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## **Pedagogies for diversity: retaining critical challenge amidst fears of 'dumbing down'**

*Growing concerns about retention and attrition rates in a mass and increasingly marketised higher education system have encouraged the idea that 'meeting learner needs' should be a key focus for institutional attention. It will be suggested that this approach is unrealistic, however, because of the extent of the diversity which it attempts to respond to. An alternative response is to move away from the individualised focus on needs, deficits and 'support', towards a consideration of 'activities, patterns of interaction and communication failures', in relation to higher education pedagogical cultures. This move reconceptualises the idea of 'barriers to learning', attempting to understand how more subtle aspects of higher education pedagogical cultures may themselves be creating conditions which make it difficult, or even impossible, for some students to learn. Deliberately forging a middle path between conventional and radical approaches to pedagogy, the paper attempts to identify examples of 'older' values and assumptions which may be positive and functional, and to separate these out from a number of other values and assumptions which, it is argued, may act to prevent students from being able to access new disciplinary worlds.*

The current policy context of mass Higher Education in the United Kingdom constructs the lifelong learner, amongst other things, as a customer shopping for learning services (Gibbs, 2001, in Stierer & Antoniou, 2004). This situation, combined with growing concerns about retention and attrition rates, has assisted in the development of the idea that meeting learner needs should be a key focus for institutional attention (QAA, 2004). By extension, the reality of difference (whether in relation to age, past educational history, culture, class, disability etc.) is often assumed, pedagogically, to indicate a need to find out about individual learning approaches or styles, in order to diagnose deficits, and then to offer support where deemed necessary.

It will be suggested, however, that it is impossible to succeed in meeting the needs of the range of students now coming into higher education; both in terms of the extent of this diversity, and in terms of available resources. In addition, the growing diversity of students means that level and prior experience of learning at the point of entry into higher education can no longer be assumed. Beginning students, at all levels, no longer necessarily 'know what to do' in response to conventional assessment tasks, essay criteria, or instructions about styles of referencing. Rather than seeing this situation as an indication of falling standards, or of the need to 'dumb down', this paper will argue that it implies the need for a change of perspective.

Arguing for different approaches to pedagogy in higher education is not anything new. Challenges to conventional views and assumptions in this field have come from adult education (eg. Brookfield, 1995; Boud, 2000; Harrison, 2001), from feminist researchers (Tisdell, 1998; Johnson-Bailey, 2001), from those working in new universities (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2002; Archer et al, 2003), as well as from research into higher education learning itself (Ramsden, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Some of these perspectives have argued for quite radical

changes to pedagogy, curriculum structures and assessment (eg. Boud & Solomon, 2001; Lillis, 2001), many of which are now being implemented in a range of different contexts. This paper, however, whilst accepting that many aspects of higher education culture and practice are (and should be) contested, attempts to outline a path between 'conventional' and 'radical' approaches. It accepts, for example, the privileging of abstract, propositional knowledge, rather than arguing, as would be possible, for the recognition of a wider range of types of knowledge in the academy. The intention here is to examine whether it might be possible to transform potentially alienating types of exposure to propositional knowledge (Mann, 2001) into richer kinds of engagement, in order that a much wider range of students might gain access to conventional and established forms of knowledge and power.

After briefly outlining some of the different responses to the challenges of mass higher education, the paper will argue that current responses are often based on a deficit view of the student. Combining insights from the social model of disability with research into academic literacies, it will then explore five aspects of higher education practice which is it argued could be potential causes of 'non-learning' for students.

### **Responses to new challenges**

The rapid transition in the UK to a mass higher education system is presenting challenges not only to conventional university teaching structures, but also to many of the deeply-held beliefs and values which underpin such structures. Responses to these challenges are constructed in a range of different ways. Perhaps the most common articulation is the need to work out how to make success possible for 'new' types of student ('mature', 'disadvantaged', 'non-traditional', 'overseas'). Perceived as being 'weaker' in terms of educational experience and/or ability, these students are likely to be offered generic support in the form of additional courses and/or consultation. Apart from the problem of limited resources for this approach, however, research in academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Turner, 2001) suggests that this kind of 'add on' work, whilst helpful for new and under-confident students in general terms, may not be sufficient to make a difference to many of the problems currently being experienced. This first response sees the cause of the problem as located *within the student*, whilst tending to leave conventional goals of higher education learning largely unchallenged (Northedge, 2003a) (such goals may be interpreted in various ways; for example, particular assumptions about subject knowledge, or the development of independent thought).

A second response focuses on a perceived need to improve conventional teaching methods. This view suggests that as previous methods were only ever partially effective, they are likely to be even less so in the larger and more diverse classes that characterise a mass higher education system. From this perspective, the search is for new approaches which will 'work' in terms of 'delivering' improved student success and retention for increasing numbers of students, without increasing resources (HEFCE, 2001). Whereas the first approach focuses on support in relation to student needs, this approach largely focuses upon researching and developing new *teaching technologies*. Though expanding the range of teaching methods is important, focussing on teacher action without interrogating deeper assumptions in relation to aims and values is arguably likely to lead to limited changes in understanding student learning.

A third description of the challenge comes from a variety of adult education perspectives (eg. Boud, 2000). As has already been discussed, these perspectives engage with more fundamental aspects of teaching and learning practices, criticising conventional higher education goals and the

perceived elitist, exclusionary and narrow assumptions underpinning conventional assessment practices. This position certainly does look at underlying cultural assumptions and values in relation to teaching approaches, raising difficult questions about *aims and purposes*. By its very nature, however, this kind of challenge, whilst perhaps the most likely to effect real change, may also be resisted, or may not initially be understood, and thus may be rejected.

Finally, and linked to the idea of rejection or resistance, is the response of people such as Frank Furedi (2004) and Dennis Hayes (2003), who take up a position of what might be called '*defensive cynicism*'. This response frames the current situation in terms of erosion of standards and dumbing down, and blames the 'quality' of the students, some of whom are seen to be incapable of coping with the critical challenges of conventional higher education. This response appears to equate widening participation with an inevitable abandonment of certain key elements of higher education assumptions and values in relation to learning.

These various different readings of the situation appear often to become conflated, which may be contributing to potential confusion around these issues. The purpose of the discussion here is to try to separate out some of the different elements which might be involved in the notion of 'conventional' higher education; to try to define elements of this which could be seen as positive, and to attempt to distinguish these from aspects of culture and practice which may no longer be sustainable. For the purposes of the discussion a simplified definition of a higher education goal will be created, in order to begin a conversation about these issues. This will inevitably be an 'ideal type', reducing a great deal of disciplinary complexity and diversity.

### **Goals, values, and assumptions, (in the humanities and social sciences)**

It could be argued, both in relation to the humanities and social sciences, and in relation to various forms of professional knowledge, that one of the aims of 'higher' learning is the development of a more questioning, critical engagement with the world (Barnett, 1997). In many disciplines and areas, particularly within the humanities and social sciences, it is often felt that this critical awareness is best developed through processes which *challenge* the student. This challenge is usually offered through a) the stimulation of a good lecture on the subject, b) engagement with, and exchange of, ideas, expressed verbally in seminars, in response to reading, and c) processes of reading and thought involved in the creation of an academic essay. Whilst agreeing with the idea that a wider range of approaches and methods should both challenge and add important variety to experiences of learning and teaching, this exploration will assume these more conventional forms. This is partly to make the point that methods themselves do not necessarily have to be changed in order to make higher education more accessible, and also to underline the idea that *how* teaching is done may be more important than the use of an 'innovative' method.

Though it will be argued that the above articulations of goal and process could, in principle, be maintained in the current context, it seems much harder to argue for some of the values and assumptions which can underpin these. Conventional cultures within universities, for example, largely accept that the academy is the highest point in an education system which legitimately functions through processes of selection and exclusion (Young, 1999). In addition, value positions relating to the status of intellectual activity in comparison to physical or manual work frequently combine with beliefs about ability which suggest that only a minority of people in a

society are capable of doing high level intellectual work; a view which often comes to the surface when figures of 50% participation are discussed (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2002).

Values are also embedded in ideas and models of learning. Independent learning, learner responsibility, taking a 'deep' approach, and becoming a 'reflective practitioner' are key ideas around which a great deal of writing and research is now based. Though embedded within many research accounts as an obvious good, these ideas are not neutral 'truths' about learning, and their use in educational theory has generated an enormous amount of debate in other arenas (eg. Brookfield, 1993). As statements of value, however, such ideas reveal much about what is encouraged and rewarded in higher education. What is potentially difficult for some students is that these underlying principles are usually only implicit in course outlines, assessment instructions and assumptions about the structuring of work, and are therefore difficult for those unfamiliar with the discourse to see and understand.

At the level of writing and study practices, expressions of these larger value positions are not necessarily obvious to students. The valuing of independence, for example, may translate, for university teachers, into an assumption that students (who know that they are expected to read widely?) will make it their business to learn how to use the university library effectively; will succeed in selecting appropriate texts from the range on offer; will know that academic reading is strategic, and will be confident enough to skim over large chunks of irrelevant material; will succeed in making sense of the dense genres of much academic prose; and will feel confident enough in their interpretation of the assessment task to be able to work ideas gleaned from text into their own written answer to a question. If the student fails in any of these tasks, assumptions about ability, or about preparation for university, are likely to combine with ideas of learner responsibility to call forth a discourse which suggests that the student must 'work out' how to do whatever is required, perhaps by talking to other students, or by attending a generic study workshop. The ubiquitous presence of the word 'support' in relation to these issues suggests the existence of a superior group who function in a strong and 'unsupported' way, thus pathologising any student for whom these assumptions are not clear.

Apart from the challenge of working with new text genres, possible vagueness about what 'analysis' of an essay question might mean, and a likely fear of exposure through the written medium, students are likely to be hampered in their struggle to make sense of academic practices by their own misconceptions about purpose (Ivanic, 2001). The belief, for example, that professional practice can be enhanced by the development of a critical awareness that requires distance from practice itself, may never be explicitly articulated by university teachers. The student, on the other hand (whose expectations may be based only upon distant memories of school), may believe that the purpose of the course is simply to gain knowledge about theory, and to prove this 'gain' by displaying it in assessment. Such mutual misunderstanding about purposes may underpin some of the problems that professionals sometimes have in seeing how university study links to their professional practice. As long as these different viewpoints remain unarticulated, they are likely to create misunderstanding on both sides, with accompanying implications for assessment feedback and results.

### **Considering activity, patterns of interaction, and communication failure**

Whilst the notion of ‘barriers to learning’ begins to grapple with some of the problems outlined above, naming barriers can appear to identify concrete impediments which can then be systematically removed. This can be helpful in relation to certain types of institutional structure (eg. timetabling, childcare arrangements etc.). However, when used in relation to individuals (eg. ‘negative past educational experience’, ‘low motivation/self-esteem’) the idea of barriers can arguably work as a distancing device which attempts to separate, and thereby to contain, different types of ‘non-learning’. Rather than seeing a ‘barrier’ as something to be conquered, or removed, it is suggested here that certain types of barrier may actually be *integral* to certain institutional practices and assumptions.

The idea that barriers may be a structural component of cultural attitudes and practices is an extension of the principles of the ‘social model’ of disability (Oliver, 1983). This model argues that the conventional, ‘medical’ approach to disability constructs impairment as a deficit; categorising, diagnosing and trying to ‘fix’ people who are defined as different to a particular societal norm. By contrast, the social model suggests that it is the values, attitudes, and practices of society which create what is experienced as disability (Swain et al, 1993; Oliver, 1983). The shift from a deficit model of the individual towards an attempt to understand social attitudes and practices as the cause of such perceived deficits is also one of the key principles of academic literacies research in higher education (Lillis, 2001; Ivanic, 2001; Scott, 2000; Lea & Street, 1998). This research argues for a move away from ‘study skills’ models of generic skill and individual problems towards a detailed investigation of discourses and power in specific disciplinary contexts. Similar moves are also being discussed in other areas of education, such as in this example from mathematics :

The familiar discussion of mental schemes, misconceptions and cognitive conflict (needs to be) transformed into a consideration of activity, patterns of interaction and communication failure.

Kieran, et al (2003)

In the context of higher education learning, this overall approach shifts the framing of the ‘problem’ from a static, condition-based view of the individual learner towards a more dynamic, process-based view which tries to identify problematic aspects of higher education discourse and practice. The question in relation to learning then changes from being ‘what is wrong with this student’ to ‘what are the features of the curriculum, or of processes of interaction around the curriculum, which are preventing some students from being able to access this subject?’ Five potential areas for consideration in relation to this question will now be explored.

#### *1. Student lack of familiarity with processes*

In the previously more restricted system, students who had not experienced high levels of previous educational success were simply unable to participate in higher education. Now, however, students are as likely to be professional teachers, administrators, managers, and health care workers as they are to be eighteen-year-olds who have just left school. Alternatively they may be security guards, nurses, prison officers, secretaries, retirees, factory workers, or mothers. The success of mature adults in further and higher education, now well-documented by adult education research, suggests that there is not necessarily any direct causal link between lack of academic success at school and the ability to engage in academic work later in life. However, there may be a link between lack of previous experience of academic work and the ability to

understand institutional and curricular expectations, at least initially. It is easy to conflate the idea of 'ability', in the sense of genetically-determined IQ, with this lack of awareness and experience of the values, assumptions, and practices of higher education.

In a mass system, which is increasingly expected to provide career and professional development opportunities for a range of people learning throughout their lives, it is no longer possible to expect all students to enter university already knowing how to do things such as respond to a reading list and a set of essay questions, engage with new types of text genre, and adopt a critical stance in relation to ideas in published form. There are also questions about whether this can still be assumed for students coming straight from school.

In a small-scale study examining an intensive access course for recent school-leavers, a number of the students told stories of being progressively alienated by their school experiences, sometimes relating to a sense of being patronised and judged by powerful teachers (Haggis & Pouget, 2002). School-aged learners are not often constructed as being powerful agents themselves, but such students may choose a variety of ways of reacting to the pressures and constraints that are imposed upon them (see Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000). Although learners may enter higher education with a history of 'low-achievement', this is not necessarily related to their capacity to benefit from higher education in the future.

A notable aspect of the experience of working with some of the students in the small-scale study mentioned above (Haggis & Pouget, 2002) was the students' almost complete lack of understanding of what 'work' might consist of in relation to study, and, related to this, how work had to be organised to fit into the scheduling of time. Similar issues are also emerging in a second study, currently ongoing, with adult access students now engaged in undergraduate study (see Haggis, 2004). The people in this study are motivated and put in long hours, but some of these hours appear to be being misspent, in terms of results. In one case, lack of understanding of study processes, combined with no knowledge of basic principles of double marking and external examining procedures within the university, led one of the participants to attribute her good grade to the bias of the lecturer, who she assumed was simply trying to encourage her. Problems with the organisation of work and time can affect students of all kinds; school-leavers, mature 'returners', full-time professionals, and people with disabilities such as dyslexia, or who are experiencing mental ill-health.

## *2. A wide range of motives and types of engagement*

Students in a mass system do not necessarily share the aims and assumptions of disciplinary specialists when they first come in to the university. They may have been sent on a professional development course; they may be doing a course because they cannot expect career advancement without a qualification; they may have been convinced by schools careers advisers and parents that university is necessary to get a good job and salary. They may not (yet) be interested in the subject, having had no experience of learning it, or of learning it at this level. Rather than dismissing these positions as 'instrumental' or 'vocational' (a position itself linked to ideas about the value of intellectual exploration 'for its own sake' being superior to engagement with study for reasons connected to work), however, these orientations could instead be seen as perfectly legitimate, a move which might contribute to a more accepting, potentially less alienating atmosphere in HE (see Mann, 2001, and Leathwood & O'Connell, 2002, for discussion of student experiences of alienation). In an atmosphere which was more accepting of a wider range of backgrounds and motivations, there is no reason why students could not be gradually introduced to the aspects of the discipline that inspire their teachers. However, the task of 'seducing'

students into a level of interest and commitment that they may have been unaware of when they enrolled shifts the responsibility, to some extent at least, back onto the teacher (Northedge, 2003b). Arguably success in this area depends crucially on exploring critical aspects of the discipline in a way that is accessible to those new to the field.

### *3. Understanding the orientation of the discipline*

In addition to a discipline containing potential areas of interest and excitement which may be hidden from view at the point of entry, students may have little idea of how teaching and learning in the Humanities or Social Sciences is seen by disciplinary specialists; as being about questioning and creating knowledge, for example, as well as being about exploring what is already known. Previous experiences of lack of success with transmission approaches and knowledge-testing assessment regimes are likely to have created a quite different set of ideas about the purpose of study. In addition, such experiences may have left students underconfident and fearful, wary of the very challenges that higher education exists to stimulate. Students may not wish to challenge their ideas, values and past experience, or such challenge may be perceived as threatening and uncomfortable (Atherton, 1999). This does not mean that students cannot *become* engaged and questioning, but it may mean that such engagement needs to be carefully staged, and perhaps explored explicitly. Once again, this shifts some degree of responsibility for learning how to engage with the discipline back onto the teacher.

### *4. The problems of language*

The differing understandings which have been discussed so far could be seen as types of communication problem, perhaps even as examples of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Though many current models frame such misunderstandings as the result of deficiencies within the student, it could be argued that academic expectations are in themselves quite difficult to grasp (Laurillard, 2002). Problems in de-coding and responding to expectations appear to be particularly acute in relation to assessment criteria. Despite the best intentions of many teaching staff, there is growing evidence that a number of students, at least initially, have difficulty understanding things such as aims, essay criteria and admonitions against plagiarism, as these are stated and presented in course handbooks, and as they are transmitted through teaching and assessment methods (Ivanic, 2001).

This leads to the fourth potentially alienating feature of the curriculum, which is language. Students have to be able to 'apprehend the implicit structure of the discourse' (Laurillard, 2002: 43) if they are to be able to represent, analyse or argue against the consensus view. A range of studies, however, have suggested that the language used by academics, both in terms of content, and in relation to discussion of process (in essay feedback, for example) is far from transparent to many students (Francis & Hallam, 2000; Scott, 2000). Drawing attention to the excluding potential of language does not imply that students should not be challenged by encounters with rich and specialist vocabulary. Such encounters have the potential to extend not only their ability to engage with a wider range of textual genre, but also to develop their own ability to use language in more complex and sophisticated ways. However, if the challenge goes too far beyond the level of 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1981) for an individual student, it is likely to be rejected, and thus will not lead to any kind of learning at all (Terenzini, 1999). The idea of using less complicated language where possible, or of the need to translate specialist terms, is more likely to be associated with the spectre of lowering standards than with the Plain English campaign. But it is hard to see how teaching can function as a rhetorical activity by which academic teachers 'persuade students of an alternative way of looking at the world' (Laurillard,

2002:43), if the style of the discourse makes it difficult for the majority of students to gain access to these new forms of understanding.

#### *5. The nature of process in the discipline*

A fifth potential obstruction is that many students may well not be aware of, and therefore be initially unable to engage in, the more complex aspect of *process* through which disciplinary aims may be realised. Frances & Hallam (2000), for example, found in a study with Masters students not only that key texts on the course reading list consisted primarily of the genre that students found most difficult to understand, but also that unresolved questions about the meaning of the text tended to lead to a desire to reach consensus by student group discussion, rather than attempts to read the text again. Students do not necessarily respond to the challenge of complex text and ideas in the ways that it may be natural for academics to assume (Northedge, 2003b). In addition, the experience of struggle and alienation that students can experience when attempting to wrestle with these challenges can evoke emotional reactions which result in a kind of ‘tunnel vision’ (Smith, 1971) which can sabotage the possibility of building further understanding, or of any desire to engage with the text a second or third time. Experiences of tunnel vision and negativity can contribute to a sense of hopelessness about reading, which becomes associated with long hours spend wrestling with a dictionary. It may seem obvious to lecturers that pre-lecture reading, and ‘reading around the subject’, will ‘activate schema’ relevant to understanding a difficult lecture, thereby making it easier to understand. For students who associate academic reading with the kinds of difficulty discussed above, however, this is not necessarily obvious at all.

Crucial aspects of process may be quite opaque to students (Lillis & Turner, 2001). How, for example, is an essay question to be read? How are instructions about what to research embedded within such a question? How can academic texts be read in a way that allows understanding to emerge? How does a writer overcome the sense of exposure that writing often evokes? None of these questions are about ability, or even preparation. Though many academics would not see the exploration of such questions as part of the job of a researcher teaching their subject, the complexity of process they indicate is hard to reconcile with the idea of simple, learnable ‘skills’ (DfEE, 1998). Such questions refer to highly complex operations, which academics have themselves only learnt through many years of trial and error in a range of different academic contexts, and which they go on learning. Although academic texts exist as codified products, it is arguably the processes that such products represent which are at the heart of academic activity (Northedge, 2003a; Laurillard, 2002). Higher learning in the humanities and social sciences *is* these processes of engagement, and yet the majority of academic teachers tend to focus on the exposition of content, with little or no discussion of the processes by which content is continually formed, reformed and contested.

#### **Teaching processes: from ‘learner responsibility’ to ‘collective inquiry’**

If the assumptions of disciplinary discourses and practices may themselves be implicated in some students’ failure to learn, then this arguably has implications for understandings of ‘learning support’, and also for expectations in relation to the possible effects of innovative teaching methods and practices of assessment. If it is the relative invisibility of the complexities of academic and disciplinary processes which may, in some cases, be causing problems, then focussing on trying to remedy individual students’ failings, or upon manipulating individual ‘approaches’, is unlikely to effect substantial change. The alternative seems to be that the embedded, processual complexities of thinking, understanding, and acting in specific disciplinary



contexts need to be explored *as an integral part of academic content teaching within the disciplines themselves*.

Part of the complexity of disciplinary processes is their contested nature; it is unlikely that two academics even in the same field would articulate and model such processes in exactly the same way. Far from being self-evident, or something that academics can rightly expect students to be already familiar with, such processes are partly hidden even from academics themselves (Lea & Street, 1998; Scott, 2000), which may be one of the reasons why academic teachers are often reluctant to try to make them explicit. If students, however, are unable to see and explore such areas of complexity and contestation, it is likely to be difficult for them to learn how to generate their own versions of this type of process.

The idea that subject teachers might explore the complexities of academic practices much more explicitly with their students challenges many conventional assumptions about university teaching, and suggests a different way of thinking about current framings of ‘independence’ and associated discourses of ‘learner responsibility’ (Northedge, 2003b). Although current versions of these ideas may seem relatively new, the reason they have become so influential is arguably because they have served to successfully articulate a number of much older assumptions about autonomy which existed within the previously more restricted system. The re-framing suggested here does not necessarily imply the need to abandon, or even necessarily to adjust, conventional expectations about independent thought and autonomous study. It may, however, imply a need to work differently with students, at least in the early stages of their study (a problem, however, in increasingly modular systems) in order for them to learn what these expectations entail.

The questions being raised here are different from earlier critiques of ‘transmission’ notions of university teaching. This earlier critique questioned assumptions around the conventional focus upon the transmission of content knowledge, which largely ignored how learners themselves might make sense of and learn from pedagogical practices. Over time, however, the shift of focus from teaching to learning has merged with wider political agendas concerned with lifelong learning, economic competitiveness, and a perceived need for innovation and change. Policy-driven attempts to shift responsibility for employment/employability from employers and the state onto the individual have coalesced with more liberal, humanistic framings of ideas such as ‘learner responsibility’, resulting in the conflation of a range of different agendas, which are now constructing students in particular ways, for particular ends. In this context, focusing on ‘the learner’, and on ideas such as ‘learner needs’ or ‘student responsibility’, can become a means not only of shifting responsibility, but also of pathologising, labelling and containing people in relation to different constructions of ‘difference’. Furthermore, in the increasingly marketised and funding-driven context of higher education, the demand to meet the diverse needs of students as paying clients clashes resoundingly with the more conventional idea that the purpose of many forms of higher education should be that of providing a *challenge* to students’ values, assumptions and habits of thought. In many ways the ideas of ‘need’ and ‘challenge’ are directly opposed. The idea of responding to need suggests that the institution has a responsibility to find out either ‘what’s wrong’ with students, or ‘what it is that they want’, and to try to provide an appropriate response to this. Challenge, on the other hand, suggests that the institution has something worthwhile to offer; something which may intrinsically, and perhaps even deliberately, incorporate difficulty and struggle.

Current conceptualisations of learning also tend to be both decontextualised (despite the fact that learning is always focussed on an object, and that objects/subjects vary enormously) and individualised (reflection and other types of ‘metacognition’ all focus on developing the ‘self-aware’ individual). Transmission approaches attempt to teach by exposure, assuming that demonstration of the practices of the discipline will lead to students being able to successfully carry out these practices themselves. Individualised learning approaches, on the other hand, assume that getting students to focus on (and learn to talk about) their learning in a generic sense will result in ‘better quality learning outcomes’. The pedagogical approach being suggested here, by contrast, is based on the idea of *collective inquiry into the nature of specific disciplines*. This approach focuses not on developing an individual’s ability to see their own mind/process, but on collective forms of exploration in relation to different aspects of disciplinary practice. If the teacher is able to see how the students are thinking about, talking about, and approaching particular instances of disciplinary practice, and if the students are able to hear how other students are doing this, and how the tutor is doing it, then this (in theory, at least) begins to open up possibilities for new types of understanding.

As well as expanding the area of focus to include the *practices* of the discipline, the idea of ‘collective inquiry’ is based upon the notion of *dialogue*, in the sense developed by writers such as Paolo Freire (1972) and David Bohm (1996). This view of teaching raises many questions about the workings of power in Higher Education environments, which go beyond the scope of this paper. In dialogic forms of exploration, however, student positions and perspectives are seen as being as important an aspect of the educational process as the propositional content of the discipline itself. To develop collective, rather than individual, forms of understanding, exploratory work of this kind arguably needs to take place before assessment, as part of teaching, rather than in the individualised form of post-submission feedback on written assignments. In this approach, students still have responsibility for reading, thinking and trying to engage with disciplinary meanings, but it is the teacher’s responsibility to create pedagogical situations within which student positions and interpretations can form part of the subject of study. From this perspective, what students say and do in relation to the challenges of the discipline are the teacher’s raw materials; it is the teacher’s responsibility to work out how to create productive interactions between the different elements involved.

Exploring aspects of process in conjunction with specific concepts, in actual disciplinary assessment contexts, is not ‘learning how to learn’ but learning how to *do* the learning in *that* subject – how to think, question, search for evidence, accept evidence, and put evidence together to make an argument that is acceptable in that discipline. By definition, these activities have limited transferability, which means that they must be carried out differently in each different disciplinary area. The fact that these processes are carried out in different ways in different areas does not mean that students are not at the same time developing the ability to ‘transfer’ some of the thinking they are learning across contexts. However, it does mean that learning to do these things has to take place in specific contexts before any aspect of transfer can be made, rather than the other way round.

The kind of exploration which is being argued for here is also not ‘spoonfeeding’. Exploration of high level processes cannot, by definition, be spoonfeeding; only content information can be delivered by the spoonful. Process cannot be ‘delivered’, it can only be described, discussed, compared, modelled and practiced. In preparing for an essay, for example, telling students which authors to read, which ideas to stress, or which quotes to include, could be considered

spoonfeeding. Working with students on analysing an essay question, on the other hand, helping them to differentiate between different levels of vocabulary in the question, eliciting different types of question that could be asked about key words, asking questions that lead students to realise that the essay question contains an assumption, and eliciting what kind of questions might be in the essay writer's head as they read an academic text, gives little away, in terms of content. Activities like this with students lead to more, rather than fewer questions. They open the essay question up in all its complexity, rather than closing it down, or predetermining the student's answer.

Teaching as a process of collective inquiry into the nature of the discipline extends the idea of the 'mediation of learning' (Laurillard, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978), which Nespor (1994), commenting on Vygotsky, has suggested is more or less restricted to teacher/student negotiations across the boundary between the learner and the immediate educational environment. This approach takes a much broader perspective, attempting to understand subtle and partly hidden aspects of higher education culture, discourse and practice, and the effects that these can have upon student learning. As with other attempts to understand culture, it is most difficult for those whose practices and attitudes themselves make up the culture to see how that culture is operating. Thinking about these issues, however, may be a step forward in the task of analysing how the interconnected discourses and practices of higher education may combine in various ways to generate success and failure in learning.

## **Conclusion**

In arguing for a shift in perspective away from an individual, deficit approach to student problems towards one which attempts to better understand the possible effects of cultural values, assumptions and practices in higher education, this paper has suggested five areas which may be problematic. These are 1) lack of discussion and exploration of the personal and institutional processes involved in study and assessment; 2) lack of acceptance of a wide range of different motives and types of engagement; 3) lack of explicit discussion of key assumptions and principles of the discipline; 4) opaque and alienating use of language; and 5) student ignorance of the more complex aspect of process through which disciplinary aims may be realised. It has been argued that these problems are a feature of institutional, disciplinary and pedagogical interactions, and that it is the responsibility of the teacher, not the learner, to consider what might need to be changed in order to address these issues. This position redirects the current focus on learning and the learner by suggesting that many of the problems experienced by learners are at least partly being caused by the cultural values and assumptions which underpin different aspects of pedagogy and assessment.

It has also been suggested that the current focus on trying to understand more about individual, generic 'learning processes' could be misguided, in the sense that what is usually at issue in a higher education context is not so much how students learn, or do not learn, but whether or not they learn how to function as is expected within specific disciplinary areas. The processes which are implicated are *educational* processes, not learning processes; the means by which institutions and disciplinary specialists act upon learners in relation to purposes which have been defined by the institution and the discipline, rather than by 'the learners' themselves .

The argument for embedded, subject-specific exploration of different types of disciplinary process is not an argument for 'dumbing down' or an indication of the erosion of standards. Articulating more clearly what it is that academics believe in, what it is they want to share with

their students, and what they want their students to do, may actually be a way of protecting some aspects of the 'old' higher education against the threat of colonisation by market-driven values, and a possible drift towards more simplistic versions of academic processes. Detailed exploration of the new ways of thinking, reading and writing which academic teachers wish to introduce their students to also might begin to reduce the frequency of requests for 'example' essays, and perhaps begin to open out other areas of cross-cultural communication failure, such as those which lead to the occurrence of what the academy defines as plagiarism

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