

Master in the Workplace and Novice in the Classroom: helping non-traditional, postgraduate students to develop their academic voice

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Keywords: *academic voice, management studies, postgraduate, socio-cultural learning theory*

Introduction

This paper focuses on postgraduate courses, such as the MBA (Masters in Business Administration) or DMS (Diploma in Management Studies) where students have diverse levels of management experience and academic preparedness. Typically, some students have reached senior management positions but are conscious of their lack of formal qualifications or recent academic experience, whilst others have graduated within the last 2-3 years but can be equally intimidated by the industry experience of their peers. Northedge (2003:17) posed the question, "Is it possible to meet the needs of non-traditional students, whilst preserving intellectual standards and stretching the capabilities of more traditional students?" This paper reflects on Northedge's response and the influence on my own teaching practice.

Northedge's Social-Constructivist Approach

Constructivism understands learning as an active process of constructing knowledge, meaning and understanding (Fry et al, 2002). The learner determines relevance and that relevance will almost certainly vary between students. Taking a constructivist perspective, Northedge argues that "knowledge is not pinned down on the pages of a book. We cannot chop it into pieces to feed to students. It arises out of a process of discoursing, situated within communities" (2003: 19). The notion of knowledge as something that is situated within communities draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991: 49) who regard learning as socially constructed and explore "issues of sociocultural transformation with the changing relations between newcomers and old-timers" within communities of practice. Knowledge is associated with developing the confidence to participate in academic knowledge communities whose discourse is expressed in written form through papers or verbally through seminars and scholarly debates (Northedge, 2003). The novice or new-comer might, Northedge argues, begin by reading journal articles or attending a conference or participate in a postgraduate seminar whilst the master or old-timer may well write for leading journals or sit on the editorial board of a journal.

From this socio-cultural, constructivist perspective, teaching is centred on providing a forum where discussion and debate helps student to critically reflect on theory and relate it to their real world experiences in order to construct their own relevance and meaning. Northedge (2003) argues that if the focus is on learning as acquisition of a fixed body of knowledge then it is inevitable that those with considerable experience will not be stretched and those with limited knowledge may be left behind. Instead, he advises that lecturers select core topics that have levels of complexity and about which there is much debate e.g. corporate responsibility. This will enable students to engage "according to their own level of experience and understanding" (*ibid.*: 22).

By providing frequent opportunities to participate in the subject discourse, through both written and oral exercises, students can develop their understanding of how to operate within a particular knowledge community and can begin to establish a sense of academic voice or identity. Lave and Wenger argue that "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon" (1991: 115). An example of this is provided by Handley et al. who observed a number of junior management consultants. The consultants had been attending meetings as virtually silent observers but were then given a challenging task of their own which they described as "like climbing Everest in two days" (2007: 185). After the task was completed their confidence and their contribution in other meetings increased significantly because they had been "able to develop their identity and practice" (*ibid.*: 185).

Discussing Workplace and Academic Discourse with Students

After considering Northedge's ideas, there are two areas that have particularly influenced my own teaching practice. The first is to encourage students to take a proactive and enthusiastic interest in developing their own academic voice, and the second is to provide a supportive environment with frequent opportunities for students to participate in written and oral academic discourse. Taking the first, an effective approach in helping experienced managers to understand the notion of academic voice is to develop a shared understanding of the difference between the academic setting and the workplace. Northedge (2003) distinguishes between workplace discourse (assertive, task-orientated and business-like) and academic discourse (unhurried, dispassionate and accepting of ambiguity). He acknowledges these differences are 'oversimplified characterisations' (*ibid.*: 24) but in my experience his ideas can form the basis of an extremely useful discussion with students. Students can appreciate the value of being able to operate effectively in both the academic and workplace domains. There is clearly a benefit in the workplace in being able to challenge the *status quo*, reflect, debate and think critically. This is particularly true for higher level management roles to which many students aspire. Students with significant management experience might also consider the possible tension between being a master in the workplace and a novice

in an academic context. Northedge (2003: 27) is discussing care service professionals but his thoughts are reflected by MBA students when he argues,

'They enter the world of academic discourse from a daily life in which they play senior roles at work and in the community. They are used to people seeking out their advice. Suddenly, they find their considered opinions set briskly aside. Though they carry within them convictions based on a lifetime's experience, they have to accept the role of a humble beginner, whose arguments carry weight only by making reference to the views of remote, faceless authors'

The idea of 'academic voice' can be used to draw a distinction between workplace discourse, where managers are expected to draw on their lifetime experience and state their view firmly and authoritatively and the academic voice where they must still put forward their own ideas but must support this with extensive reading, critical thinking, analysis and reflection. Northedge (2003:26) argues that through participation students 'learn to value questioning and debate, and pick up the appropriate discursive style'. Drawing on my own experiences, students do appreciate an in-depth discussion of academic writing skills but the discussion of workplace-academia comparison provides important initial context-setting. Students come to appreciate that academic discourse is different to workplace discourse but is still relevant and something they can aspire to master in order to improve their effectiveness, originality and credibility in the workplace. Whilst anecdotal rather than empirical, it does seem that students who engage with these ideas become more proactive in seeking feedback in order to develop their academic written and oral skills.

Creating Constructive Opportunities to Practice Speaking & Writing

Northedge argues that students need "a coherent and consistent environment in which to practice reading, listening, thinking, speaking and writing" (2003:29). Frequent writing tasks with effective feedback can provide essential support for students in developing their own sense of meaning and identity. Northedge (2003: 30) argues that,

'commenting on written work is a crucial part of the teaching process. As teachers read they must 'listen' to what the student is trying to say, and 'reply' through their comments; supplying the other side of the conversation and thus helping to construct the student's identity as a discourse participant'

Students can be encouraged to become more generative participants through classroom discussion as well as writing tasks. Key to participation is a supportive classroom environment where it isn't just "the bright and the brave" who contribute. This can be facilitated through something as simple as using small groups or pairs to discuss ideas which can then give people confidence to contribute in a large group. It can also involve ensuring that everyone speaks during the early classroom sessions, even if they only introduce themselves. It does seem that once

people have contributed once or twice then they are more comfortable doing so in future.

Developing a supportive climate involves students as well as the lecturer. The difference between workplace and academic discourse can be used to discuss differences between the workplace and classroom and thereby help students to understand the importance of supporting their peers. If the workplace is competitive and as one student explained, 'you have about 30 seconds to establish your credibility or you're just written off' then the classroom can be presented as a challenging but safe place where students can explore ideas and express opinions without fear of ridicule. Perhaps it's too twee to compare it to the TV sitcom "Cheers" where "everyone knows your name", but that is an image students can relate to and appreciate, particularly those who arrive after a full working day. The importance of creating a relaxed learning environment is supported by brain research which suggests that social stress can seriously hamper the cognitive ability to learn and remember (Dwyer, 2001).

Conclusion

In conclusion, an effective means of engaging with students with diverse levels of experience and academic preparedness is to select core topics that will enable students to engage "according to their own level of experience and understanding" (Northedge, 2003: 22). A discussion of the difference between workplace and academic discourse can help students to understand the relevance and benefits of each, such that students engage proactively and enthusiastically in their personal journey between academic novice and master. This seems particularly true for postgraduate management students but may apply in other contexts. Finally, it is important to provide a supportive environment where students have many opportunities through discussion and writing task to develop their academic voice and receive constructive feedback. A closing caveat is that this supportive environment is likely to be effective only if it is established at the start of the course and reinforced consistently. Once students begin to treat each other or are treated in a way that is harsh and unsupportive, it may prove very difficult to change.

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