



The Contrary Nature of 'Differentiation' in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

For some time, there has been an emphasis on the death of the traditional lecture as a teaching resource, and the growth and abundance of literature on differentiated and inclusive learning and assessment strategies since The Dearing Report in 1997. The implementation of governance processes that monitor such strategies, which are bound up in the language of differentiated learning and teaching, illustrates the fervour for the adoption of such principles. Notions of educational progressivism and instrumentalism (Dewey, 2011) have sought to make higher education more accessible and democratic (Armitage et al., 2001) and are specifically aimed at reducing student attrition rates by appealing to a wide variety of 'different' learning styles (Honey & Mumford, 1982). In consideration of matters on curriculum, assessments and quality assurance, this initial paper looks at how three selective higher education session outlines have elements of assessment and feedback strategies that match with current trends of inclusive democratic pedagogic theories and asks if this should be the case or whether differentiated curriculum and assessment strategies, and the regulation surrounding their momentum, is just as fundamentally divisive as traditional approaches. This paper presents work in progress and the initial phase of a larger piece of work that sets out to critically interrogate more broadly 'differentiation' as an institutional driver, but for the present is a provisional call for learners and teachers to make it their daily practice to question and act upon the social and cultural structures that dominate higher education and the academy and instead both expect and appreciate excellence without transcending the notion that different parallel knowledges of excellence exist.

Keywords: differentiation; parallel knowledges; assessment; quality.

In consideration of matters on curriculum, assessments and quality assurance, this paper will look at how three selective HE session outlines have elements of assessment and feedback strategies that match with current trends of inclusive democratic pedagogic theories and ask if this should be the case or whether differentiated curriculum and assessment strategies and the regulation surrounding their momentum is just as fundamentally divisive as traditional approaches.

The three session outlines to be explored come from a level five module that is facilitated over a variety of single days as well as two intensive weeks. The content covers a wide range of curriculum material by utilising a variety of tools such as video clips, traditional lecture by PowerPoint, self-completing questionnaires, scenarios-based group exercises, and smaller and whole group learner discussions and projects (including the production of posters). Not all the learning and teaching strategies will be commented on as there is not enough space within this paper, but the most significant will be drawn on for discussion and analysis. The assessment methods are also varied and diverse, from self-assessment to smaller and whole group formative peer assessment of both written work and poster creations, to summative assessment of formatively reviewed written work. This multiple and varied approach to the learning, teaching and assessment reflects popular ideas of making learning as inclusive as possible.

Emphasis on the death of the traditional lecture as a teaching resource (Open Education, 2009), and the growth and abundance of literature on differentiated and inclusive learning and assessment strategies (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 1999; Grace & Gravestock, 2009) since The Dearing Report in 1997, delivered the initial impetus; and the implementation of governance

processes that monitor such strategies, which are bound up in the language of differentiated learning and teaching, illustrates the fervour for the adoption of such principles. Notions of educational progressivism and instrumentalism (Dewey, 2011) have sought to make higher education more accessible and democratic (Armitage et al., 2001) and, in the case of the session outlines drawn upon for this paper, are specifically aimed at reducing student attrition rates by appealing to a wide variety of different learning styles (Honey & Mumford, 1982). It also demonstrates a belief that more egalitarian approaches to learning necessarily mean inclusivity, as opposed to elitist approaches that sit in opposition and are designated as exclusive in nature. The notions and language of inclusivity are inscribed into University documentation, from the overarching Assessment Handbook (2012) to individual module validation documents; and an example of this is in the Strategic Plan, where it is pronounced that the number-one goal of the University is "to deliver an accessible innovative and flexible curriculum" (Canterbury Christ Church University [CCCU], 2012a).

Critics of this position argue that the consequences of introducing alternative methods and strategies of learning, teaching and assessment have led to what Furedi (2006, p. 72) refers to as the "dumbing down" of higher education standards. For Furedi (2006), the process of widening participation has disoriented higher education away from standards of excellence. Such arguments, it is important to understand, do not necessarily disagree with the principles of progressive education for all and the democratisation of higher education; and they do not seek to exclude particular individuals from the academy, as, for example, traditional male-dominated systems of knowledge have excluded women (Evans, 1997). Instead, they call for diversities of knowledge, for an inclusion

that still encompasses principles of liberal humanism, that practises intellectual pursuits towards free thinking and ultimately a more equal society (Armitage et al., 2001), but with the caveat that it be less opaque than it has been practised so far. The notion of 'Other ways of knowing' still speaks from liberalist principles, but does not constitute a call for less critique, less assessment, less evaluation, nor less accountability; instead, it seeks to preserve precisely the distinctive excellence of critique offered within the academy by new ways of knowing, such as women's, Black and critical race studies, which have deconstructed, subverted and exposed the white male canon and the social hierarchy (hooks, 2010).

Fundamentally, though, there is not disagreement between driven didactic practitioners of widening participation and its critics; there is, however, divergence over how a more equal society comes about. One side argues for affirmative action and regimes of governance that look to ensure realisation, whereas the other advocates less obsession with measuring and more focus on the purpose of higher education to be critical, to debate and produce new knowledges that push the boundaries of intellectualism (Furedi, 2006).

Higher education is experiencing the same comprehensivisation of secondary education felt as a consequence of the 1974 Education Act. The grammar school system of the post-Second-World-War period built upon the meritocratic principle (Young, 1970) that sought to illustrate that anyone and everyone can understand the principles of what constitutes 'higher pleasure' and worthy intellectual pursuits (Mill, 2001); but what the principle fails to recognise is that, frequently, the very people who are acting to engineer meritocratic education, through a rhetoric of inclusion and diversity, are the very people who are also implicit in maintaining social and cultural hierarchies (hooks, 2010). In other words, as higher education sees more diverse groups of individuals participate within it, the academy and academics can often fail to see their own accountabilities, and, as a result, produce assessment and standards that are premised on making intellectual pursuits easier rather than oriented around Other parallel knowledges of excellence.

The democratisation of higher education in its current evolutionary state seems to do the very work it proposes to eliminate, because it suggests that intellectual excellence is deterministic. It has fallen into an advocating of social Darwinism by signifying that 'different' people need 'different' teaching and measures of assessment, and, in so doing, emphasises what it means to be 'different' in a way that projects Otherness. And nowhere better is this illustrated than in the University Assessment Handbook (CCCU 2012b), where it states:

However, for the uninitiated, or perhaps for some students from minority ethnic groups or different cultural backgrounds, these traditional modes can be a barrier to them demonstrating that learning outcomes have been achieved. We should, therefore, adopt a broad based assessment strategy, using a wide variety of methods to meet the different needs of students. (CCCU 2012b)

In this context 'difference' is cast as the inexperienced, unknowing Other (Said, 1978) who cannot be challenged in traditional ways of intellectualism because they cannot achieve through the use of this method. What it implies is that there is still a reference point, i.e. traditional intellectualism practised by the white middle classes, and it is this by which all Others are measured. In this sense, the Other can never attain, because the presence of the referent marker guarantees it; therefore, the academy sets about creating more general approaches to assessment, and, in so doing, bolsters and sustains the elevated social position of the referent marker. Installing binary opposites (Derrida, 1978) and making the Other the 'problem' of learning is extremely effective because it means the referent never being dislodged, destabilised, deconstructed, or even confronted by parallel knowledges. Yet the

purpose of the university should be to be contentious, and especially of itself, as how else can new knowledges be forged.

Applying this argument to the session outlines drawn on for this paper also demonstrates the divisive ideology behind the dynamic rhetoric and discourse of inclusion and democratic tenets espoused by the institution. For example, the production of posters in reality often feeds into students' existing feelings of inferiority, and so they cut out, stick on and colour in instead of being challenged to produce crafted sentences that convey difficult to grapple with concepts and knowledges. Self-completion questionnaires are many times laughed at by students as pop psychology, as are pseudo-corporate team building exercises and the showing of videos with content so blatantly obvious it does not warrant an analysis. All these broad based methods of teaching and learning reinforce the status of learners as intellectually deficient, as unable to engage meaningfully with words, intellectual language, texts and books and, as a result, propagates students' conveyance of low expectation and averageness (Furedi, 2006). It is nonsense to consider cutting-out and sticking any more relevant than close textual analysis is to any particular social or cultural group. If Oxbridge students receive excellence of knowledge through small group tutorials that are forums for challenging debates and close textual analysis, then why should not any other student? The solution lies in action to dismantle the 'different' learner as the 'problem' and instead relocate the problem as oriented around institutions and the academy. Doing this means higher education will be free to constantly critique, challenge, include and produce new ways of knowing that are parallel in excellence.

Inclusive and wider participation agendas and the general democratisation of higher education are about conciliating the masses through a discourse of inclusion, but in reality there really is little more opportunity for the working classes and the comprehensively state educated to access Oxbridge and other elite institutions than there ever has been (Hussey & Smith, 2010). In theory, there is an expression of the right for everyone to learn, but in practice it fails to bring about real change, instead becoming a prescriptive and socially divisive form of state intervention that does little to bring about social justice for disenfranchised peoples.

Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi (2005) say that the academy and academics need to feel the agitation and discomfort of being confronted with the realisation that they are not 'good' liberals. The construct of 'good' liberalism as a form of therapy for the middle classes needs exposing for the deception that it is, because all it does is maintain the status quo whilst allowing the privileged to purge themselves of culpability.

The question remains of how to resist 'good' liberalism and, in so doing, still be true to the University's value of "the power of higher education to transform individuals, communities, society and the economy" (CCCU, 2012c). Academics' points of reference are twofold: firstly, there is a need to illuminate the social construction of knowledge, and secondly, teaching needs to convey to learners an understanding of "education as a practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994). This does not just mean that qualifications have the potential to lead to greater wealth and social mobility, but that learning can lead to freedom of expression and self-actualisation and be empowering. Teaching that seeks to raise awareness, and be about doing as much as about speaking, is teaching that engages with awareness raised within the classroom so that Othered voices and their parallel knowledges are heard and acted upon. Such teaching is a point of transformative learning and education, because learners and teachers together exercising the practice of speech and action can provide the foundation for communal transgressions and for those transgressions to be liberating.

In the sessions outlines there is also potential for the peer review process to provide a space and the autonomy for parallel knowledges to exist and be debated. The practice of peer review, in the context of the module it is used within, allows small groups of learners to each

take turns in being given time and space to speak and defend the knowledges and arguments they have interrogated in their work. The process is problematic in that the teacher is somewhat absent and, in this module, specifically told not to engage and respond intellectually with what learners present. Whilst limited in many ways, at least there is the opportunity for many different voices to be heard and listened to and a space and the freedom for learners to express themselves; and these spaces are conducted similarly and have the prospect to be more like elitist institutional learning.

The intention is to extend upon this provisional enquiry, work towards a larger piece of work to garner a greater understanding of the institutional nature of 'differentiation', and ask why it is sustained and what is at stake from its deconstruction and exposure as a tool of social discrimination, both for institutions and for individuals.

This initial piece of work, then, is the foundation of a call for learners and teachers to make it their daily practice to question and act upon the social and cultural structures that dominate higher education and the academy, and, towards a truer liberal education, to both expect and appreciate excellence without transcending the notion that different parallel knowledges of excellence exist.

Biography

Toni Wright works as a Lecturer in the Department of Nursing and Applied Clinical Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). Her research interests lie with women's studies as well as having a particular interest in post-colonial feminist theories and critical race theories.

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