Nothing about us without us! Utilising experiences of disability in higher education

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Abstract

Inspired by the famous slogan 'nothing about us without us', this paper draws upon the experience of the author to explore the issue of how to navigate a disability studies curriculum in the contemporary University. Experience of university both as a student and as a lecturer has informed the writing of this article. The article begins by exploring the use of autoethnographic/ auto/biographical accounts, before exploring some of the important elements of planning and assessing disability-focused courses in higher education in the UK and concludes by offering some suggestions as to the value of theoretically generated personal observations in higher education provision.

Introduction

I employ the technique of auto/biography/autoethnography to discuss some important parts of my pedagogical approach to lecturing in higher education. I suggest that my analyses of these pedagogical approaches are relevant to higher education staff engaged in supporting disabled people as my pedagogical approach is heavily informed by my experiences of being a disabled person. Within my pedagogical practice as a special educational needs and disability studies programme leader, I feel that I draw on my past experiences of being a disabled person. Therefore, I offer this article so that others may be able to celebrate their own experiences within their pedagogical practice.

Why an auto/biographical/autoethnographic approach?

My approach to academia is one which suggests that personal experiences play a vital role in shaping experiences in higher education, whether in teaching, research, being a student and so on. This approach draws heavily upon the writings of C.Wright-Mills (1959/2000) and reaffirms the importance of personal experience and suggests that personal experiences can be an excellent tool in highlighting wider social concepts. Furthermore, I also wish to draw on the work of Gayle Letherby

(2002, 2003) and her contribution to an edited text on the role of subjectivity and objectivity in research (Letherby, Williams and Scott 2013) where it is suggested that in higher education research, our experiences heavily influence the research that we engage with. This has been termed 'theorised subjectivity' and argues that in some way all research may starts from the subjective position of the life experiences of the researcher. Given the way that teaching in higher education is so tightly bound with research, I deem it sensible to suggest that as educators, the primacy of subjectivity still applies. Therefore, within this paper I seek to demonstrate how my life experiences (especially concerning disability), have dictated the way that I approach my pedagogical practice in being a lecturer and programme leader in special educational needs and disability studies. I have previously noted my experiences of higher education as disabled undergraduate student within this journal (Harvey 2011), and these experiences heavily inform my teaching.

There are those that critique the use of personal experiences in academic research, stating that such experiences may be seen as self-indulgent (Delamont 2007) (this was a deliberately provocative paper). Meanwhile, Chang (2008) states that the use of personal narratives in academic work need to have a link to wider culture if they are to be seen as more than descriptive autobiography or memoir. Research by Loh (2013) discusses the concepts of plausibility and utility in autoethnographic work noting that narratives must resonate with others and contribute to their capacity to solve problems. Le Roux (2017) conducted a survey of the perceptions of autoethnographers' as to the legitimacy of the method. The findings unanimously indicated that rigour was vital, but there was less agreement as to what would constitute rigorous research. This paper then, in its' autobiographical/autoethnographic approach to maximising the efficacy of higher education lecturing is highly entangled in the ongoing debate that examines the use of auto/biography/autoethnography as a legitimate and useful research method. Nonetheless, I have endeavoured to produce an account which links personal experiences with experiences concerning higher education lecturing, with the aim of my account being of some assistance to other educators.

The design and planning of my teaching

In this section I will outline how I seek to apply both the theory and practical elements of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education and reflect upon how I can ensure that this remains relevant in line with contemporary research and scholarly activity. I will also offer insight into how contemporary research and scholarly activity informs my approach to implementation of student learning. I discuss various pedagogical tools such as the use of humour and how that helps me to engage students in the subject content. Recently, there has been much debate around the marketisation of higher education and I situate my teaching practice within this debate. I clearly recognise the marketisation of higher education (Taylor 2017) and in opposition to this notion, I explore the pedagogical term "bildung' and discuss the strategies I used to ensure that my teaching is as far as possible co-produced with students as fellow learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Taylor 2017). I conclude this section by stating the way that I feel that although the planning of a session is important, there has to be a certain amount of flexibility around this. I draw on social theoretical literature which emphasises the fluid nature of life to reinforce this. When beginning the planning of my teaching sessions, I am very aware of the wider context of the activity. I am extremely cognisant of the way that my teaching on individual modules is part of a *Special educational needs and disability studies* course and as a result many of the students have a raft of experience working with people with special educational needs or a disability. It has been stated that an awareness of the context that the educational activity is located within is of paramount importance is the planning and design stage (O'Neil 2015). Furthermore, it has been noted that higher education is frequently guilty of creating a huge divide between its key concepts. For example, theory is often viewed in opposition to practice; research is viewed in opposition to teaching; and education is viewed in opposition to training (Khan and Gabriel 2018).

I remain particularly keen to attempt to step away yet further from the one-way, linear conceptualisation of higher education, whereby knowledge is simply imparted onto the 'passive' student by the 'all-knowing', 'expert' lecturer. Crucially, it has been stated that within a society,

whereby *product* is considered above *process,* higher education has seen to become a transaction that can be acquired rather than an introduction to independent and lifelong learning. Furthermore, it has been suggested (Taylor 2017), that the concept of *Bildung* could possibly be used to contest the marketised nature of higher education. Meanwhile, it has also been noted that *Bildung* is an ambiguous term (Biesta 2002), but for the purposes of this discussion *Bildung* refers to the cultivation of knowledgeable and ultimately well-rounded people whose success in life is made up from far more than what classification of degree they receive (Horlacher 2004; Taylor 2017). Furthermore, Taylor states that:

'(T)the notion of Bildung may offer conceptual sustenance to those who wish to develop educative practices to supplement or contest the prevalence and privileging of market and economic imperatives in higher education, which configure teaching and learning as an object available to measurement.' (Taylor 2017: 419).

Throughout my teaching practice I remain particularly cognisant of the concept of *Bildung* and how I can incorporate its principles into each session. Indeed, the diverse profile of student who are attracted to this course, constantly remind of the multiple, and at times, dialogic nature of people's lives (Hughes, Goodley, & Davis, 2012). Consequently, I feel it is important to make students feel valued by being aware of the way higher education should not be viewed as simply being a being part of their lives, rather than being the only thing in their lives.

In keeping with my approach which aims to dislocate the notion of the economic purchase of a higher education degree, I am keen to find ways to further involve students in their learning as much as possible. I felt that it was vital to consult the students regarding the content of the session. I am determined to embrace the idea of students being co-constructors of their own learning (Wegner & Nickles 2015). I build time into each session where I can be flexible with the content and ask the students the topics they would like to cover. I try to draw heavily on the students' own experience of working with disabled people which I thought would serve to further disrupt the idea of the students

learning in a passive way from an all-knowing ‘expert’ lecturer. I am extremely aware to recognise the way that each session is unique and that the learning of the students will happen in a fluid and unexpected way. Indeed, the topic of a key module of the programme draws on social theory to celebrate the way that life itself is a fluid concept (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and that therefore disability and disabled people's lives should not be conceptualised in a static way. In acceptance of this notion, it makes sense that I recognise that each learning encounter is unique. It has been stated (Roy 2017) that this uncertainty can cause trepidation at first, but an effective educator is able to use this uncertainty to their advantage, as the unique experiences of the cohort can be utilised. Indeed, it has been noted that a recipe-type approach which dictates exactly how learning should take place can limit possibility for unexpected growth. In viewing the students as co-constructors of their own learning (Wegner & Nickles 2015), as well encouraging healthy debate of the topic, I endeavour to allow for this fluidity of learning within my practice.

As stated above, the Special educational needs and disability studies course at my institution tends to attract students who have experience working in the sector and wish to increase their theoretical knowledge of disability. With the practical nature of the experiences of the students in mind, the first task is to ensure that the learning objectives for each session are commensurate with the module learning outcomes and ultimately with the programme learning outcomes. It has been stated (Kimball, Schnee, & Schwabe, 2015) that learning outcomes are pivotal to the planning of the curriculum, whether this is at the session, programme and or even university level. Learning outcomes are designed to ‘articulate clear objectives around which planning and teaching should revolve’ (Kimball, Schnee, & Schwabe 2015: 113). Having said this, the use of learning outcomes in education is not without criticism. For example, there is much debate surrounding the strict and rigid use of learning outcomes where learning outcomes are akin to a recipe for success in higher education.

It has been noted *that: 'all learning, apart from simple behavioral responses like chanting a times table or threading a sewing machine needle, is part of a continuum. Even chanting tables can be done well or badly. There are degrees of knowing, understanding, being capable, having an attitude and so on, and exactly where one learning event ends and another begins is largely arbitrary'* (Hussey and Smith 2008: 109).

Furthermore, the importance of creating well-rounded, critical thinkers is highlighted by Kimball, Schnee, and Schwabe (2015: 129), when they argue that higher education should be more concerned with encouraging:

'students [to] begin to recognize and articulate their connections to the world around them, and to work towards goals supported in all the higher education rubrics such as critical thinking and engaged citizenship' (Kimball, Schnee, and Schwabe 2015: 129).

Therefore, in consideration of this debate, I I try to incorporate learning objectives and outcomes into my teaching practice, but through my encouragement of engaging with wider literature, I always seek to encourage critical thinking as well as an understanding of the topic which are both of great importance within higher education (Kimball, Schnee, and Schwabe 2015; Hussey and Smith 2008).

An aspect of my pedagogy which I find very important is the use of humour and therefore I use this frequently in order to create a fertile learning environment. It has been stated that the use of humour is very appropriate and effective pedagogical tool (Kararo & McCartney 2019; Torock, McMorris & Lin 2004). In my experience of being a student present at various lectures, I have found that humour is most effective when it is used not in the predetermined way but engages with individual learners is vital given the 'massification and diversification' (Reddy, Searle, Shawa & Teferra 2016: 1820) of higher education. This is an especially important notion to embrace when the context of the session is considered. Indeed, literature on the use of humour in higher education

learning and teaching suggests that it can be an important way of increasing the emotional engagement of students and ultimately an effective way of creating wholesome learning environments (Hoad, Deed & Lugg 2013). I would therefore suggest that the use of humour may be an effective tool to use when engaging with a large number of students from non-traditional backgrounds (such as disabled students). Having said this, the use of humour is not without its complexities. It has been stated that in order for humour to be used as a way of increasing student engagement, the topic has to be appropriate and of interest to the students (Machlev and Karlin 2017). Moreover, the way humour is delivered is also important and it has to be used in an age-and context appropriate way (Ivy 2013).

Assessment and feedback in learning and teaching

In this section I will highlight the importance of assessment and the provision of feedback in higher education. Throughout this discussion I will explore some of the methods and complexities of the assessment of my own practice as educator. Much of my teaching emphasises the notion of creating *reciprocal* relationships with disabled people. Therefore, it seems sensible to suggest that I should regard assessment as a way of assessing my own performance as educator as well and that of the students.

The assessment of student learning is important within any higher education context. It has been noted that the assessment should (as far as possible) seek to recognise that students are active participants in their learning (Rawlusyk, 2018). Furthermore, and rather crucially, it has also been observed that the outcome of student assessment can also be used as a prism through which to reflect on the professional practice of the educator (Robinson, Pope & Hollyoak, 2013). Such reflection is crucial in contemporary higher education institutions given the advent of student feedback forums such as the National Student Survey (Andrews, Brown & Mesher, 2018). Meanwhile, the *Higher Education Academy* recognises the importance of assessment and as such have developed a framework for transforming assessment in higher education (The Higher

Education Academy, 2016). In this document, assessment is broken down into two main types. These are assessment *of* learning, and assessment *for* learning. I will now summarise the main differences between these two types of assessment in higher education.

Assessment of learning in essence is the way that students demonstrate the extent to which they have accrued knowledge (Carless, 2015; Norton, Norton, & Shannon, 2013; Rawlusyk 2018) and is therefore used to provide clear evidence of student achievement. This is often also referred to as *summative assessment* which is most often carried out at the end of a period of instruction (Gronlund, 2006) and is mainly used to determine grades. Meanwhile, *assessment for learning* moves away from the idea that students need to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge acquisition, and instead focuses on the learning process itself, and is often concerned with indicating areas in which students can enhance their knowledge (McDowell et al., 2011; Rawlusyk, 2018; Sambell et al., 2013). Assessment for learning is often referred to as *formative assessment.* It has been noted that a crucial element of this type of assessment has to be some sort of interaction between the student and the lecturer (McDowell et al. 2011). Rather crucially for this discussion, assessment for learning which involves formative assessment has been cited as the type of assessment that is most likely to promote independent learning (McDowell et al. 2011). The creation of independent and lifelong learners, that is those who move away from the model of learning which is educator led and characterises much of the education system, and requires that students take responsibility for their own learning, is something that I feel is crucial to emphasise during University education. Furthermore, Carless et al. (2011) indicate that just because an assessment mode is summative, there is no reason why it cannot be a source of learning to students, and the key to this is the provision of high-quality feedback. Notably then, there appears to be a way of combining elements of *assessment of learning* and *assessment for learning,* which I feel is the type of assessment that should be provided in higher education as the purpose of such institutions is to

support the on-going learning of students. In response to this observation, I seek to use examples of both summative and formative assessment tasks and during summative assessment, I to ensure the students are learning during the process. Being programme lead for the BA (Hons) Special Educational Needs and Disability Studies, and leading modules in all three years of the course, means that I am able to oversee the way the students develop throughout the course. Having this oversight has contributed to the way I structure assessments. Firstly, and in terms of formative and summative assessment tasks, I build in informal and formative tasks early on in the module and these lead to summative assessment tasks which are used to assess the learning of students at the end of the module.

I ensure that I give particularly detailed feedback on early tasks as there is evidence that feedback that is overly negative, can result in students having a severely negative emotional response to this feedback (Robinson et al., 2013). I am aware of the context of the situation and provide feedback accordingly. Particularly, in the early stages of a module, I am aware that feedback I give may be the first piece of feedback the students would have received and therefore I feel it is of paramount importance to make this feedback positive. The way I do this is not to provide feedback that is positive regardless of the standard of the work, but rather to emphasise the way that this is the first piece of work that students have submitted in their journey at University. Ensuring that the feedback is framed in a positive manner, ensures that the assessment process has contributed to the students' learning and provides an important glance into the future to increase the quality of future submissions. Highlighting ways that future work can be improved is considered a crucial part of the feedback process (Carless 2009; Sambell et al. 2013). The way that feedback is future-orientated, dictates that 'feedforward' may be a more appropriate term to use (Carless 2009). I ensure that this feedback is provided in a timely manner, which is considered an extremely important factor in the provision of feedback (Robinson et al. 2013).

In keeping with the notion that feedback should be future orientated, I believe that it is also crucial that the assessment tasks throughout the programme should also embrace the notion of progression. I use my position as programme leader to ensure that the assessment tasks enable students to demonstrate a degree of progression throughout the three years of their programme of study. In terms of the provision of feedback to students, the general aim of such a process is to provide the best possible learning environment (Pereira et al. 2016; Evans 2013; Price, Handley, Milar & O'Donovan 2010). To ensure that this feedback is as effective as possible, it has been stated that it should be timely and relevant (Pereira et al. 2016; Ramsden 2013). Furthermore, it has also been highlighted that the provision of feedback should be suitable to the context of both the task and the overall programme of learning (Pereira et al. 2016; Knight & Yorke 2003).

In addition to prioritising the provision of timely written feedback on student work that is submitted for summative purposes, I try to integrate regular informal feedback within sessions. For example, before I finish the session I try and set a brief, informal task for students to complete that is related to the content within that session. Additionally, for the first 15 minutes of the following session, I briefly re-state the content of the previous session and request that students to orally demonstrate their understanding of the previous weeks' topic to me. I then provide verbal feedback on the content of their understanding. Sometimes I am guilty of dedicating too much time and thought to this task, but I feel this is important. In encouraging students to learn this way, I am encouraging the students to become active participants within their programme of learning, rather than passive recipients of knowledge (King, Scrodt & Weisal 2009; Myers & Myers 2014). Furthermore, I interpret the need for feedback to be relevant and suitable to the context of learning to mean that the feedback provided should be in some way directed to working with disabled people, since this is the vocation that the course is providing for. There is a need for the assessment task to reflect the content of the sessions provided. Therefore, I try and encourage students to think how the topic of the session would relate to practice in their future careers. This will allow students to be able to situate the content of the modules I teach within their overall programme of learning and career

plans. I achieve this by trying where possible to draw on the experiences of the students to demonstrate the relevance of the subject we are investigating. This task is made easier by the way that many students completing the course have extensive work experience with disabled people.

Indeed, the literature suggests (Segers & Dochy 2001: Poulos & Mahony 2008: Perreira et al. 2016) that students should always be involved in the process of feedback. It seems sensible to suggest that if assessment should seek to involve students in a way that encourages co-constructed learning, opinions on the provision of feedback should be highlighted from different perspectives, including that of the educator and that of the student. Considering the perspective of the student, I think it is important to acknowledge the huge power difference that exists between student and educator (Green 2019). In situations that acknowledge this, students are encouraged to 'seek out and negotiate feedback rather than passively receive it' (Green 2019: 83). The encouragement of the negotiation and seeking out of feedback (Carless et al. 2011; Sadler 2013; Green 2019) highlights the active involvement of students where the student is seen as an active agent rather than a passive recipient. This has been said to 'enable students to draw on a range of affordances within their learning context to make sense of and to appropriate feedback for their own purposes' (Green 2019: 84). In terms of my own practice, as I have noted above, I am still relatively early in my career and thus am still reflecting on the most effective way to maximise student involvement in the feedback process. However, as a first step in this process, at all times I ensure that my practice seeks to both recognise and dismantle (as far as possible) the power differences that exist between me and my students. Furthermore, the entire notion of providing feedback has been questioned by authors who cite the way that feedback is not always used by students (Li and De Luca 2014). I am still reflecting on the best way I can provide feedback that engages learners and stimulates them to improve their future submissions. Despite the potential of this view to challenge the provision of feedback, I prefer to acknowledge this observation and ensure that by providing high quality, timely and relevant feedback, the students will be more likely to engage with it if it clearly raises their chances of being successful both at University and in their future careers.

As noted above, much of my lecturing refers to the notion of *reciprocity* and breaking down barriers between people as I believe this is vital when working with people especially those with special educational needs/disabled people (Harvey 2018). Considering this then, it makes sense to discuss some of the ways that my own performance as the lecturer can be critiqued by my fellow learners (students). It has been stated that feedback from students is used in different ways. It is used to appraise teaching (and therefore can signal future changes in teaching methods) (Hoon, Newton, Oliver & Szpakowska 2015)

There are different methods of gaining student feedback. I feel that the particular method itself is far less important than the way that students are informed that *their* opinion and *their* feedback is both listened to on acted upon. In a similar way to the provision of services to disabled people, it is vital that we seek to empower students and reduce the power differential between students and lecturers as far as is possible. There are those that believe that focusing on the personal relationship between the student and lecturer may well be a fruitful way forward (Hagenauer & Volet 2014). Hagenauer & Volet (2014), argue that higher education in general needs to understand the concept of building teacher- student relationships, and also better understand the way that these can impact upon quality assurance measures. The current context of higher education that is characterised by increasing fees (which is arguably transforming higher education into a commodity that can be bought) (Bunce, Baird & Jones 2017). This only serves to reinforce the importance of building relationships between students and lecturers. In a recent study carried out by Bunce, Baird & Jones (2017), it was found that following analysis of learner identities, students who viewed higher education as more of a commodity, were less successful in achieving higher grades than those who thoroughly engaged with all aspects of University life.

I feel that engaging with this observation, demands those working in higher education institutions to consider different ways in which the provision of good quality education can be maintained and continued. It seemed sensible to suggest that focusing on concepts such as improving relationships

between students and their educators is an important component, especially considering the positive link between good relationships and increased motivation, social competence and well-being.

Improving student – educator relationships seems to me to be a sensible concept for further research. I believe this to be a particularly interesting avenue for research with disabled students, considering the observation that government policy needs to ensure better educational outcomes for disabled people (TUC 2018).

Conclusion: the role of reflection in higher education

The process of reflecting on teaching practice in a critical and reflexive manner is attracting growing interest across a range of academic disciplines (Van Beveren, Roets, Buysse, & Rutten 2018). Indeed, reflection is considered a necessary practice within both higher education training as well as playing a prominent role in a multitude of professional accreditation standards (Norrie, Hammond, D'Avray, Collington, & Fook 2012, Ryan & Ryan 2013). In a recent systematic review which explores the purpose of reflection in higher education (Van Beveren et al. 2018), reflection was considered an important constituent of practice at the personal (Meizrow 1998; Morley & Dunstan 2013), interpersonal (Duquette & Dabrowski 2016; Badwall 2016) and socio-structural (Dyson & Smith Brice 2016; Carrington & Selva 2010) levels. As a result, it can be concluded that the process of reflection is a key constituent of the work of educators within higher education institutions. I feel that this along with my positioning as a disabled person provide a sound justification for the theoretically generated personal observations in this paper. I hope that my auto/biographical/autoethnographic reflections may be of use to others whose work in higher education concerns disabled people.

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