship to the authors' political and moral standpoints. Debates within higher education policy circles are invariably reduced to a series of oppositions: theory and practice; training and education; research and teaching. The article seeks to break down such polarities through an exploration of classroom practice. In fact, we argue that such distinctions help to legitimize the existing inequalities in higher education and group-based harms, which characterize the sector. Instead, a case is made for a pedagogy that enables students, particularly those from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, to use their experiences, values, etc. to exchange and develop ideas in a group context, thereby providing an important means of collective empowerment (intellectual and practical, both at work and in their private lives). In this process students are encouraged to use ethical theories as tools to explain and underpin their understanding of work-based scenarios. The role of the academic is to facilitate such exchanges and foster new ethical approaches and a public awareness and

engagement that goes beyond the classroom. The pedagogic approach, drawing on notions of relational autonomy and narrative methods as well as providing spaces for the co-production of new knowledge, confirms the indivisibility of research and teaching.

Keywords: *Binary; Critical Pedagogy; Transformative Ethics; Relational autonomy; Narrative.*

Introduction

In this article we explore the scope provided through classroom practice to resist the excesses of conservative and neo-liberal policies in general and in higher education in particular. The latter has led to a pre-occupation with employability, training and practice, particularly in the old polytechnic or 'new' (post 1992) university sector. The particular area of curriculum we consider is a second-year undergraduate module, 'Ethics and Research in Professional Contexts' which is taken by students reading for degrees in Health and Social Care and Health and Social Policy.

In what follows, the classroom becomes a space for a *transformative* pedagogy, that is, one that goes beyond the individual towards collective change in an 'activity space', to borrow a concept from Doreen Massey (2008) that generates action/agency and autonomy. A curriculum that asks students what matters to them, to clarify their values and conditions and to define what is happening to them, can be risky but also generative, productive and transformational.

What, then, is critical dialogue, in this context? The class discussions based on case-studies, as we shall illustrate below, have served to illustrate these critical dialogues in which students identify their own values and concerns, challenge assumptions and 'background concepts' and in the process, generate new

concepts and ideas. The significance of the group cannot be underestimated as it forms the basis for developing an understanding of shared experience and the potential for collective forms of action and intervention in the public sphere. The dialogues, therefore, made possible through this model of discursive practice in the classroom, underline the need for new normative theories of justice in order to be able to evaluate fresh concepts that are generated in this way. Students are thus encouraged to challenge, in Freire's words 'the ferocity of the ethics of the market place' (1998: 115) and the immorality of conditions that give rise to poor health and under-resourced health care. The weekly case study scenarios provide opportunities for the student group to consider ethical dilemmas from the perspectives of stakeholders including trade unions, groups of service users and political parties to challenge what Freire refers to as degradation of human beings. Critical pedagogy provides a transformative environment inside the classroom and the basis for transformations beyond, in workplaces, community settings, and interpersonal relations. In these ways, teachers and students are co-producers of knowledge that is both intellectual and political in character.

The article begins with an overview of the curriculum context within which the module is offered and a summary of the module's claims and rationale. Specifically, we ask why do we choose to teach like this and what in our view is good about the approach taken? We will then explore the learning environment within the module, drawing on the work of Henry Giroux and also Stuart Hall, Paulo Freire, bell hooks and others, to demonstrate the importance of retaining the integral links between teaching and research and theory and practice. We will show how we have worked towards the development of a critical pedagogy that foregrounds the student experience and uses the classroom as a site for their formation as political subjects (including their role as ethical professionals). We have sought to develop this space in a wider environment, as we have suggested

above, in which the elitism of the binary divide between old and new (former polytechnics) universities in the higher education sector continues to flourish. In the UK prestigious, research-led universities recruit disproportionate numbers of students from private and selective schools on the one hand, whilst 'teaching-only institutions` recruit diverse cohorts of students, often from disadvantaged backgrounds to study a range of vocationally-oriented courses. The latter students are very much our constituency and hence, interwoven through our analysis, are their views, drawn from informal discussions and formal feedback, focus groups and via questionnaires. The purpose of the extracts from student feedback is to illustrate the ways in which students understand, critically engage with and deploy the subject matter of the module (both conceptual and applied) in their wider roles in civil society.

In his book 'Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education', Henry Giroux paints a dystopian view of the academy in the late 20th early 21st centuries, one in which values of trust and public good have been abandoned in favour of those of market fundamentalism; where technicist skills replace those of scholarship and research and where manufactured ignorance (echoing more recent notions of a post-truth society) is preferred to critical engagement with students. The changing role of academics is also underlined by Rosemary Deem, Sam Hillyard and Mike Reed (2007) who couch such changes in terms of a shift from corporatist to neo-liberal managerialist culture within higher education - one in which academics have increasingly lost control over their work and sense of professional identity. Managerial models of demand-led resource allocation and scrutiny, through audit and performance management, have come to dominate higher education and transformed the organizational habitus of academics, managers and support staff (ibid).

Joyce Canaan and Wesley Shumar distinguish neo-liberal aspects of this transformation, including the commodification of learning and marketisation of the relationship between students (consumers) and (the market place of) higher education, from neo-conservative elements, which include greater government regulation, accountability and control. At one level the binary divide and class stratified education sector is fiercely denied in government circles, take for example the former Universities and Science Minister, David Willets who wrote, "just as it is now impossible to see exactly where the Berlin Wall went, it is unthinkable to imagine cleaving our higher education sector in two again" (Quoted in the Times Higher Education, March 6th 2013). At another level, however, the UK higher education sector remains profoundly stratified and divisions and hierarchies are progressively reinforced through funding formulae and allocations, the distribution of endowments and a raft of performance indicators and associated league tables.[1]Moreover, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) sees the binary divide in higher education underpinning broad divisions within the labour market, so that universities at the top end provide higher status technical and disciplinary knowledge that supports elite occupations, whilst less advantaged students disproportionately take courses aimed at delivering core competencies targeting lower status graduate labour markets.

The transformations in higher education summarized above should resonate with many who have worked and studied in the sector over recent decades. However, as the authors cited above have also argued, such developments and trends may seem inevitable and permanent but remain open to resistance, negotiation and even reversal. Specifically, there are those 'activity spaces' as Massey calls them (2008) within the classroom, amongst students, amongst colleagues in curriculum meetings, with partners in the community (e.g. charities, community organisations, trade unions, employers), where different models of pedagogy are possible and where there remains a role for public

intellectuals and critical enquiry. It is in these spaces that we locate our own pedagogic practices, in the academic subject area of applied ethics and on a module offered to large cohorts of undergraduates students taking health and youth related courses at a post-92 university (the latter refers to former polytechnics and other institutions granted university status since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act) with a high level of student diversity. Over 60% of our students are from a BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) background and over 98% attended state schools. Despite efforts of the Russell Group (an interest group of 24 'elite' universities in the UK) to widen participation (Guardian 5th August 2016) just under 3% of their students are from a BAME background and 57% attended state schools.

The Module: Context and Rationale

'Ethics and Research in Professional Contexts' is a level five, undergraduate module. Between 170 and 250 students have enrolled on each of the five years it has run, a large majority of whom are taking degrees in Health and Social Care or Health and Social Policy but also Youth Work and Criminology. To an outsider, students taking the module would be considered 'diverse' when set alongside the young, white students who remain the norm across the sector. However, to an insider, successive intakes of students onto this module are remarkably similar, that is predominantly mature (aged over 25) women from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, either in part-time paid work and /or with caring roles at home, for whom English is not their first language. In other words, the module is less diverse internally than in terms of the overall HE student profile. It is worth 30 credits and runs over 30 weeks, divided into two parts, the first is on ethical issues in health and youth work; the second is on research methods and approaches, where students develop a research proposal on a social issue of their choice in order to prepare them for final year dissertations. In this article we will focus predominantly on Part One of the

module. The students attend a three-hour class each week in groups of around 30. All teaching is interactive, particularly in the classes where students work on case studies in groups, drawing on their experiences, and setting these against ideas from their reading and lecture notes in order to develop ethically informed arguments. A similar approach is taken in Part Two, using case studies to consider a range of methodological and practical issues surrounding social research.

Whilst an important pedagogic focus of the module is to draw on student backgrounds as a legitimate starting point for learning, it differs from a 'student-centred' approach, at least when the latter is used to promote individualized learning, organized around dominant, discipline-based paradigms. In contrast, we are more interested in the ways in which students discuss and exchange experiences and develop their views *in the group and as a group*. It becomes important, therefore, to provide spaces that support the collective empowerment of students through reflection, critical engagement and an active response to structural inequalities and group-based harms (hooks. 1987) and injustice. This approach can be thought of as a generative curriculum, one that emerges out of dialogue and leads to greater self-awareness, criticality *and* collective action. More specifically, a generative curriculum begins with student interests and develops dynamically in collaboration with other students and teachers. As Bobbi Fisher and Pat Cordeiro, point out, "there is a continuous interplay between content learning and process learning" in a generative curriculum (1994: 2-7) and the content (in our case ethical theories, codes of conduct etc.) is introduced to support this process. This stands in contrast to forms of 'student-centred learning 'where teaching facilitates a process in which students work in isolation from the group and where understanding and action are inevitably more atomistic and fragmented.

It follows from this last comment that a key feature of the pedagogy is our relationships with students, something akin to bell hooks' model when she writes about relationships built on mutual trust and respect. In "Teaching to Transgress" (1994), she identifies the ingredients that make up an exciting learning process. In the first instance,

> The professor must genuinely *value* everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. (ibid: 8)

As their views are taken seriously and backgrounds validated, students, particularly mature students whose first language is not English, are able to speak with greater confidence both in the classroom and outside at work (with other workers and/or management) in community settings including with their friends and families. This was evident in a number of comments made by students in focus group discussions. The following are fairly typical:

> This (module) has made me know how I can stand up for myself. Before I wasn't able to understand things, to speak for myself. Now I stand up for myself. I'm very happy.

> This (module) has given me more knowledge. I'm in a difficult situation at work. My boss wants me to change my hours but now I think he has a duty of care to me and I have some autonomy and this has given me confidence to speak my mind.

The first extract above testifies to the importance of students gaining self-belief and confidence to express their views whilst the second illustrates the ways in which students are thus able to articulate ethical principles to challenge working conditions imposed by management. This second extract led to a classroom discussion of the most effective strategies for change at work, including the role of professional associations, trade unions and other forms of collective action.

The reason for taking this pedagogic approach is rooted in our view that much learning and teaching in higher education reproduces inequalities and group-based harms. The module has been designed, therefore, to create safe spaces where academics and students can openly engage in discussions around controversial issues. We shall return to the role of the public intellectual below, but Noam Chomsky makes a distinction between 'value oriented' and 'responsible' intellectuals, the former challenging inequalities and the institutions that buttress them, whilst the latter, also referred to as policy or technocratic intellectuals, merely serve them (2017: 10).The patterns of educational inequalities are multiple and complex, as Giroux and others have argued. However, it is evident to those of us who have taught across the sector that students enrolling at Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities have enjoyed a much smoother transition from school to university than the majority of students at inner city, post-92 universities.

Many students from the former types of institution have high level writing skills, conceptual vocabularies and ways of thinking, which have been developed from an early age. They also generally have more affluent parents who provide a variety of forms of support (including financial) and time (free from dependents and part-time work) that is available to study. All of these factors optimise the chances of a good degree. In contrast, many of the students we teach do not come well equipped to cope with the academic demands of higher education. They are generally older and not dependents but, on the contrary, have dependents to care for. They invariably need to supplement income through part time work, which, on top of family commitments, reduce their opportunities to bridge the gap sometimes exacerbated by fractured educational careers. They are less likely to graduate with a good degree and, even when they achieve the same degree classification as their counterparts, their degree will be 'worth' less than those awarded by more prestigious

institutions. They will also undoubtedly have accumulated less social and cultural capital along the way. At one level, therefore, the approach taken on the ethics and research module is an attempt to contribute to the wider value-oriented project described by Chomsky in order to challenge structural inequalities and injustices that characterize the sector. However, our approach also aims to create spaces for dialogue and empowerment that are possible *within* a largely hostile environment and, in this respect, change is adaptive and incremental. It should also be noted that student success, in terms of conventional measures, is integral to this pedagogic approach; in this respect it is worth recognising that the student pass rates are consistently higher for this than their other level five modules, and the feedback from students, both qualitative (as we illustrate throughout) and quantitative, is consistently positive.

Research and Teaching

"There is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching. One inhabits the body of the other" (Freire,1998: 35)

We share Paulo Freire's view that as teachers, we are inevitably engaged in research within our practice. This operates at a number of levels: firstly, the resonance of our research interests with the module's objectives; secondly, the view of knowledge as a product of collaborative classroom practices; thirdly, an understanding of the role of higher education in civil society; and finally, fourthly, the use of research tools to evaluate, analyse and develop the module. We will focus on the first two in more detail here, and consider the third and fourth only briefly.

Both of the authors (and others teaching the module) bring a research background and interest to the module. One of the authors has developed a

conceptualisation of relational autonomy in her doctoral and post-doctoral research that has informed our approach to student-centred learning. Standard accounts of 'student-centred learning' have at their heart notions of 'active learning', 'learner responsibility', 'student self-determination', and 'learner independence'. The liberal value of individual self-directedness, free from external interference, broadly underpins these understandings. However, drawing on the first author's work critiquing and re-conceptualising the standard accounts, we understand student autonomy as primarily a social-relational process rather than an individual capacity for independent choice-making. 'Student centeredness', in her view, has certain sorts of discursive social relations, rather than the non-interference of individuals, at its core. The module, with its weekly discussion classes debating controversial moral issues in professional practice, is explicitly designed to be 'student-centred' in this new, discursive, social-relational way. It fosters a shared purpose in learning via respectful critical dialogue, and this, rather than more individualistic approaches to facilitating learning, forms our ethos. The focus on the co-production of knowledge through discursive relations in the classroom, informs collective responses to group-based harms and injustices.

Similarly, the second author has an interest in and experience of using narrative methods on community-based oral history projects, which have served the module in a number of ways, both in terms of methodology and technique. As a tradition, whilst oral histories are collected from individuals, their strength lies in their rendering visible whole groups, communities and classes, hitherto written out of conventional historiography. Likewise, in the module, students are encouraged to tell stories from their own lives in order to make connections across the student group and beyond, to civil society. These narratives are thus woven into a consideration of wider ethical and social issues and an engagement with different forms of action and intervention. The case studies, which are

themselves stories, form the basis of such considerations, around which we invite students to re-construct the diverse (ethically informed) views of the various hypothetical stakeholders. In an interview published on the subject of space, Doreen Massey wrote,

> Most obviously I would say that space is not a flat surface across which we walk; Raymond Williams talked about this: you're taking a train across the landscape – you're not traveling across a dead flat surface that is space: you're cutting across a myriad of stories going on. So instead of space being this flat surface it's like a pincushion of a million stories: if you stop at any point in that walk there will be a house with a story. (2013:2)

Another way of approaching individual histories is through the concept of habitus (Reay, 2004) as it has been applied to disadvantaged students entering higher education. Habitus is the generative and unifying principle of conducts and their explanatory principle and the habitus of a student either gels or jars in a particular field, *the field* of higher education. This is manifested in 'the self-assurance, irreverent ease on the one hand or tense application on the other' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2007: 161). Even experience of earlier academic success and a positive learner identity does not necessarily compensate for the self-doubt that inevitably emerges when confronted with a totally unfamiliar educational field, seemingly populated by 'the clever, more self-confident middle classes' (Aries and Seider, 2005: 428). As our group of students is predominantly female, mature, black and minority ethnic and from working class backgrounds, this sense of insecurity comes not so much from feeling isolated within the group, but from a sense of alienation or detachment from higher education in general. These differences are reinforced in a variety of ways, including linguistic capital which, as Pierre Bourdieu writes, is "not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories" (ibid: 73).

The facts that many of our students lack school qualifications and come from linguistic backgrounds in which English is not the first language, whose non-traditional backgrounds are neither mirrored in institutional arrangements nor reflected in conventional performance measures, go some way to explain the order of the challenge.

Whilst our use of narrative methods and life histories serve to valorize student backgrounds, we do not assume, as some advocates do, that students will reveal their true selves in this process and/or arrive at some authentic sense of self. On the contrary, we believe that self-awareness is part of a reflective process that is socially informed, that it is dependent on time and place and, as we suggest above, relationally specific. Experience, in this sense, is never raw or innocent but always constructed and culturally and politically informed. Knowledge is generated through group-based discussions in which teachers play an active role, drawing on their own understandings and viewpoints, one that goes beyond that of facilitator.

The notion of research as the co-production of classroom encounters is the second feature of the relationship between research and teaching. As we have suggested, one of the most effective ways to attract student interest, increase confidence and aid understanding is to ensure that student experiences, values and prejudices are understood as an integral part of the curriculum. In Paulo Freire's words it is the 'responsibility of teacher to respect kinds of knowledge that exist among (students) … why not discuss with students the concrete reality of their lives' (1998: 36). It also represents one of Henry Giroux's principles of critical pedagogy when he writes,

> It is crucial for educators not only to connect classroom knowledge to the experiences, histories, and resources that students bring to the classroom but… to (further) their

capacities to be critical agents who are responsive to moral and political problems of their time (2011:7)

A good example, taken from the module, of the relationship between student views and the co-production of knowledge, is that of religious difference. It is commonplace to associate different religions with shared views on ethical controversies such as abortion, sexuality, assisted suicide, and so on. The absence of any discussion of religious beliefs in the class would leave those assumptions unchallenged and students with faith-based values without an opportunity to work them through, both in relationship to the views of others in the class as well as relevant professional codes of conduct. In fact, what emerges from such discussions is not only confirmation of a range of religious affiliations as represented by students taking the module, but equally important, the diversity of views *within* religious groups. It soon becomes apparent that a head scarf, cloth cap or other, less visible but disclosed religious beliefs do not, in themselves, guarantee a particular point of view on those ethically fraught topics referred to above.

Such discussions, therefore, serve to break down religious stereotypes and give students an opportunity to explore their own views alongside those of others in the group, clarify them in terms of ethical principles and theories, and benchmark them against relevant professional codes of conduct. One important criterion when it comes to assessments, is how far students have critically engaged with different viewpoints. In other words, holding one view uncritically and dogmatically, however 'right' it might appear, is not as important as an understanding and analysis of alternative viewpoints. The assumption is that a critical exploration of the latter is part of the development of an argument and/or arriving at a conclusion. The notion of critical thinking is not readily grasped by all students. For example, one student responded to a

question about their capacity for critical thinking in the following way: 'How can I be critical of someone or something if I know little about it?' In the module we encourage specific forms of critical thinking, including, as Freire suggests, a curiosity or restless questioning (op.cit.:37), entailing: a willingness to question our own assumptions; an openness to other people's points of view; an interest in challenging the taken-for-grantedness and/or 'bias' implicit in the seemingly most objective research, and to question the 'natural' order of things as articulated through dominant ways of thinking and practice. More specifically, critical thinking entails an engagement with what is constructed as natural, a questioning of assumptions underpinning diverse views and beliefs, an awareness of the ideological in the seemingly neutral worlds of science and professional practice. The teacher's role here is to challenge, pose questions, offer alternatives and generally unsettle often deep-seated points of view.

Developing a willingness to challenge assumptions surrounding difference is an example of such thinking and was illustrated in the following comment made by a student in the focus group discussion:

> I do see things from different points of view (now). For example, I watched a video on obesity and people thought they just ate a lot and were lazy. Before I would have judged them from same angle, now I see there are more factors involved.

The student has thus challenged his own prejudices, with regard to individual pathology and responsibility when it comes to health care, and recognized instead the social determinants of health, e.g. social class. Such thinking thus provides the basis for a more ethically informed assessment of public health interventions and their limitations, as well as a consideration of alternative approaches to addressing social issues.

Another student gave an example how she felt the module had given her the confidence and the tools to articulate difference:

> I told my husband's social work team (that) I was unhappy with the care arrangements. They were shocked and shaking when I said 'I want people from my own ethnic group because you're not meeting my needs'. Later she (the social worker) phoned me and told me they would be doing everything I asked for. Everything I've learnt on the course helped me … gave me confidence, good judgment and problem solving.

The importance of this extract is that the student's new-found confidence went hand in hand with challenging current care arrangements for her husband and demanding someone from the same ethnic background to be involved. Later in the module the student might have cited research evidence to support her demands.

Hypatia, the Greek mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, who lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, was reputed to have said 'reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than not to think at all'. As one of the leading mathematicians and astronomers of her day, she saw thinking as more than simply understanding the ideas of others. At best, students will only learn what others think if taught in that way, rather than being required to think for themselves. Despite the large numbers of students on our module, the case study format provides a space for students in groups of 4-5 to share experiences, explore values, rehearse arguments, whilst introducing ethical principles/ theories and relevant codes of conduct to support their ideas. Whilst the significant growth in student numbers on the module has been challenging, as it has in other subject areas, it has nevertheless been possible to maintain a critical pedagogy at the heart of the module.

Our engagement with bodies of research and scholarship, both classroom-based and beyond, e.g. the wider role of higher education, is a third way in which research informs our teaching. We have already referred to a number of thinkers who have developed and refined the concept of critical pedagogy and we will expand on these below. We will also discuss how wider debates around social justice can be used to engage with ideas around active citizenship. In general, these interests converge around a commitment to public sociology and to the university as a public institution, with links to agencies, organisations, etc., in civil society (see for example Gabriel, Harding, Hodgkinson, Kelly, and Khan, 2009).

Finally, although not discussed in detail here, we also use data analysis to evaluate and develop the module, including pass rates, number of 'good' passes (60% and above), as well as responses from module feedback questionnaires, focus groups and other more informal sources of student feedback. Moreover, as Freire suggests, we cannot separate the more formal sources of feedback and monitoring from our longer term involvement with the module and our experiences and recollections, in the case of one author, as the module convenor and in both cases, as classroom teachers, over a number of years. To paraphrase Freire, we are researchers because we are teachers (ibid: 133).

Resisting Binary Divisions in Higher Education.

The purpose of this section is to show how the module has sought to challenge current binaries in higher education; theory/practice; education/training and academic/vocational. Such binaries reflect the wider binary divide, referred to above and characterizing higher education as a whole. We will do so with reference to the educational ideas and practices of key thinkers who have influenced our understanding and approach to learning and teaching. With

regard to the status of theory on the module, it is worth considering Stuart Hall's contribution to pedagogy. As Angela McRobbie writes,

> the particular pedagogic values that Stuart Hall brought to bear on the enterprise of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies set him even further apart from the UK academic and political establishment. (2000: 214)

A feature of Stuart Hall's pedagogic approach was to draw on the lived experiences of his graduate students and to theorise these using conceptual tools from literary studies, political economy, philosophy and sociology. The diversity of the Centre's student groups ensured that issues of gender, race and class provided the raw material for analysis. Both their experiences and interdisciplinary approaches understandably challenged mainstream orthodoxies, as McRobbie suggests (2000). In same way, we would argue, the raw data for this module draws on the backgrounds, including paid work roles, played by students who, as we have suggested, are drawn from socially and ethnically diverse backgrounds in relation to the sector as a whole. Ethical theories are introduced to help make sense of those experiences and in particular to explain different courses of action/decisions. Interventions, in practice, were integral to Hall's pedagogic approach. As he wrote, 'The gap between theory and practice is only overcome in developing practice in its own right.' (1990: 18). David Scott captured this in "Stuart Hall's Voice" when he writes what marked Hall in intellectual terms was not so much the content of his thought as his style of thinking, which he refers to as 'ethics of receptivity and reciprocal attunement' (2017:19). In the case of our module, hypothetical case studies, couched in topical issues and with a strong ethical dimension, have formed the basis of weekly small group discussions. The case study scenarios are written up as narratives and include a range of people representing different interests and with potentially conflicting values and priorities. These discussions allow

students to address a number of key questions that form the basis of the assessment for this part of the module. The classroom discussions provide a space for students to re-examine their experiences and challenge taken for granted understandings and interpretations of social realities. They do so by drawing on theories which are deployed to assess different ways of thinking about and responses to the problems posed in the case studies, thus forging connections between dialogue, theory and ethically informed practice or praxis.

As many of our students have not had the advantages of an A level education and/or whose first language is not English, ethical theories are sometimes not initially easily digestible, reliant as they are on a conceptual vocabulary and often written in antiquated styles that are challenging even for those students who have been exposed to such linguistic styles over a longer period. The purpose of the weekly group discussions is to enable students to familiarize themselves with those more abstract ideas couched in terms of a series of familiar yet controversial topics, whilst our role is to facilitate peer group discussions where students are able to express themselves with greater confidence and ethical insight. The lectures also provide a space in which ideas are explained and applied and where students are able to express their views on a particular thought experiment or topical issue.

The module, thus, does not begin with ethical theories. On the contrary, it starts with a question about what makes an issue or a dilemma ethical before invoking theory, not for its own sake, but as a tool for explaining or make sense of different lines of argument/decision. Take, for example, the issue of childhood vaccination. Integral to the debate is the question, should we prioritise the rights of parents to make decisions on behalf of their children, or should we require vaccinations in light of the evidence that suggests falling below a certain number of vaccinations per 100 children could lead to an epidemic of the

illness? The question is subsequently clarified with reference to relevant ethical principles, behind which sit theories. So, the question hinges on two words in italics: should we consider the *rights* of individual parents or the health *consequences* for children as a whole? This brings different theories into play, based on consequences of actions (e.g. utilitarianism) and those that focus on rights and autonomy (e.g. deontology). An advantage of this approach, in terms of aims of the module, is that students are more willing to engage with theory once they understand its relevance and application. In the students' own words,

> Theory helps when you're justifying something… you've got a backbone to your argument, it gives you authority.

and,

> Theory equips you in the workplace. You're able to make ethical judgements, think about how policies and the law fit I … (and ask) are they ethical?

In the above case, students considered how resistance to vaccinations may be related to social class and/or to education and the need to raise awareness amongst community organisations, parents, schools, faith groups, etc., in diverse neighbourhoods, to promote public health campaigns, arrange consultative meetings and mobilise around the issue.

Whilst questions form the basis of assessments across all academic disciplines, an important feature of this module is the absence of definitive answers. What matters more than answers is the ability to re-think taken for granted assumptions, to get behind and challenge dominant attitudes and values, to reach an understanding of the reasoning behind these, and to be able to argue

for a particular decision/course of action. This method, dating back (at least) as far as ancient Greece, prompted one student to remark:

> for a while, I didn't get this module, I kept expecting you to give us the answers but instead you just asked more questions. Then it clicked, when Alya talked about Socrates … you're making me think, and then I thought, that's how I'll be with clients. I'll keep asking them questions and encourage them to think for themselves.

One manifestation of the managerial culture referred to by Rosemary Deem and colleagues is the focus on student employability and graduate employment outcomes. In old binary terms this was the USP of the polytechnic sector and many see this as an opportunity to revive such distinctions, with new universities focussing on vocational qualifications, apprenticeships, T levels and working in partnership with Institutes of Technology. In this model the elite sector should rely on both reputational currency and an accumulation of social and cultural capital to secure employment for their graduates, regardless of the vocational content of their programmes. We have already touched on the ways in which such divisions reproduce structural inequalities in general but the specific mechanisms require further elaboration. The proposed contraction of the post 92 curriculum to a set of technical skills, information sets and simulated/live work experiences constitute a disservice to students and employers. Surveys of both students and employers confirm, on the contrary, that independent learning, critical thinking and problem solving are what is required for the flexible job requirements and dynamic labour markets characteristic of the 21st century economy. This is not to suggest the module's aim is to sponsor such a workforce or use such terms unproblematically. Instead we advocate a critical pedagogy where students are encouraged to reflect on their own backgrounds and those of others in the group and to use theory, both as a means of understanding, and as a basis for intervention and collective

action. Critical pedagogy, therefore, dismantles the distinctions between research and teaching, theoretical and applied knowledge and a vocational and academic curriculum, all of which represent the pillars of the binary divide in higher education.

The Public Sphere and the Formation of Political Subjects.

The relationship between students and the public sphere is addressed in a number of ways. Firstly, by choosing scenarios that closely resemble or replicate 'real world' issues, students are encouraged to think in ways that will support them in their professional roles. However, in seeking such simulations of professional practice, we also acknowledge the necessity of aligning an understanding of practice with educational objectives and the assumption that professional work is not simply the application of technical knowledge but must build on conceptual understanding and critical engagement with practice. In Freire's words, 'critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice' (op.cit:30). One student offered an example of how the module provided her with the resources, both conceptual and emotional, to challenge management.

> I had to challenge my boss on one occasion. He had (made a decision that) I thought was unethical. He didn't like that I'd spoken up but he said 'OK let's (try it your way) … The course gave me the confidence to know I was right on this occasion whereas before I've not had this feeling

In this case, the student's confidence is harnessed to a resistance to management practices, which in turn can be used to assess different strategies for challenging managerial decisions, including working with professional bodies, service users and trade unions.

Secondly, an important value shared across the university sector, but particularly evident amongst new universities attracting students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is promoting social inclusion through providing opportunities to those students who might otherwise remain excluded from higher education. In the case of our university and presumably other post-92 institutions in comparable urban locations, those groups traditionally associated with the public sphere form a significant part of our student body. Nevertheless, the principle of widening participation is invariably reinforced with a strong commitment to (external) community and public engagement often through fostering links with agencies, NGOs, policy makers, etc., with a view to working collaboratively on issues of equality and social justice. These processes serve educational objectives as well as playing an important role in the formation of ethical subjects. As Freire puts it,

> as men and women inserted in and formed by a socio-context of relations, we become capable of comparing, evaluating, intervening, deciding, taking new directions and thereby constituting ourselves as ethical beings (op.cit:38)

The teacher as public intellectual is integral to critical pedagogy. To return briefly to Stuart Hall, the commitment to social justice entailed a commitment to intervening in the 'national popular', in Hall's case, for example, in art and photography. In order to broaden the horizon beyond the confines of a series of hypothetical professional settings, the module seeks to contextualize courses of action/decisions in terms of wider political priorities. The latter are invariably rooted in contrasting, ethically-informed understandings of justice. Such curriculum concerns represent another of Giroux's principles of critical pedagogy, namely that education is not just about knowledge but, through a critical engagement with knowledge, the formation of political subjects. In his words,

> It is crucial for educators not only to connect classroom knowledge to the experiences, histories, and resources that students bring to the classroom but… to (further) their capacities to be critical agents who are responsive to moral and political problems of their time. (Giroux, 2011: 7)

Whilst the case studies support critical thinking and decision making in professional and family settings, the same ethical concepts and ways of thinking apply to wider dilemmas facing governments, corporations and citizens exercising their democratic rights. So, for example, we might illustrate how the National Health Service allocates resources on utilitarian grounds, using something called a Quality Adjusted Life Year (QALY). However, such decisions will depend on the overall size of the health pot. As the pot grows, the NHS will have more monies to invest in drugs, technology and levels and types of care. The size of the pot in turn reflects government priorities, for example investing in defence, banking, counter terrorism and/or social priorities like health. How we rationalise these decisions depends on our view of the world and here it is possible to invoke different normative theories of a 'just' society to explain such differences. Students are thus made aware of the context in which health decisions are made and the economic and political dimensions of health care ethics. So, for example, Robert Nozick or Friedrich Hayek would argue in neo-liberal terms that the just society is one in which the individual is 'free' to make his or her own decisions, unfettered by regulations, laws etc. and a minimum tax burden, so as to maximise levels of disposable income. The only caveat is the desire for the state to provide security through expenditure on military, police/ criminal justice and border controls, which means, in terms of opportunity cost, limiting social expenditure e.g. on health. Others, like John Rawls, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum would argue, on the contrary, that a society as that envisaged by Nozick would be unjust, primarily because it would

inevitably advantage some groups over others, lead to unjustifiable inequalities of wealth and income and deny many the right to adequate housing, health, education and freedom from violence. We might add, in line with Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's argument in "The Spirit Level" (2009), that the most unequal societies are the worst off, across a range of indicators, including health. As teachers, therefore, we apply ethical concepts and reasoning to a wider set of concerns so that students become aware of the connections with their own lives and the possibilities of alternative ways of thinking and practice beyond the professional setting or home environment.

Hence, the following comment from a student prompted a discussion of political priorities and conflicting views as to what is 'fair':

> Everything is expensive, house rent increasing every month… have that pressure.. I can't afford it all … that stress… all these things affect us- make us unhealthy, a lot of us are going through a rough time …

This comment was greeted with widespread nods of recognition and support from other students and provided an important starting point for a discussion on the social determinants of ill health and the current campaigns to support public health care.

The importance of engaging colleagues and students in such conversations was underlined by Giroux in his essay on Edward Said. In it he wrote,

> He (Edward Said) urged us to enter a dialogue with colleagues and students about politics and the knowledge we seek to produce together and to connect such knowledge to broader public spheres and issues (2006: 306)

Conclusion

In the course of this article we have illustrated four related features of our pedagogic practice. The first is *ethical,* insofar as our aim is to develop a pedagogy that begins with a value commitment to finding ways of reducing/eliminating structural inequalities and group-based harms in higher education teaching and learning. Specifically, structural inequalities refer to the gulf that exists between privileged and less privileged children, young people and adults -inequalities that are reproduced at every phase in the educational system and compounded by divisions within the higher education sector. In terms of harms within higher education, we are referring to the harm to students of not developing critical thinking skills and gaining understanding of ideas that relate to their chosen subject/professions (and wider lives). We, therefore, work on ways to creatively make spaces for empowerment in HE contexts – resisting and changing the structure of neoliberal, instrumentalist policies and practices. As Stuart Hall reminds us, it is ethical not to be complacent, to be actively and critically engaged, to inquire and to respond to the times. Hall's ethics have been referred to as "dialogical ethics" (Scott, 2005), that is they do not follow rules (as in Kant), but respond to 'alterity'. They take risks of dialogical encounters (across differences) and aim to "illuminate" in dark times.

Our practice is also *integrative* insofar as we bring analytic and critical thinking skills together with more 'applied' knowledge associated with professional practice, for example, codes of conduct, policy guidelines and the law. We thus draw on a range of philosophical methods as tools for engaging with professional practice, rejecting the idea that theory/knowledge and vocational and practical skills are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, evidence suggests that students and employers prioritise independent, critical thinking over content driven knowledge, and proactive problem solving and decision making over more passive, derivative forms of learning and assessment. We have facilitated

the use of theory as a tool for students to use in making sense of and intervening in the public sphere (for example in work settings, in civil society and as active citizens) and in private settings, as the quotes above from students confirm.

Our pedagogic practice is also consciously *engaged*. Our engagement is *theoretical,* seeking to clarify concepts of learning, teaching and research and the relationship between teachers, learners and research. It is also *pragmatic* insofar as it makes links between health policy, education policy and research policy and the links between all three. Finally, it is *political* because it speaks to broader issues of inequality, democracy and citizenship. From our perspective, as practitioners/teachers, we work towards a wider notion of public good (as discussed above in terms of notions of harm and justice).With respect to students, we seek to create a 'generative curriculum', one that is open-ended, process oriented, dialogic, co-produced and resistant to neo-liberal commodification of education and the individualism and competitiveness inherent in learning and teaching practices. We also aim for students and ourselves to take this generative curriculum outside the academy and into the workplace and beyond. Teachers and learners are thus engaged in a knowledge exchange that becomes a model for lifelong learning (beyond the corporate university). As we have suggested our aim is to work with our students, many of whom come from less privileged backgrounds and live relatively oppressed and disadvantaged lives, to develop new forms of knowledge and a space "in the interstices" (Gabriel, Harding, Hodgkinson, Kelly, and Khan, A. 2009) where students work together, collectively, to consider ethics and values in professional practice. The module carves out dedicated spaces for considering difficult and controversial ethical dilemmas across different approaches and values, facilitated by engaged teachers, to allow plural approaches to decision making, and to enable the generation of new, situated knowledge.

[1]The TEF results published in 2017 threw up some interesting anomalies. Only time will tell if adjustments are made to reinforce old divisions once more or TEF is devalued in favour of other metrics.

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