

## **Rethinking Student-Centredness: the role of Trust, Dialogue and Collective Praxis**

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### **Introduction**

This article explores ideas of a student-centred curriculum through an oral history project undertaken with students taking a level five undergraduate health ethics module at a UK HEI. We begin with a brief account of the origins of the project, which reflects our shared interests in teaching whilst recognising the differences in our academic backgrounds. We both teach on the undergraduate module 'Ethics and Research in Professional Contexts'. Alya is the module leader and architect of the module and John is a longstanding group tutor. During numerous conversations we discussed our student profile and what is now referred to as the 'awarding gap' (AdvanceHE, 2020). We noted that little pedagogic research has been done with racially minoritised groups in higher education (Baker, 2020). We also discussed different ways of teaching; in particular, the approach adopted on the module of generating and posing questions and providing resources for learners to develop informed arguments rather than being concerned with right or wrong answers.

### **The project itself**

When designing the project we also drew on our respective academic backgrounds to inform the methodological and conceptual orientation of the research. Before we consider this in more detail, we will provide an initial overview of the project itself. The project ran from 2019-2021. The overall aim was to give students an opportunity to recount their experiences on the module whilst also reflecting more generally on their educational journeys. All students from our seminar groups were invited to participate in interviews using oral history methods. Students who were interested indicated on a sheet of paper circulated in class whilst others approached us directly. The intention at the time was to conduct the interviews in-person at the University or somewhere of the students' choosing. When we asked for volunteers, 26 were initially happy to be interviewed. However, as a result of the coronavirus lockdowns and the associated pressures faced by students, this number reduced to nine. The oral history method used to conduct and analyse the interviews allowed us to foreground the student narrator: their stories and the meanings given required us as oral historians to listen to accounts of their educational experiences in their terms, not in ours, and look for recurring themes across their individualised accounts. In this sense the principle of social justice informs oral history by allowing those traditionally excluded from the historical record an opportunity to speak for themselves. We see this approach as mirroring the pedagogic approach of

the module, namely that the knowledge, experience and understanding students bring to the classroom is integral to a socially just and inclusive curriculum.

The interviews, therefore, were conducted during Covid-19 restrictions so there were additional challenges in terms of remote interviewing and research ethics. But the interviews at least served to highlight some of the working conditions our students face in normal times; for example, childcare responsibilities and paid work commitments, as well as physical space at home, all of which present significant challenges for students on a full-time degree course.

We briefly explore below several concepts that have helped us make sense of their stories and illustrate each of these themes with anonymised extracts from the interviews.

### **Intersectionality and the Mythical Norm**

One way we view the complexity of our participants' narrated experiences, particularly in relation to their educational journeys, is with reference to the notion of intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) used the term to highlight the distinctive experiences of black women in the 1980s, arguing against seeing 'black' and 'woman' as separate identity categories. The concept has been widely debated since in relation to equality issues, hence our interest. We find Sylvia Walby's argument (2012) that intersectionality should be viewed as a complex ontology rather than a category helpful in analysing oral histories. Categories leave readers with unitary, static stories; by contrast, the students we interviewed spoke of themselves in complex, dynamic ways. All were women and from diverse, racially minoritised backgrounds. The majority were of black African origin, who associated their first language with that spoken in their villages or towns rather than French or English, even when one of the latter was used in their schools. They were all mature (over 21 years), and many lived with their children, partners or in one case with their mother and daughter. The majority were combining their studies with paid work in the health and social care sector in hospitals, or for a local authority or private company. Moreover, all saw education as a journey helping them to forge new self-understandings and ways of being.

The multiple differences that marked our student group from the assumed student profile that exists in the minds of many prompted us to consider intersectionality alongside Audre Lorde's idea of the 'mythical norm' (1984). Like intersectionality, it became popular after 1980 and has been refined over decades since. Lorde defined the embodied form of the 'mythical norm' in her original paper as 'white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure' (1984, p.116). She says: 'It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society' (1984, p.116). We can consider how the norm's specific characteristics have changed (or not) since the 1980s; but it is evident that the norm on the one hand and the intersectional differences manifest amongst our student group on the other, are differently positioned, both materially and culturally. The extracts below illustrate some of these differences, including the role played by language. As Lorde suggests, communicative practices can 'silence, devalue, marginalise people and their ideas...' but language can also provide a tool for 'self-definition, community building and resistance' (1984, p.116), which is evident in the first of Rita's extracts below, one of the students

interviewed. In Lorde's words, 'If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others - for their use and to our detriment' (1984, p.45).

*We prefer them (group discussions) because if we're struggling in class we benefit from interactions in the group. The English is totally different to what I learnt back home and what you say as typical Englishman is different. There are Africans and Caribbeans and there are commonalities between us. Amongst colleagues (fellow students) we can explain in 'pidgin'. Nigerians and Ghanaians would have an understanding so if someone doesn't understand we can explain in 'pidgin' and we learn from each other that way. We share a common language compared to what lecturers speak.*

**Rita**

*We had the discussion of FGM (which is) the practice in my country. There were two Caribbeans in the group. We had to explain it in a way, because it is not part of western culture. There are differences of opinion in Sierra Leone (on FGM). Everyone got something they believe in because it's the fabric of their identity. It needs to be understood from a survivor's perspective not taught from a book.*

**Rita**

*I didn't know that we... if you're richer or have a better lifestyle, basically you have better options to health, better education, you live longer. I just didn't see it like that you know. And the ethics in... what we're doing now, being humble, having humility, treating people with fairness, all those Acts, all the discrimination Acts, and being able to have, what's that one where we can say our own...was it autonomy? I didn't know all about those things until I came to the course.*

**Vanessa**

## **Trust and Trustfulness**

The module is designed to foster an embodied 'community of inquiry' (Dewey, 1902) with trustfulness at its heart. Our view is that taking the idea of a socially just pedagogy seriously involves both attending to situated relationships of trust and aiming to foster self-trust (and, relatedly, self-confidence) in learners. The module's architecture is intended to support the constitution of learner agency and autonomy understood relationally, through an ongoing process of trustful dialogue. This involves teacher and learner engagement with the module curriculum via an explicit culture of trust in all learning interactions.

This was mentioned in the oral history narrations several times, for example by Rachel who spoke of feeling heard and included, even if you are not very polished:

*You chip in and they listen to you, even if you are not expressing yourself in the most eloquent way...*

**Rachel**

The development of trustful relations at the University are particularly important as they are often preceded by educational experiences that have been interrupted and done little to build confidence and self-esteem. The nature and quality of relationships were considered important in building trust and confidence, as the following extract from Asuma illustrates:

*I enjoy the diversity, (being around) people of your own kind (and) our student mentor who will explain all you need to know and the librarian helps with resources and tutors like you who give us the encouragement and support to do the things we need to do.*

**Asuma**

The module usually has a large cohort of over 150 students. The syllabus covers controversial moral dilemmas in health and social care, which interviewees said resonates with their experiences of the sector. The module explores case-studies and personal judgments of what counts as a moral dilemma and moral solutions, then moves to a critical study of ethical theory, law, sector-specific professional codes of conduct, and other relevant policies and interventions.

The aim is to create possibilities for every learner's engagement and participation in critical, shared inquiry across difference. We make explicit *what* we are discussing and reading and *how* we aim to do it. The module fosters purposive, disciplined 'thinking together' across different views. The discipline comes from what one narrator described as 'sticking with it', even when group views differ and the moral dilemma seems intractable, throughout the module. Regular group discussions build directly to the assignment: a critical, discursive essay that can be written in the first-person. The assignment encourages discussion of personal views and insights but asks for philosophical inquiry rather than experiential or reflective writing; 'reasoning out' to clarify and support one's *own* moral values and critical views in relation to a moral dilemma in a case study.

## Dialogue and Co-Creation

The module design is *radically student-centred*. By this we mean it fosters, foregrounds and explicitly values students' relationally autonomous views and testimonies. It works to weave these into the learning process, for example by inviting students to suggest case-studies for discussion from their imagination or lived experiences. Applied ethics pedagogy commonly involves setting up pre-planned 'for and against' debates using teacher-defined topics. By contrast, in our classes we encourage generative and creative *dialogical discussion*, shared, purposeful inquiry, and 'thinking together' about issues that matter to learners. Ground rules of respect and collaboration are agreed by each group in early sessions and revisited as we go along. Thus, learners are collectively involved in the creation of the curriculum, learning process, and learning environment.

Samina, one of the students, spoke on valuing the 'struggle' of learning; disciplined 'thinking together' takes effort but it's 'worth it', you get clearer of your own views.

*I always come away with some things I have learned. In the discussion, I get clearer, despite the challenges...*

**Samina**

Rachel, another student, spoke of her experience of transformative learning; the sense of freedom and space to think through issues, 'in all directions', openly, together with trustful others, 'even when you have different views':

*I was very judgmental on a lot of issues. I was very much fixed on my beliefs, and so – once I started doing the module, this module on ethics, I had really begun to open my – to broaden my world view...We were dealing with the ethical dilemmas, the case studies ...What helped me most was the interactions in the seminar between students and the way lectures are designed, when they present the slides but they're still flexible to allow students to chip in and present their opinions...when I was told there's no right or wrong answer, it's the way you argue the subject or topic, it's how you justify it – that was quite, it was quite liberating, to know that I can actually explore it as far as possible, horizontally as well as vertically, in all directions....all arguments are listened to, and other students' participation also, has been very encouraging...we allow everyone...*

**Rachel**

## Collective Praxis

So, what is it to 'think and work/study together' in a trustful community of inquiry to create a socially just curriculum? It requires a *critical* pedagogy, that is a pedagogy that is reflexive and disruptive, and draws on critical approaches to *how* learning happens as well as *what* is taught (Giroux, 2010). We characterise the ethical teacher as practising the virtue of trustfulness; as a way of taking social justice seriously at the level of student-teacher interactions. This can be considered through the lens of the notion of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007). Using Fricker's framing, as teachers we aim to *resist testimonial harms*, and hear our students as credible knowers; to explicitly and in non-prejudicial ways to consider their views and support open dialogue in the group. Furthermore, we aim to *resist hermeneutical harms*; that is, we strive to achieve collective understanding of marginalised students' experiences, despite gaps in interpretive resources. This occurs in class discussions, as described. This is a process in which students speak for themselves, and we, as teachers join with them to co-produce knowledge (a form of collective praxis).

The research showed that students appreciate the teaching approach taken but also that the research method adopted, i.e. collecting oral histories was not simply an add-on but part of a wider counterpoint to practices of exclusion and silencing (like the 'mythical norm'). Our critical pedagogy and our research practice simultaneously value and centre non-hegemonic cultural knowledge. This, for us, is *engaged* teaching and research in order to foster a more inclusive and socially just curriculum.

We aimed to develop a pedagogy that mitigates against what has been termed the 'epistemic violence' of hearers failing to meet speaker dependency in linguistic exchanges (Dotson, 2011). Uma Narayan's account of standpoint epistemology (1989; 2004) has also informed our practice, especially her view that the oppressed do not always possess all or any interpretive resources to know what's 'really' going on; so 'allies', or those wanting to help, must act to counteract this.

For us, this involves teachers developing the virtue of trustfulness and to hear and foster insights together with student speakers; *this* is the practice of the co-production of knowledge. In our pedagogy, *this* is centring students.

Our analysis of our oral history project also considers the macro level of structural injustice (Anderson, 2012), and thinking about how, for our specific student community, aspects of curriculum design, institutional design and the wider sector can be re-thought (and improved) with new knowledge generated via their testimonies. For example, Rachel, one of the students, spoke of her struggle to grasp expectations to access learning resources independently because of her previous educational experience in a West African country. She said:

*'I think that's one of the main reasons causing challenges to access learning resources; although resources are there, the reading extracts are provided. Well, because of my background... we had very few resources...so we relied a lot on the classroom deliverance from the teacher. And having to do it yourself, maybe go the library, it wasn't really the tradition. We relied more on being given, rather than being an independent learner like now...So, because of these old habits, it's difficult to suddenly switch away from them...many of us, having studied in Africa... many of us having the same experience.'*

**Rachel**

Some recent HE pedagogy research using equality and inclusion concepts is proving useful in addressing inequities of outcomes for the disadvantaged at the level of one-to-one student-teacher relations; but our study suggests the need to extend thinking to look collectively and institutionally, for example at how learning resources are provided, and Anderson's approach helps to support this claim.

Our work connects directly with London Metropolitan University's 'Education for Social Justice Framework' and 'Decolonising Met' initiatives: it addresses curriculum design/pedagogy and sees decolonising (particularly as 'decolonising the mind' re: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, 1986) as an engaged, trustful, collective process of knowledge generation, relating HE pedagogy to the political dynamics of contemporary culture and aiming for (anti-oppressive, anti-racist) ethical transformations. We have a commitment to fostering conditions of learning that mitigate against alienation from oneself, identity, and heritage via linguistic oppression. For us, this means supporting the co-development of resources and space for learners to speak for themselves. The oral history project both supports and contributes to this.

### **Conclusions: implications for practice**

In terms of classroom practice the interviews highlight a need to re-think the notion of a student-centred approach to learning and teaching at least in the way it has been conceived in liberal, individualised accounts. They do so in a number of interrelated ways. Whilst the oral history method invited a series of individual accounts, they also revealed a recurring pattern of intersectional circumstances and challenges that call for responses to their collective experiences rather than as individual students. This is part of a critical pedagogy that allows students to express

'rights' and 'wrongs' in their own (collective) terms and appropriate theoretical understandings to support their ideas.

The interviews also illustrate the importance of understanding the complexity and evolving processes of identity formation and positioning. No one term will suffice not only because it rarely does justice to the complexities of being but also because it will always be provisional. The term 'BAME' is illustrative of these problems. The students were more than 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic'. They were also mature, working (and working class) women whose first language was not English, who were often living in households where they had caring responsibilities. This suggests the 'BAME' category in and of itself will hide further disadvantages as well as gloss over significant material differences amongst 'BAME' groups. Equally, groups seek to re-define themselves in response to changing circumstances, for example because of their educational experience. A narrative approach is thus not only a helpful research tool but also insofar as it is embedded in learning and teaching, can create institutional spaces within which such new understandings and self-definitions can emerge.

A socially just teaching and research approach is essential if we are to build trustful relations with students and treat them as credible knowers. In contrast, a more individualised approach might only serve to deny and hence exacerbate epistemic injustices and hermeneutical harms. The interviews have highlighted the importance and benefits of formalising spaces in the curriculum where student knowledge and professional experience in conjunction with conceptual tools and other learning resources can be brought to bear on discussions of everyday ethical issues. The opportunities provided for students to learn together as a group are an essential feature of this process as is the integration of the learning from these practices into module assessments. Student-centeredness is thus a relational and constitutive feature of our pedagogy. Overall, the module provides an example of a socially just pedagogy as one that centres students' voices and agency, including their capacities for becoming agents of social change.

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### Biographical Note

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John Gabriel is Senior Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Social Professions and former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University. He is one of the founding members of the University's Centre for Life Writing and Oral History (CLiOH). He has published widely on racism and culture and more recently participated in and published articles on community-based oral history projects. Throughout his career he has been interested in learning and teaching in higher education and has been a partner member on a number of EU capacity building projects. He has served on the editorial board of *Teaching in Higher Education* for many years and is a principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He has been an active member of a number of voluntary organisations and is currently Chair of the Oral History Society.