

## Eliminating the 'Dunce' – challenging a teaching myth

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### Introduction

I have chosen this title because I believe that given the right circumstances anyone can learn. Historically in child education the label 'Dunce' was applied to students who did not conform or who had difficulty learning. The term 'Dunce' was derived from John Duns Scotus (1256/66-1308), a master philosopher from Scotland. His ideas about cognition and existence were popular in late medieval Europe until the Humanist reform of the Renaissance (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2001/7). During that period his ideas were rejected. His followers, the 'Dunsmen', rallied against the attack on his work and were consequently regarded as idiots. It is therefore not difficult to see how the notion of the 'Dunce' became associated with diversity. For the purpose of this paper I shall use the term 'Dunce myth' to indicate negative attitudes towards learners' experience of failure.

### The challenge of diversity

Fortunately in today's climate of equalities in school and Further and Higher education there is greater understanding about underachievement and both students and lecturers are encouraged to develop learning strategies. Equal opportunities means providing learning opportunities to all and therefore paying attention to students who may take longer to integrate their learning. Personal experience of the education system can also impact on teaching and learning, so lecturers need to find ways to encourage and support students to stay motivated.

In a study of educational practice (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2005, in Mckenzie-Mavinga 2009) I worked with trainee counsellors to create a bridge between teaching and learning. The study revealed that race conflicts within the group lay at the heart of students' learning experience. These conflicts created silences and concerns about how to communicate on a volatile subject without fear of attack or further oppression. Discussion groups to facilitate students to share their experiences helped to lessen the conflicts associated with learning.

My own former learning experience was mainly influenced by what others taught and deemed to be right. I wasn't a Dunce, but I did not understand how to reflect

on my learning. Beard and Hartley (1984) view this kind of compliant learning as one of the deficiencies that students bring with them to higher education. Citing other scholars, they note that '[s]tudents who are at this "initial stage of influence" may be seeking the "right answers"' and be in transition from 'childlike learning' to a mature analytical approach (*ibid.* p.100, citing Perry 1970 and Saljo 1979).

A negative attitude transferred by the teacher to 'childlike' learners brought about the phenomenon of the Dunce. Awareness of the impact of a negative attitude, and determining whether teaching objectives meet students' learning needs, can help lecturers to be more proactive with respect to how students progress from one stage of learning to the other – particularly in the context of greater student diversity in higher education.

The issue of plagiarism is a case in point. Carroll (2007) has stressed the importance of a clear agreed definition of plagiarism between students and staff, as differing assumptions can be made about aspects of this phenomenon. She defines plagiarism as 'submitting someone else's work as your own' (p.13), but further clarifications are necessary for learners. For example, with the phrase 'someone else's work' whose work are we referring to – the author, the lecturer, the Internet, or the work of another student, if the project is shared? Wide concern among UK academics about the problem of plagiarism (*ibid.* p. 20) highlights the need for more learner support and flexible thinking about diversity and students' needs.

Shifts towards equalities and the acknowledgement of the factor of diversity in learning and teaching can help push the myth of the Dunce into the past. Sarah Ahmed, from her research concerning the language of diversity in higher education, observes that '[f]or most of my interviewees, the emergence of a diversity framework enabled them to have a stronger voice within the university' (Ahmed 2007, p.238). This shift has stirred my curiosity about whether tackling plagiarism might sometimes be a strategy to overcome the remnants of this mythology. Students striving to meet learning objectives employ many ways to do so - for example, speeding through assignments due to time pressures and multiple deadlines. Spurred by a need to get it right, students may not be aware that they are plagiarising. The embarrassment of failure can induce the threat of the Dunce experience and drive students to try what may seem like an easy route to completion.

On the lecturer's part, the burden of administrative responsibilities and teaching inefficiencies can have an effect on how students understand information. For example, handouts that don't give enough information, or a lack of challenge to students' ideas, can create a less stimulating learning environment. Lack of diversity awareness with regards to students' learning patterns and needs may also have contributed to the myth of the Dunce.

My students explain that they need time to reflect, question and evaluate their learning. That tells me they want to become experts in their discipline and eliminate the myth of the Dunce. However, the constraints of programme management and teaching hours limit time in class for the evaluation of learning. On the other hand, policies that support diversity challenge lecturers to provide a confident learning experience that engages, informs and brings about intellectual transformation. Of course, this transformation depends on whether the cultural context of the learning experience is considered, and to what extent lecturers try to address the needs of students from different backgrounds.

## **Pedagogical approaches**

Potential failure can be arrested by informing students about academic expectations and practices, and facilitating them to explore ways to adapt their learning experiences and feel more confident. In response to students' needs, and in an attempt to address the cultural context of learning, I incorporated black issues workshops into the training of counsellors over a period of two years. An evaluation of that programme (Mckenzie-Mavinga, 2005 in Mckenzie-Mavinga 2009) showed that black students' training needs were not being met, while attention was placed on white students' needs to explore what the shared experience of racism meant to them. Most students involved in the study said that they had benefited from the opportunity to address the unspoken conflicts about how diversity and oppressions impacted on their learning experiences.

This suggests that confidence and progress can be encouraged by the provision within courses of theme-based discussions about diversity and learning. Student support may also depend on their relationship with peers and the quality of personal meetings with tutors. Kinnell (1990) suggests that the effectiveness of personal tutorials depends on the lecturers' level of empathy and readiness to attend to learning 'for all kinds of students' (p. 62). Empathy plays an important role in supporting the diversity of student experiences; however, given the pressures on staff to meet institutional objectives, and the diversity of academics, this assumption cannot always be relied on.

In the study of counsellor training referred to above, students experienced a greater sense of achievement rather than failure, as they were encouraged to develop their empathy, challenge theory and develop ideas from their experiences of black issues. Brookfield (1987) views the risk of challenge as an opportunity for the learner to encounter the unknown and develop authenticity: 'Challenge prompts self scrutiny, consideration of alternatives and, the taking of action' (p. 91). Students experiencing greater authenticity may take more responsibility for their learning and therefore become less dependent on the lecturer. Greater authenticity and confidence in communication can also mean less risk of plagiarism as students develop confidence in the use of their own words to express ideas. I call this finding a voice.

Finding a voice means being able to integrate and articulate new knowledge. The new knowledge can be linked with students' personal history, experience and career development. Media, technology and interactive learning can assist students to access methods of developing this integration. Lecturers can also use these resources to engage on a variety of levels with students - for example, the use of videos to analyse skills during class work or scrutiny of online draft essays to detect early plagiarism. As students are afforded greater opportunities to improve the standard of their work, the myth of the Dunce can be pushed further into the background

## Conclusion

The cause for developing more student friendly techniques for learning can transform the myth of the Dunce into greater opportunities for integrating experience into *learning*. Addressing students' learning needs and designing courses that aim to pre-empt plagiarism and inform students about what good academic practice entails are some of the ways of achieving that goal. A model that assists students' relationships with their lecturers and their peers can help to develop greater confidence in their communication skills and prepare for diversity in professional practice. Embarking on this challenge means having faith in our ability as teachers to bring about student empowerment rather than reinforce 'the Dunce' mythology.

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