Coping with difference before "a proper job": narratives and commonplace diversity in higher education

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Global Equality and Diversity Conference & Awards 2015

Super-diverse context

Management schools enhance opportunities to explore how people learn to cope with strangers as part of everyday life:

- Super-diverse disciplinary context: most impacted by diversification and internationalization (ONS 2011; HEFCE 2014)
- Super-diverse geographic context: highest proportion of disadvantaged students in Russell Group, 60% international students, lots of state school students, very high proportion of BAME students, set in NE London (QMUL 2014)

In this super-diverse context, everybody is a stranger, everybody has to integrate via mixing (Vertovec 2007; Wessendorf 2014)

- Everybody is a stranger, everybody has to mix. This often occurs overlooked in formal setting such as lectures and seminars

Discussion

Marie

Method

- 46 individual students
- 1-1 narrative interviews
- Participant observation
- Mixed-site: students from contrasting backgrounds
- 'Incidents': interactions between students in super-diverse sites

Prezi

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Management schools are key sites in HE to prepare people to cope with interactions with strangers

Traditionally, they did so through cultivating students' 'cultural awareness': knowledge of stereotypes and country specific phenomena. Such approaches however encourage 'pragmatic' responses which negate interactions between strangers in HE and how students can learn from these (Blasco 2009).

Traditional approaches also ignore heightened diversity within increasingly 'multicultural' workplaces, and the commonplace nature of interactions with strangers in cities and HE sites

This has lead to approaches aiming to prepare people to work alongside strangers focusing upon 'cultural intelligence'. CQ emphasizes adaptation and flexibility across cultures and encourages attitudes that are open and pay attention to lived experiences of mixing (Earley & Peterson 2004; Thomas & Inkson 2004).

Yet, approaches are still formal, and encourage students to ignore interactions occurring as part of their everyday lives within diverse HE sites

A review of the literature for instance shows most approaches restrict interactions to special instances determined by instructors' own presumptions regarding the needs of practicing managers:

- Trips abroad (thereby excluding some students)
- Modules such as 'International Management' or 'Managing Diversity' ('standalone', non-integrated)
- Virtual learning (thereby ignoring intra-classroom diversity)

In contrast, this research shows how management schools provide enhanced contexts for people to learn to cope with strangers through normal interactions they have as part of their everyday lives within diverse HE settings

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Commonplace diversity

- A management school is a microcosm - a miniature real world example of super-diversity

- Within, diversity is 'normalized', everybody is a stranger

Research upon super-diverse sites shows that formal interventions fail to cultivate harmony amongst strangers

- People instead learn to cope with strangers informally, through everyday interactions

Student experiences of integrating into super-diverse HE contexts vividly exemplify how people acquire familiarity with strangers, feelings of belonging, community, and home over time through everyday interactions

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Cosmopolitan Resources

- Attitudes: open or closed towards mixing with strangers
- Practices: enable interactions with strangers (fitting-in; hiding; being pragmatic, withdrawing; playing along; forming public and private milieus)
- These resources enable people to mix publicly and form relations privately within sites of super-diversity
- This research explores this 'informal mode of learning through focusing upon 'incidents' of interaction between strangers (Marsick & Watkins 1994).

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Marie

During interview Marie identified the most visible/audible aspects of her diversity: working class, white, English speaking, female and northern. She is a widening participation student.

University is a means of breaking free from the decaying northern town and interacting with strangers.

Freshers' week was a significant incident for Marie that provoked awareness to differences:

Researcher: So why did that initial assignment go so well?

Marie: ...the thing that I did in my essay, the inequality stuff, I find that quite interesting... coming from a working class town and then coming to London, you massively see the difference in the wealth and stuff... that was something I noticed as soon as I got here.

At the same time as she noticed others' differences, they noticed hers:

Marie: when I actually got to uni somebody said "Oh where are you from?" and I went "[northern town] and he went "Oh...". I was like "Thanks!"

This provoked Marie to engage the kinetic elite:

Marie: you could tell that he came from quite a wealthy background... I ended up getting quite annoyed... he said it as if poor people don't work hard. So I ended up talking back to him...

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Management schools are key sites in HE

Staying Quiet

In a 'Managing Diversity' seminar, 'getting along' requires that Marie temporarily hides as power relations relating to her ethnicity arise. Other students are discussing the impact of ethnicity upon employability and Marie remains quiet despite being more disadvantaged and lacking network capital compared to others

Marie: ... and I was pretty much the only white person in the room, there was like one other person and they weren't even English, so I kind of felt like I had to keep quiet like I wasn't sure what I said could be misconstrued.

Marie's attitude is 'open' to mixing, but she still acts pragmatically, by staying quiet so as to not become the target of stereotyping by others

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Rita: student drinking and lifestyle as a cultural repetoire

Vertovec (2009), Wessendorf (2014) and Earley & Peterson (2004) describe a "repertoire" that students draw on to cope with strangers

We find Rita, a privileged and internationally mobile Nigerian student, drawing on previous encounters with students in order to negotiate an undergraduate social event with an overt focus upon mixing

During interview, Rita describes herself as 'anti-social'. Her tactic is to 'fit-in' by appearing to mix through the event but remain disengaed

Rita: I talk to more people now, but I don't know if I would call them my friends. I don't visit them. So when I see them on Monday, we talk about their weekends and how they went out partying or drinking or whatever, but... I can't just relate with someone talking about stupid stuff.

So, Rita draws on background knowledge of stereotypical narratives of student culture to cope with strangers

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Pete: Closing up

Third year, "mid-to-northern Englishman, you know, white male"

Attitude: "Fairly open-minded" and prefers to "take people as they come". But he can't 'fit in'

In 'Managing Diversity' seminars Pete encounters more privileged and mobile students who stereotype him and rely upon taken-for-granted awareness

Such incidents provoke a critical attitude towards more privileged students, and can also provide him a valuable 'perspective'

Pete: ...we were talking about employment law and it was "Oh yes anybody could easily get a job" - yes, because if you have good contacts and money and your parents will get you a job, then yes, you have that ability

Incidents become increasingly painful

Pete's response is pragmatic: practices include withdrawing to socialise with other white males who 'share a similar social station' and his passion for football

Pete: Amat has always been very in your face and very "I have got this, I have got that, my dad does this", and it has been very difficult to get into a conversation because he doesn't take account of your position. So you don't get the opportunity to meet these people... if you did it could open a lot for you and them. And I think it is unfortunate that attitude makes it difficult. But at least from my perspective it was never worth the effort because it would have just made me mad!

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Discussion

Management schools exemplify how **formal interventions persistently negate incidental learning** through everyday interactions with strangers

In contrast, this research highlights how **sites of commonplace diversity encourage people to learn informally** through becoming 'immersed' in real-world microcosms

Yet, whilst immersed, **students still sometimes act pragmatically** by employing repertoires of cultural stereotypes to **fit-in**, abstract categories of difference, and cliched narratives relating to class difference and mobility.

Relations can also form pragmatically: on the basis of shared ethnicity, socio-economc status, and national origin as students withdraw due to the emotional costs of mixing

Learning through such incidents is also **deeply nuanced and unpredictable**: whereas some respond tactically through finding motivation to learn and engage more privileged students, others close-up, and withdraw

Such nuances may relate to socio-economic status, as the most **disadvantaged students appear to 'make-do' with incidents** as openings to learn and network, and may also be **shaped via gender** (Certeau 1984)

So, m'schools provide enhanced contexts to explore how people learn to cope with strangers informally, however they also highlight the complex and difficult nature of such experiences and how differences and tensions are perpetuated as much as broken down

Despite such difficulties, however, we believe diversity is an overlooked resource for learning and teaching in HE and argue that incidents should be more clearly integrated into HE

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