

Rethinking Teaching in the Context of Diversity

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ABSTRACT *Higher education has faced profound teaching challenges in recent times, as it has delivered a widening range of courses to students of increasingly diverse backgrounds, expectations and levels of preparedness. These challenges call for a more radical shift in teaching than simply incorporating remedial support within existing teaching programmes. This paper argues that neither traditional 'knowledge delivery' models of teaching, nor a purely 'student-centred' approach, adequately addresses the challenges of student diversity. Instead, it proposes an emphasis on the sociocultural nature of learning and teaching, modelling learning as acquiring the capacity to participate in the discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community, and teaching as supporting that participation. It explores the challenges faced by students struggling to make meaning in strange intellectual and social surroundings, and outlines ways teachers can structure courses and tasks so that very diverse cohorts of students can progress together in meeting those challenges.*

Introduction

Higher education has seen a radical diversification of students and courses, over recent decades, in the context of continuing pressure towards greater 'relevance' and widening of participation. This has presented sharp teaching challenges to a sector long protected by high walls of selective entry and intellectual aloofness. Yet institutional responses have often gone little further than offering 'remedial' support to 'weak' students. In effect, non-traditional students have been treated as 'charity' cases to be rescued from ignorance. The stately home of elite education is simply extended by adding a large paupers' wing. 'Proper' students continue to define the norms, whilst the rest tag along behind as best they can. Such a limited response subverts the purposes of broadening education, producing an underclass of students alienated from knowledge that is effectively dangled beyond their reach. Yet, 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 argues that it is, if we re-examine some basic questions: What is knowledge? What is learning? What is teaching?—and consider some non-traditional answers. The line argued applies most obviously to the critical-analytical 'discursive' disciplines—social sciences, humanities, arts—where reading texts and writing essays

play a central role. There is an interesting debate to be had as to whether it applies also to the sciences and mathematics, but not within the scope of this paper. The discussion focuses, for purposes of illustration, on a course presented by the UK Open University.

The Challenge of Meeting Diverse Needs

'K100: *Understanding Health and Social Care*' is a broad first year undergraduate course, aimed at an audience ranging from care assistants with few qualifications, through entry level nurses and social workers, to experienced care professionals (some already graduates). It is studied by around 6000 students each year; many employed in some form of care work and over 60% having less than standard university entry qualifications. These students vary enormously in what they bring to the course and what they need from it. Can one course cater to such diversity? The evidence is encouraging. Results compare well with OU norms, and the course is exceptionally popular with both students and the 250 part-time tutors who support them (also from many backgrounds). Here are comments from three students who joined the course with very different backgrounds and needs:

After twenty years spent working in social care ... more recently in a management role with one of the larger national charitable trusts ... this course has enabled me to stand back and re-think many of the issues I am confronted with daily ... underpinned practices evolved over the year and, in the process, given me a broad understanding of how current issues impact on other care practitioners. Overall, I say thanks and well-done! (Courses Survey Project Team, 1999)

The whole course has helped me in getting a new job as a special needs assistant at a primary school ... At the interview I used things I had learnt from K100 and the headmaster was very impressed ... I can't believe its nearly coming to an end. It's gone so quick. (Student letter to tutor, quoted with permission)

Not working in a health or social care environment, I found K100 very enjoyable, and an eye-opener. I learned a lot. (Courses Survey Project Team, 1999)

The point here is not to claim exceptionality for K100 in appealing to such varied students, but ask how it can be that a senior professional with 20 years experience, a beginner in care work, and an interested outsider are all able to benefit from and enjoy the same course? How could a course be accessible to the latter two, without patronising and boring the former?

What is Knowledge?

If we think of teaching as transmitting knowledge in the form of *information*, we seem to be faced with a conundrum. A 30-week programme presenting the kinds of basic

information needed by newcomers to the care field is hardly likely to satisfy the needs and retain the interest of an experienced care professional. Equally, if we think of teaching as enabling the construction of *concepts* within the student's mind, it is clear that a seasoned professional enters K100 with an extensive repertoire of sophisticated concepts, whilst beginners will require time to develop even a basic conceptual toolkit. Any theorisation that represents teaching as presenting 'items' of knowledge to be internalised raises the same difficulty. With a diverse student body, no fixed start or end point can be assumed and, consequently, no selection of items can be appropriate to the needs of all. The challenges of diversity demand a more fluid conception of teaching.

Sociocultural theories of learning offer an alternative. They view teaching as enabling participation in knowing (see, e.g. Wenger, 1998; Wertsch *et al.*, 1995; Wells, 1999; Wells & Claxton, 2002). Knowledge is seen as constituted in the flow of meaning produced between knowledgeable people when they communicate together. Any grouping that regularly communicates about particular issues for particular purposes develops shared ways of talking about and understanding those issues. The members become participants in a discourse community (Swales, 1990). They come to share a discourse that is increasingly specialised and obscure to outsiders. Specialisation occurs whether the focus of common concern is gardening, health or financial investment. We live surrounded by specialised discourses emanating from discourse communities and we participate in them to varying degrees; in some cases, just dipping in to take advantage of a useful concept, while in others becoming deeply engaged in debate.

An academic discipline is a discourse community of a particularly systematic and committed kind (or, more accurately, a constellation of overlapping communities, with somewhat blurred boundaries). It is a community that discourses primarily through writing, giving its discourse a very distinctive style—highly focused, analytical and critical (Olson, 1996). What we think of as 'higher knowledge' is what communities of academic specialists say to each other as they debate issues in papers, books and seminars:

Knowledge is what is shared within discourse, within a 'textual' community. (Bruner, 1996, p. 57)

Academic disciplines are examples of high status discourse communities, which have successfully established claims to 'expertise' within the wider society. (Others include professional advisers, agony aunts and various kinds of TV 'pundits' such as political or sports commentators.) Discourse communities that are accepted as sources of legitimate knowledge, I refer to as 'knowledge communities', to distinguish them from the more informal discourse communities, which permeate social life. They are the kind of community people make an effort to acquire membership of in order to become 'knowledgeable'.

From this perspective, 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.

Knowing involves ... participation in social communities. (Wenger, 1998, p. 10)

With regard to socially recognised knowledge, *to be knowledgeable is to be capable of participating in the specialist discourse of a knowledge community*. Participation does, of course, require relevant information and specialist concepts, but these do not *constitute* the knowledge of the community, they *enable* it. The primary target of learning is the ability to participate in what is said within a chosen knowledge community.

There are, however, many levels of participation.

Levels of Participation in Knowledge Communities

Central versus peripheral. Discourse communities require forums where discourse takes place. In academic disciplines key forums include leading journals, where prominent members of the community conduct debates. These generally set the terms of debate for other more peripheral forums. Around the centre, well established members participate in high status communal activities (e.g. running conferences or sitting on key committees). Away from the centre, 'ordinary' members engage in routine discourse as they get on with communal business. Meanwhile, on the periphery are forums such as postgraduate seminars, where newcomers can legitimately participate (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, a knowledge community tends to have a status structure such that the stakes of participation are higher the more central the forum.

Generative versus vicarious. In any discursive forum some participants will contribute directly to the flow of discussion, while others participate by listening, or reading, if only because the logistics of debate require 'speaking time' to be rationed. Thus, some take a 'generative' role in shaping the flow of shared meaning, while others participate vicariously (Bruner, 1990). A great deal of communal meaning is shared this way. We spend much time 'participating' in this vicarious mode as we watch TV or read newspapers. It is, for example, the main way most of us participate in national political debate.

Vicarious participation should not be equated with passivity. Reading a journal article (i.e. vicariously participating in debate generated by the author) can be a very demanding activity. It is common to find, within a student seminar group, that those who have said little reveal through their essays that they followed the classroom debate at least as thoughtfully as those who took a generative role.

Convergent versus variant understanding. Participants in discourse do not make identical sense of the flow of shared meaning. Young children, for example, acquire much understanding of the world through participating in family conversations, but the meanings constructed in a child's head are of a different order from those in the parents' heads. A child constructs what is said in a simplified way that 'works' for him or her. However, the flow of conversation 'works' for the parent, too. Meaning

is genuinely shared, even though understanding of what is said is not identical. Both sides acquire knowledge, though not the same knowledge.

Thus, differences in levels of understanding do not prevent effective sharing of meaning. Indeed, a key function of discourse is to share knowledge between people who understand differently. Typically, within academic debate, well established members of the knowledge community exchange views, while others, participating vicariously, construct the flow of meaning in terms that work for them. Of course, these different understandings are not equal in status. The way leading members understand and speak the discourse sets standards for the community as a whole. Better established members will tend to converge more closely to the community's dominant usage and understanding, while more peripheral members, including newcomers, are more variant in their usage and understanding. (The parent's understanding is likely to be more convergent with 'mainstream' thinking, while the young child's is more variant. Both parties tacitly acknowledge this.)

It requires a substantial investment of time and effort to acquire the capacity to participate *generatively* and with *convergent* understanding in the *central* forums of a knowledge community. However, it is often perfectly satisfactory to participate in a discourse peripherally, vicariously and with variant understanding. As a non-expert you might listen to a radio discussion between nutritionists, participating vicariously in a discourse that enables experts to generate wide-ranging understandings of the influences of foods on bodily processes. However, for you their talk simply generates useful reflection on your eating habits. Later, you might discuss what you heard with another peripheral participant in nutritionist discourse and, though your understandings may be quite variant from those of nutritionists, together you will take advantage of their specialist discourse.

Entering a Knowledge Community

This notion of a knowledge community where active participation in debates can be, to varying degrees, peripheral, vicarious and variant, suggests how a course can work with a diverse audience. The student's goal is to become an effective participant in an unfamiliar knowledge community. The early stages will involve peripheral and vicarious participation with variant understanding. However, as the students' understanding becomes more convergent and as they acquire skills of generative participation, they gradually become able to participate more centrally. If a course presents compelling flows of richly textured meaning, a wide range of students will be able to participate and all will advance from their prior level of discursive skill.

For example, a core topic within K100 is the extensive restructuring of care services in the post-Thatcher era. On this broad and complex subject students will have been exposed to much ideologically loaded mass-media commentary.

They also enter with widely varying knowledge of key policy changes, and of the economic, political and social issues at the heart of policy debate. This major topic is introduced in week three of the course by focusing on certain consequences of the 1990 Community Care Act (K100 Course Team, 1998a). However, first, the discussion is contextualised by means of a brief, schematic and generously illustrated

sketch of the history of care in UK communities. A few key arguments underlying the introduction of the 1990 Act are then outlined. However, the focus soon shifts to the everyday work experiences of a home care assistant and her employer, both of whom are interviewed on audio-cassette. As the discussion proceeds, other people are also introduced, so that the focus returns frequently to personal responses to situations. There is also a carefully judged quantity of local detail, such as an example of the care plans the home care assistant has to work to and of the records she keeps; these being aspects of the implementation of the Act.

Students working through the case studies and associated activities without prior knowledge of the care field participate peripherally, as onlookers, encountering people in unfamiliar predicaments, and assimilating much in passing about the nature and extent of community care services and the structures that support them. Meanwhile, to students who are frontline care workers, much of this detail is commonplace, but its significance is transformed by its contextualisation within discussion of broad policy changes. They begin a movement inwards from the periphery of the care community by locating their daily experience within its central debates. At the same time, students already established within the care community as managers, involved daily in discussions about policy implementation, are able to engage relatively convergently with the underlying debates, and perhaps generatively (noting down possible courses of personal action). Thus, this study week, by presenting a strong narrative with a variety of detail and an emphasis on human experience, enables a broad student audience to follow a single flow of discourse, each engaging with it according to their own level of experience and understanding.

In this account of knowledge and learning, a discourse is a communal knowledge system within which all participants, in the process of participating, extend their repertoire of knowing. (At the same time the discourse itself elaborates, metamorphoses and produces new forms of knowing.) This continuing enhancement of understanding through participation in communal meaning making occurs whatever your status within the discourse (senior member, or novice), and whatever the mode of your participation (central or peripheral, generative or vicarious).

What is Learning?

Learning is thus a process of becoming increasingly competent as both:

- a user of various *specialist discourses*;
- a participant within the relevant *knowledge communities*.

What students gain by entering education is ability to participate in prestigious and powerful knowledge communities. This gives them:

- *intellectual power*, through access to the concepts, theories and methods of enquiry and analysis generated within particular specialist discourses, and
- *social power*, through membership of knowledge communities which may control decision making, professional practice and employment opportunities.

As a K100 student observed, 'I went for an interview at work for the post of

Assistant Manager. Because of K100 I was able to ... speak the same language as the interviewers. Well, what do you know—I've been offered the job.'

The Role of Education

The role of education, then, is to support participation in the discourses of unfamiliar knowledge communities. On the one hand, participation presents students with intellectual challenges in struggling to make meaning from the discourse. On the other, it presents the more social challenges of joining a new community. I discuss the former in another paper (Northedge, 2003). Here, I explore the social challenges.

Social Challenges of Academic Discourse

The new diversity in HE brings together students from very different domestic and occupational situations. Many come to academic discourse expecting it to complement the knowledge produced in their other life-worlds, but instead find it discordant and unsettling. A vocationally oriented course, such as K100, deals with issues that many students are already frequently involved in discussing in very different terms at work and outside work. They live in an everyday world in which care services are regularly thrust under the mass media spotlight. Newspaper headlines scream 'Is baby Julie's life worth £20,000?' or 'Social worker wrecked my life'. Highly emotive and personalised accounts vigorously persuade them to take sides within a starkly moralised universe. Meanwhile at work they are participants in a professional community whose discourse is pragmatic, controlled and defensive. Here, they are expected to position themselves within a task-orientated universe, where decisions about operating on babies are taken in the context of established policy and spending priorities, and where lapses in services are seen as regrettable exceptions. Then, as K100 students, they enter a third discursive universe where they are expected to set aside both public and professional rhetoric, and stand apart from their own actions as care workers. They are invited to position themselves as dispassionate debaters between competing theoretical accounts, even though these may undercut assumptions regarded as fundamental in their daily lives. Table I sketches these three discursive worlds.

A K100 student who works in care is positioned within contrasting discursive universes at different times of day. Outside work they are drawn by family and friends into taking stances on stark dilemmas defined by public debate. At work they must commit themselves to the attitudes and values, however controversial, that go with their allotted tasks. Then, on opening their books, they are invited to become neutral critical analysts of whatever strange theory they encounter.

Moreover, these discursive universes work in quite different ways. Everyday discourse, whether at the public level in the mass-media, or locally in home and community, functions 'tribally', keeping us in our places, carrying on our daily lives alongside each other. It works less by analytical reasoning than by constructing group loyalties, presuming common perceptions, invoking folk wisdom, naming

TABLE I. How care issues are treated within different types of discourse

Source	Everyday discourses	Discourses of care practice	Academic discourses on care
	Tabloid headline	Hospital spokesperson	Journal article
Issue: Scarcity of resources for care	'Is baby Julie's life worth \$50,000?'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving maximum good with limited resources • Priorities, difficult decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate on models of care financing • Debate on shifting resource from cure to prevention
Issue: Abuse in care institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either: indifference (collude in denial) • Or: outrage/blame/ personalised attack: 'Social worker wrecked my life.' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial: hostility towards questions and 'whistle-blowing' • Public emphasis on rules, control systems, accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theories of power, control, vulnerability, ambiguity, boundaries

enemies and anathematising alternative viewpoints. By comparison, discourse within care workplaces tends to function in a more constrained way, to keep institutions and systems going; enabling the delivery of services, whilst protecting against internal disruption and external threat. Meanwhile, academic discourse aspires to esoteric goals of theory building and research. It claims to separate a speaker's arguments from social position, personal loyalties, institutional goals and immediate crises. Ideas are said to be judged independently of speaker and context.

The Challenge of Voice

These differences in function produce discourses of very different character. The cut and thrust of everyday discourse is unblushingly ideological and coercive, as people struggle for position. Skirmishes arise spontaneously and there are no referees. Participants respond opportunistically to the flow of discourse around them, scoring points where they can. By comparison, discourse in care settings is more controlled. Professional relationships between carers and clients, rules of confidentiality, time pressures and the requirements of public image, all impose constraints on what is talked about, when and how. Meanwhile academic discourse is governed by rules of evidence-based logical analysis and structured debate. Instead of responding to immediate pressures of daily action, participants address themselves to measured, reflective written exchanges. Thus, students have to learn very unfamiliar strategies and skills in order to participate effectively. They also have to develop a very different 'voice'. The voice used in everyday discourse is urgent, personal, emotive and tribal; in professional discourses it tends to be brisk, assertive, businesslike and institutional; whilst in academic discourse it is unhurried, speculative, analytical and uncommitted (Table II). These are, of course, oversimplified characterisations. Academic discourse clearly has its tribal and institutional aspects (Becher &

TABLE II. Nature of discourse community and discourse

	Everyday discourses	Discourses of care practice	Academic discourses on care
Mode	Tribal	Institutional/functional	Rational/analytical
Key goals/functions	Reproduction of the social order: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at Public level, e.g. media discourses • at 'local' level, e.g. family, work-place, community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of services • Reproduction of institutions of care delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis/criticism • Theory building/research • Reproduction of the academy
Character of discourse	Ideological/coercive/opportunistic	Bureaucratic/hierarchical/pragmatic presentational	Literate/textual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literal meanings • Logical analysis
'Voice'	Personal	Institutional	Objective/analytical

Trowler, 2001). Nevertheless, the broad differences sketched give rise to discursive experiences of distinctly different character.

Voice requires a sense of one's identity within the discourse community. For students with little experience in academic communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice through which to 'speak' the discourse, whether in writing or in class, can be long and difficult. Yet, until they do, their grades suffer, since their progress can only be registered through speaking the discourse. Support in establishing voice is a vital component of courses for students from diverse backgrounds. (For further discussion of voice see, e.g. Clark & Ivanic, 1997.)

The Challenge of Debate

Another hurdle is the concept of debate. Within everyday discourse, views are presented as 'common sense'. The implication is that, if you are 'one of us', you will accept the prevailing view. It is a populist order in which a successful comedian's views carry as much weight as a leading researcher's. Authority comes from status as a tribal figure with whom people are happy to identify, rather than from extensive knowledge. As an ordinary member of the community you simply align yourself with leading figures and positions, and speak in ways that reflect popular debate. If talk in the post office queue turns to a scandal over abuse within a care home, you express disgust and support tough action. Were you to note that abuse is a highly ambiguous issue and that effects of intervention are often questionable, you would sound evasive and resistant to natural justice. Listeners would feel uncomfortable. In everyday discourse, people do not want to hear your arguments, they want to know whose side you are on. Alternative views are not systematically refuted, but denigrated by casting aspersions on those who hold them. 'Debate' within the tribe is treated as a crisis of authority.

TABLE III. Orientation to questioning and debate

	Everyday discourses	Discourses of care practice	Academic discourses on care
Attitude to the 'taken-for-granted'	Pressure to see things as 'obvious'/'normal'/'natural'—because they are communally accepted	Pressure to see things as 'obvious'/'normal'/'natural'—because established institutionally: • 'Play your role properly and hold the views that go with it.'	Nothing taken for granted: • All must be <i>questioned</i> : deconstruction of the 'obvious'/'normal'/'natural' • All views <i>justified</i> : by argument and evidence
Attitude to debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume agreement with listener (i.e. no need for debate) • Denigrate other views and their holders • Debate = crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational agreement is required • Debate permitted only under controlled conditions with 'proper' authority in charge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate is essential • Disagreement welcomed/required

Similarly, within occupational discourses, workers are expected to accept dominant views as obvious and right, because they correspond to the way the employing institution does business. To play their roles properly as care workers, they must express the values and policies the institution espouses. Any debate is expected to take place with the proper authorities in charge.

In stark contrast, students find that nothing in academic discourse is to be taken for granted. Everything must be questioned, particularly that which seems normal and natural. Debate is regarded as the lifeblood of the community. All views must be justified by argument and evidence. An essay which presents only one view and no criticism does not get a good mark. Switching nimbly between views is taken as a sign, not of untrustworthiness, but of breadth of understanding (Table III)

The Challenge of the Role of Novice Academic

Academic novices have a more demanding role than most. They cannot simply listen, absorb and imitate. They need to develop *identities* as members of the chosen knowledge community, so that they 'think' and 'speak' its discourse.

This requires them to have the courage to venture their own thoughts in speech and writing within the community. They cannot simply 'dip in' to debates [surface learning (Marton *et al.*, 1997)], they must learn to use the discourse to make meaning of their own (deep learning). Through generative participation students internalise the underlying goals towards which discourse within the community is directed, learn to value questioning and debate, and pick up the appropriate discursive style. Out of all this a workable identity gradually forms.

However, for some students the process is quite threatening. For example, one section of K100 explores the issues at stake in developing policies to prevent abuse

TABLE IV. Roles within discourse communities

	Everyday discourses	Discourses of care practice	Academic discourses on care
Leading roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion leaders in public positions • TV/newspaper pundits • Comedians, DJs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional leaders • Policy bodies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established writers, e.g. Townsend, Goffman, etc.
Roles of ordinary members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve discursive identity by aligning with established positions • Reproduce core tenets of ideology (i.e. children) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toe the party line • Use the discourse to reproduce institutional processes/functions (i.e. junior/unqualified staff) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in debates —in journals —at conferences —informally
Roles of novices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hear/internalise • Don't participate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absorb, accept, obey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i.e. students) • Read/listen/understand • Speak in class/ write essays/criticise

within care services (K100 Course Team, 1998b). However, some students in basic grade care posts seem, in their essays, to be unable to go beyond describing and advocating the policies of their own institution. Academic discourse assumes that it is perfectly easy to adopt all kinds of postures for the purposes of argument, but these students have work roles which require consistent commitment to dominant views and values. Here shifts in orientation, would signal unreliability, or doubtful authenticity. To be asked in academic discourse to adopt a worldview that embraces new ideas and values is more than an intellectual challenge; it sets up conflicts with the roles through which the student accomplishes daily life.

Other K100 students experience a different kind of difficulty with the role of novice. 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 (Table IV).

Straddling Discursive Worlds

Students continue to live and work in the everyday and professional worlds, so they must learn to accommodate to switching between discursive worlds. They must learn to exchange discursive identities, without feeling disloyal, or shallow; recognising the value of discontinuities of meaning and identity in a world of multiple knowledge communities. Higher education, which in the past has assumed that students came from backgrounds such that the gaps between discursive worlds

would not be large, must in the new era of diversity be much more supportive of students as they accommodate to social and intellectual discontinuities.

Teaching in the Context of Diversity

How, then, can teachers construct discursive environments that allow students to participate at a variety of levels? How can they support and assess students in ways that recognise the legitimacy of progress at different levels?

An Appropriate Discursive Environment

An environment with multiple voices. In traditional HE courses, students frequently experienced exposure to a single, continuous, authoritative voice presenting a controlled, polished account. Here, the only sense of a knowledge community is of an elite of supremely confident experts. Where is the space for the humble novice to participate? How could students, used to the rough and tumble of tribal and professional discourse, aspire to membership of this austere community?

If students are to become ‘participants’ in knowledge there must be dialogues with which they feel they can comfortably engage. The K100 course opens with a poem by a care recipient, followed by a brief introductory discussion interspersed with collages of photographs (K100 Course Team, 1998c). Then there is a case study dramatised on audio-cassette, followed by debate interspersed with newspaper headlines, research findings, first-hand accounts from carers and care recipients, tables of statistics, further case studies, quotations from official guidelines, diagrams and more. Thus, students engage with snatches of discourse at a variety of levels, from domestic and media discourses, through discourses of care practice, to the discourses of research and theory. They are exposed to a bustling community of many voices and different ways of knowing; a community they can immediately engage with (Northedge, 2002).

This is not simply a matter of presenting students with a variety of source material to respond to as they will. The voices and words inserted into this discursive space are carefully selected. They reflect the membership, norms and agendas of the relevant knowledge community. Nor are students simply left to wander haphazardly; the voices are embedded in a structured debate, so that students can enter into the positions represented by each and begin to internalise the nature of the debates within the community.

An appropriate target knowledge community. Which knowledge community is the appropriate ‘target’ for your course? With a diverse student body, it is particularly important to be clear about this. Traditionally, it was taken for granted that the academic discipline itself, with its community of researchers and scholars, was the knowledge community that students were learning to participate in. The most successful students would eventually join the community and the rest would benefit somehow by coming along for the ride. This assumption remained unchallenged even in vocational courses, where students clearly had no intention of becoming

members of academic knowledge communities. For example, a course for carers might use specialist lecturers, from a variety of disciplines such as medicine, law, sociology, psychology, economics or management, on the assumption that their knowledge could be packaged as free-standing chunks and that each lecturer would convey to students suitable brief extracts from this knowledge. Clearly, it is impossible for students to develop the discursive skills, voices and identities to become participants in such a wide range of discourses, and certainly not through such brief exposure to them. Consequently, they could never be more than ‘listeners-in’: never truly ‘participants’ in knowledge. Students were thereby condemned to incomprehension, rote-learning and a sense of inadequacy.

By contrast, the K100 designers assumed that students were aiming to become participants in the knowledge community of *care practitioners*. Thus, the set reading was selected from discourses within that community. When, say, sociological ideas were needed they were not presented through extracts from mainstream sociological discourse, but from writings by sociologists within care discourses. When students were set to using these ideas, the tasks were deliberately contextualised within care settings. Some K100 students may choose to become participants in academic sociological, psychological or legal discourse, but for that they will need to take courses in those disciplines. While studying K100, most students require a single, well-defined target knowledge community, and plenty of time and support for learning to participate in it.

Intermediate levels of discourse. Most students enter a course unprepared for direct exposure to mainstream specialist discourse. One of the primary functions of education is to construct intermediate levels of discourse, which model key aspects of target discourses, but allow relatively unskilled participation. In K100 a ‘teaching discourse’ is constructed around short extracts from various levels of ongoing care discourse, giving students sufficient support to engage with them. Thus, the course represents an intermediate discursive forum, constructed on the periphery of the care community and bridging to everyday discourse. Here, students can build up skills of participating, in preparation for moving into more specialised discourse.

A sustained discursive environment. If a course is to present a specially constructed intermediate discourse, care is required in sustaining it. Students need a coherent and consistent environment in which to practice reading, listening, thinking, speaking and writing. Teachers easily forget, for example, that when they set students to read a journal article, or a chapter from a mainstream text, they are sending them outside the intermediate discourse. Many students will find their progress comes to an abrupt halt, unless they are given some preparatory ‘framing’ to locate the argument of the mainstream text within the intermediate discursive environment.

Multiple Levels of Participation

Because knowledge communities are complex and specialist discourses difficult to

penetrate, students need opportunities to participate at a variety of levels, as they learn how the discourse works.

Vicarious participation. Students participate in the specialist discourse even as they read and listen, simply through the effort of sharing in the meaning projected by the author or speaker. Indeed, vicarious participation is vital, as it enables students to pick up, from experienced discourse members, how the discourse works; how meanings are framed within it. To make this vicarious participation more active and less dependent on the author/speaker, it is helpful to build in case studies. Students can then construct the cases in their own minds, compare them with cases from their own experience, pose their own questions and construct their own answers. Students also take a more active role if they are encouraged to take notes, especially if they work on tidying up and structuring their notes. Through their notes they practise discoursing with themselves and thereby develop the meaning shared with the author/speaker.

Generative participation. However, to be able to use the discourse effectively, students need to learn how to take over responsibility for framing shared meaning. They need to practice projecting meaning to others within the knowledge community. One significant opportunity is classroom group discussion, but classroom discussion can easily be pitched too low, so that it remains rooted within everyday discourse and students make no progress towards the target discourse. Alternatively, it can be pitched too high, so that few can genuinely participate, even vicariously. Breaking into small groups can be helpful in allowing students to practice generating specialist discourse with each other, in a rough-and-ready form, before convening in the larger group where the tutor can support them in framing the discourse more ‘convergently’. Mercer (1995) proposes the role of teacher as ‘discourse guide’.

On the other hand, because academic communities are ‘textual’, the most significant opportunity for generative participation is through writing. Frequent short writing tasks enable students to use the specialist discourse to produce their own meanings. The first assignment of K100, for example, comes about 2 hours into the course. It asks students to write and send to their tutor a short piece about the work of a carer they know personally, applying criteria they have just been reading about. However, without replies from a ‘listener’, writing assignments does not give students experience of ‘participation’ in sharing meaning. Consequently, their skills will not advance. 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. This commentary should aim to develop the student’s efforts at making meaning within the specialist discourse, rather than simply pointing to what is mistaken or missing.

Appropriate Assessment

If a diverse cohort of students is engaging with the course at a variety of levels, each

according to their own development, the work they produce will inevitably vary quite widely. The assessment system must reflect this. The teacher must be able to take account of where the student is starting from, and be tolerant of 'variant' understanding, provided there are clear signs of constructive engagement with the specialist discourse. It is primarily through this engagement that students learn, rather than through being corrected or marked down for failing to reproduce the discourse accurately. This does not mean ignoring weak, divergent usage of the discourse, but rather responding in ways that model more acceptable usage. Nor does it mean abandoning standards. It means focusing very clearly on what constitutes intelligent, creative use of the discourse for students who are working their way in from outside. Students need a realistic and fair reward for their progress. The ideal outcome of a course is that every student learns as much as he or she is capable of learning. Any assessment practice that contributes to such an outcome by encouraging students towards more effective participation is valid.

Conclusion

If HE is to offer genuine opportunities to diverse student audiences, we cannot persist with models of teaching as 'knowledge transmission', nor rely on unfocused student-centred approaches that leave the students floundering within everyday discourse. We need to recognise that access to knowledge is gained through participating in knowledge communities, and that participation presents both intellectual and social challenges to newcomers. Consequently, students need teachers who can provide opportunities for supported participation in the relevant knowledge community. Students need practice at participating both vicariously, as listeners and readers, and generatively, as speakers and writers, so that they can develop identities as members of the knowledge community and move from peripheral forums to more active, competent engagement with the community's central debates. Since knowledge communities always encompass a wide range of members participating at different levels, students from diverse backgrounds and levels of experience can very effectively participate alongside each other, provided that the educational programme is designed and the teaching delivered with this in view.

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