From belonging to being: Engaging with 'contexts of difference'

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Abstract

This paper seeks to unveil the situated struggle that students experience in comprehending the often tacit rules that govern academic practices in order to engage fully with their academic studies and develop a sense of belonging. I present a critique of the prevailing conception of student belonging, which I suggest does not effectively consider the diversity of contemporary university cohorts due to favouring social groups traditionally dominating the student body. Non-traditional students, especially those from contexts distant from Western higher education, can often struggle with developing confidence and conversance with critical thinking – a central practice of academia – which negatively impacts their experiences of belonging. My research with master's students in three Scottish universities shows that dialogic active pedagogy can be a means for establishing belonging while also supporting some students' development and demonstration of critical being across multiple domains and to transformatory levels. Such empowering participatory pedagogy, captured in the finding of 'contexts of difference', can potentially provide the means for students to adapt and establish belonging within the culture, context and subject of their learning while also enabling the development of criticality, to the highest levels, amongst some students.

Practitioner Notes

1. Adopting an academic literacies lens, practitioners should critically reflect upon which terms, concepts or practices are expected of students in their discipline, yet largely remain implicit. They should ensure these are explicitly discussed and defined with students.
2. A dialogic approach to pedagogy which promotes interaction and meaningful relationships between students and teachers as partners in learning is most conducive to generating student belonging and facilitating learners' criticality development.
3. Embracing 'contexts of difference' when teaching, which encapsulate dialogue, differing perspectives and diversity, would help provide meaningful and formative intercultural learning by offering students opportunities to develop criticality through engagement with diverse peers.
4. Relational pedagogy presents a means through which a dialogic, participatory approach that embraces contexts of difference can help support student belonging and, later, development of critical being.

Keywords

belonging, critical being, criticality, difference, dialogue

Introduction

In this paper I will argue that rather than a uniform notion of belonging that often acts as an umbrella term to describe and encapsulate the divergent experiences of increasingly diverse university cohorts (Read, et al., 2003; Winstone & Hulme, 2019; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Healey & Stroman, 2021), it would be more meaningful to attend to students as they are, considering their own background, knowledge, experiences and the specific struggles they face, recognising that students and their individuality (i.e. their *being*) matter, which our pedagogies should recognise and embrace (Gravett et al., 2021). Reporting findings from research with master's students at three Scottish universities, I contend that considering the development of students' critical being as an educational aim which embraces relational pedagogies would be more conducive to developing students' sense of belonging to university as a precursor to their successful study and development. A relational approach which recognises individual students for what and who they are and embraces their knowledge, backgrounds and experiences is arguably more inclusive in helping students integrate into their programme, community of learning and university, and develop their belonging, in doing so providing a pathway to their development as critical beings who may act upon the world rather than being subject to it (Barnett, 1997).

Student Demographics: Uniformity to Diversity

There has been a marked change in the student demographic in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) over the last 50 years, a previously exclusive system that was the preserve of elite sections of society with largely homogenous cohorts has now been transformed to become characterised by student diversity and heterogeneity due to a massification of participation in university study (Barnett, 1997; Read et al., 2003; Haggis, 2006). Specific progressive developments at a policy level, notably the Robbins (1963) and Dearing Reports (1997), were fundamental in encouraging this expansion of the traditionally homogenic student body. Calling for the growth of HE with places made available "to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment" (Robbins, 1963, p. 8), this helped extend access to university for those previously excluded or who were otherwise viewed as non-traditional students, including female students, mature and working-class students, those from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities; quite a different cohort to the traditional "dominant white, able-bodied, male and middle class" students who characterised HE to that point (Hinton-Smith, 2012 cited in Danvers, 2016, p. 19). Since these milestones expanding UK HE provision, additional significant expansion of student participation and further diversity of student cohorts has taken place through internationalisation which has seen large increases in the recruitment of international students. Such increase in international student enrolment is most visible in postgraduate study where the majority of postgraduate taught students in the UK are international students (HESA, 2022). Given these significant developments in university participation and the increase of students and their backgrounds, student cohorts can be seen as fundamentally altered in their constituency and character from previous generations with difference characterised "across a number of dimensions, namely previous education, personal disposition, current circumstances and cultural heritage" (Thomas & May, 2010, p. 4).

Given this multiplicity in student cohorts and with the varying backgrounds and experience of students educationally, a documented area of struggle exists in relation to academic practices such as critical thinking and academic writing brought by a mass HE system comprising "linguistic,

social and cultural diversity" (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p. 7) where non-traditional and international students are addended to the traditional cohorts of UK HE with little real change to traditional learning and teaching practices in the academy, and the unveiling of assumed, expected and tacit practices (Bennett Moore et al., 2003; Maton, 2008; 2014). Significantly, Johnston et al. (2011) reporting findings from a 3-year study of student criticality development point out that due to varying levels of social and cultural capital students do not all possess the knowledge and intellectual resources they are often assumed to due to the diverse, massified student corpus of contemporary UK HE and their varying experiences, backgrounds and related social and cultural capital (Graham, 2022). Some students, therefore, due to their background and previous educational experience have differing levels of resources, knowledge and cultural capital, and may resultantly not fit within the institutional habitus of the university (see Thomas, 2002 and Maton, 2008).

By implication, this line of argument related to cultural capital and habitus suggests a discrepancy/inequity exists whereby those students more characteristic of traditional university cohorts possess a certain level of cultural capital and therefore habitus which eases their transition and participation in university. In contrast, non-traditional students, such as international students as well as mature students, working-class students, and those from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities, can be seen to be in deficit where they may not possess the same cultural capital, intellectual and personal resources, and thus habitus. This becomes a significant issue in UK HE where the diversity of the student body is intensified by an increasing growth of international student numbers, adding to students' varying level of resources and their ability to develop these further. In relation to critical thinking specifically, differences related to culture are evident within the literature. Although critical thinking is a core concept of the academy in relation to knowledge (Barnett, 1997), it is not the preserve of Western modes of thought even though it is largely influenced by scholars from the West (US, UK and Central Europe). Paton (2011), Bali (2015), Sigurdsson (2015) and Chirgwin and Huijser (2015) have argued convincingly that in Eastern (Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East) and indigenous societies (e.g. Australia) respectively, there exist equivalents to critical thinking in terms of the intellectual and cognitive skills valued and exercised in those cultures. Despite this, some authors such as Atkinson (1997) retain a cultural bias towards critical thinking as culturally specific and pertaining to a Western intellectual tradition and skill "not valued in Confucian cultures" (Floyd, 2011, p. 209).

To Belong or To Be?

Alongside the increase in student enrolment and diversity is a developing literature exploring the frequently cited problems associated with international students' learning in western contexts, predominantly Asian students, and their challenges developing and demonstrating critical thinking (Bennett Moore, et al., 2003; Huang, 2008; Tian and Low, 2011; Durkin, 2011; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015; Shaheen, 2016; Hammersley-Fletcher & Hanley 2016; Zhang, 2020) - an essential practice of Western and UK higher education. Master's study is largely equated with a focus on advanced knowledge and skills development where criticality is an omnipresent feature, whether in relation to divergent disciplinary perspectives, self-reflection, or in the review, selection, application and justification of research methodologies (QAA, 2020). In short, critical thinking is a defining characteristic of master's study. Compared to undergraduate courses, students are more central to their own learning and that of their peers in master's study. Moreover, in UK HE pedagogies tend to centre on active, dialogic learning where language is salient within key

methods of learning centred around workshop-style teaching featuring discussion, and assessments dominated by writing (Bennett Moore, et al., 2003; O'Donnell, et al., 2009). Hence a largely constructivist pedagogical approach is favoured in the UK where active learning processes are valued over passive forms of learning seen in other contexts (Shaheen, 2016), like China (Dong, 2015).

Before I discuss my research findings which elaborate upon such challenges amongst a diverse cohort of master's students, I provide a brief overview of an alternative approach to normative, uniform notions of belonging which I suggest may better support students' adaptation to academic practices of the university, and support their higher learning and development as individuals. Adopting a more nuanced approach to pedagogy and teaching practice within our contemporary internationalised, massified higher education, centred around notions of relational being (Gergen, 2009) that accepts learners for who and what they are recognises and embraces the different experiences, knowledge and values they bring to the university rather than seeking to make disparate individuals belong to a larger homogenous whole potentially reflective of dominant groups in society (Thomas, 2002).

Relational being can be considered in contrast to bounded being which exemplifies the individualism behind much of education (Aspelin, 2011). Instead, relational being acknowledges that "we exist in a world of co-constitution" where we are constantly immersed in and "always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone" (Gergen, 2009, p. xv). Whilst this sentiment also relates to core notions of intercultural learning (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2003), internationalisation of the curriculum (Leask, 2015) and some key graduate attributes (Barrie, 2004), relational being in turn also links to relational pedagogy which, Aspelin (2011, p. 10) states:

> […] is a theoretical discourse based on the notion of relationship as the basic unit of education. It presupposes that the human being is constituted in and through a relational process. Teachers and students are assumed to be constantly participating in different kinds of relational activity.

To these notions of relational being and pedagogy (and care) (Bovill, 2020), I append Barnett's critical being as a complementary theoretical framework which sees individuals in relation to knowledge, themselves, others and the world with a central focus on the development of criticality within and across these domains with the ambition of developing critical persons (Barnett, 1997). Critical persons, as Barnett proposes, "are more than just thinkers. They are able to critically engage with the world and with themselves, as well as with knowledge" (1997, p. 1). Embracing criticality, a broader, more progressive concept than critical thinking (see Graham, 2022, p. 40), Dunne explains the distinctions of criticality as critical being's underpinning position, which ostensibly converges with core aspects of relational being:

> […] criticality repositions the totality of the self – that is, the human being at the center of education, life and the learning experience. It begins with personology – in other words, what it means to be human – a unique being that is habitually in a context-specific situation, a sentient being continuously engaged in trying to critically understand their lived qualia experiences, a being that is always striving for something, a being whose existence elicits a marked disease, an uneasiness about who they are and what they should do. (2015, p. 93)

I propose that a relational pedagogy with the supported development of critical being as an educational aim, whereby a divergent pedagogical approach is adopted which accepts and celebrates all students as they are as individuals, holds promise in establishing a feeling (and lived reality) amongst diverse students that they are included, valued and matter within UK HE instead of being viewed as a "marginalised tribe" (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015), as they often are.

Academic Literacies

The academic literacies field challenges the deficit view taken towards students in terms of their abilities and skills in writing and knowledge of the academic norms, conventions and practice that relate to this, and learning in HE more generally (Haggis, 2006). Academic literacies "constitutes a specific epistemology, that of literacy as social practice, and ideology, that of transformation" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 7); it recognises the need for the study of language and literacy within a paradigm shift towards a universalist HE system founded on a widening access agenda proceeded by an internationalisation focus, which resultantly brings a "linguistic, social and cultural diversity" (*ibid*, p. 7) to the HE sector. This diversity via a massified system of HE, like that in the UK and contrary to many institutional policies and statements, is perceived as problematic when related to HE's "communicative practices" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 8). This is specifically related to academia traditionally favouring a uniformity of language practices reflective of the homogenous cohorts of an elite system that acculturated students into such literacies and practices through their formal education, which itself is often tied to their social class and family background (Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2001; Thomas, 2015) where cultural capital, intellectual and personal resources may be developed. Explaining the traditional and non-traditional student divide, Maton (2008, p. 58) describes how habitus plays out in universities:

> [traditional] middle-class social agents are more likely to consider university education as a 'natural' step, as part of their inheritance. When at university they are also more likely to feel 'at home', for the underlying generating practices within the university field – its unwritten 'rules of the game' – are homologous to their own habituses.

Maton highlights what he terms 'the rules of the game' of university which I consider relate to practices and expectations such as critical thinking and academic literacies, as well as specialist, disciplinary practices of the academy. Linking to socio-cultural elements, non-traditional students – i.e. home students who may be first in their family to attend university and international students from diverse contexts – are less likely to fit, or feel at home, within the prevailing academic culture and customs, and must adapt and assimilate to this in order to succeed, as Read et al. (2003), QAA (2016), Winstone and Hulme (2019) and Zhang (2020) acknowledge. Therefore, traditional students are more like "fish in water" (Maton, 2008, p. 29) and non-traditional students "fish out of water" (Thomas, 2002, p. 431).

Key to academic literacies is the notion that writing and associated practices within HE (from active listening, note-taking in lectures and referencing, to constructing a critical argument in a thesis) are often not made explicit and the academic norms, expected practices and conventions students are expected to develop and adhere to are often tacit with students' knowledge and possession of these competences assumed (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Thus, writing "is seen not as a 'skill', but as a complex, socially-situated set of meaning-making practices" (Gourlay, 2009, p. 182). Academic literacies recognises that not all students now possess the expected competences of university and advocates that contemporary HE should avoid

viewing students such as those transitioning from school, college or other contexts, and often non-traditional and international students, as being in deficit in this regard.

Haggis suggests rather than reviewing difficulties in relation to conventions and practices of academia as problems located within students, that these relate instead to institutions, disciplines and pedagogical interactions whereby "many of the problems experienced by learners are at least partly being caused by the cultural values and assumptions" (2006, p. 533) underpinning various aspects of pedagogy and assessment practice. By unveiling these intricate practices of academic literacy as complex and social, and contextually situated, academic literacies contributes in drawing out the broader, structural issues influencing practice and custom at HE which can inhibit rather than promote students' sense of belonging, and resultant learning. It provides a means through which to view the extremely complex challenges facing many non-traditional students upon entering UK HE where they must conform with academic and disciplinary literacy practices and expectations in order to succeed – even when these may remain implicit, unspoken and one's knowledge and experience in these practices assumed.

Methodology

The data reported here emanate from the findings from my doctoral research project investigating the development of criticality amongst master's students in education, social sciences and health and social care programmes. The findings from this project provided broader insights into the experiences of these students related to their criticality development, but also went beyond this to reveal challenges and complexities many of these student participants faced in being able to effectively engage in the learning and teaching practices expected of them for successful study at master's level. With critical thinking, and more broadly criticality, a central concern of university study (Barnett, 1997; 2021) and of successful graduates (Nicol, 2010), exploring student experiences in this area helped unveil factors related to transition, inclusion and belonging that impeded and facilitated students' belonging and their development of criticality.

Research design

While I only share findings in this paper related to student experiences as described by them at interviews, it is worth noting that these interviews formed a second phase of data collection following administration of a survey from which students could volunteer for interview. Semi-structured interviews, informed by participants' survey responses from a critical thinking questionnaire, were conducted with 18 master's students. These students represented three broad disciplinary areas of education, social sciences and health and social care, and were recruited from three Scottish universities (one ancient, elite, research-focussed university which traditionally recruited homogeneous cohorts and two modern, post-1992 universities, previously constituted as colleges or polytechnics, which focus more on teaching and accommodate broader student cohorts).

Interviews were conducted with these students to gain a qualitative insight into their experiences of master's study with particular reference to their conceptions and development of criticality. Interviews aimed to gather context relevant to each student and how their prior experiences, background and present circumstances impacted upon their studies, their development of criticality while studying, and their likelihood of exercising their criticality within and beyond academic contexts or settings. Interviews also prompted students to consider which methods of teaching or

practices related to their own learning that were most conducive to developing criticality through an in-depth discussion about their master's study.

Student participant profile

The eighteen students interviewed ranged in ages from 22 to 38, and represented 10 different nationalities – American, Canadian, Chinese, British, Finnish, Montenegrin, Russian, Singaporean, Taiwanese and Peruvian. This was a diverse cohort of students with a range of previous academic experiences in their home countries, experiences of study abroad during undergraduate study and professional employment experiences. It is also worth noting that some of the slightly older students benefitted from additional life experiences afforded by their age, such as travel and work abroad and extensive volunteering and employment experience. Further details on the student participants, their demographics and background can be seen in Table 1 (below).

Findings

Results from the thematic analysis of the interviews are selectively discussed here drawing on those themes which are relevant to the focus of the paper. While the emphasis of the interviews was students' critical thinking development, various related factors, as previously outlined, were unearthed through these discussions.

Students were first asked about their preparedness for master's study where interviews began with background information from participants to contextualise their present views and experiences. This was intended to identify personal and intellectual resources (Bailin et al., 1999) students possessed on entry to their master's study, following Johnston et al.'s (2011) finding related to their significance for the criticality development of undergraduates. This first theme, preparedness for master's study, revealed discrepancies amongst the sample which appeared associated with students' background, nationality and previous educational experience. The second theme, participatory pedagogy, captured students' overwhelming preference for active pedagogies within the teaching they experienced which aided their development of critical thinking and associated academic literacies, while the third theme, cultural distance, focused on how the divergent educational experiences and backgrounds of the students created a barrier for those more distant from the academic culture of UK HE. Elaborating and building upon the three previous themes, the fourth theme, developing via dialogue, encapsulated students' particular inclination for dialogic methods of teaching and learning as assisting their criticality development and broader learning, as noted by all students interviewed. The final theme, rules of the game, described a seminal finding where students revealed how certain aspects of learning and assessment worked to actively advantage or detriment students relative to their conversance and experience with certain academic literacies or practices, the fundamental one being critical thinking.

Table 1

Student Interviewee Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Course	Nationality	Work experience
Chih (M)	29	Education	Taiwanese	Educational materials business
Sally (F)	27	Education/Social Sciences	Canadian	High school teacher
Chynna (F)	27	Education	Singaporean	N/A
Polly (F)	23	Social Science	American	Political public relations
Lin (F)	27	Educational	Chinese	No. Parental leave
Amy (F)	25	Midwifery	British	Policy administration - NHS
Susie (F)	23	Midwifery	British	Briefly in oil and gas industry
Chun (F)	22	Education	Chinese	Half year in a high school
Ying (F)	23	Education	Chinese	Teaching assistant in private English language school
Orla (F)	28	Education	British	Primary school teacher – full-time
Katy (F)	27	Education	British	Primary school teacher – full time
Genji (F)	25	Education	Chinese	Editor of Manga Comic
Aria (F)	29	Ed/Social Sciences	Peruvian	Peruvian ministry of education
Sadie (F)	25	Ed/Social Sciences	American	N/A
Andre (M)	25	Education	Russian	IT and volunteered as tutor
Karina (F)	27	Social Sciences	Montenegrin	Social policy in Montenegro.
Peko (M)	25	Social Sciences	Finnish	N/A
Avery (F)	38	Education	American	Multiple roles and experience

Preparedness for master's study

Asked about their own preparedness for master's study, students' responses varied relative to the coherence of their previous context of study with that of their chosen postgraduate study. Most

students from Western contexts felt more prepared than their colleagues from Eastern settings; for example, Polly explained her own preparedness for master's study in the UK:

> *To be completely honest I think I'm over prepared for it...but I don't think, I just think that my undergrad programme was very strong, and I learned a lot from that.* (line.50)

However, students from more divergent contexts felt less prepared, with some concerns language related and others more profound. Aria and Karina had concerns over language, especially writing in English. Lin also shared language concerns prior to her master's study in the UK, taking three attempts at the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test (British Council, 2021) to achieve the 6.5 score required for her degree. Chun was also nervous ahead of her master's due to her English abilities, particularly reading and writing, taking four attempts to achieve the required IELTS score. This then linked into a more profound concern highlighted by some students about their preparedness and the need to think critically. For example, Andre described his undergraduate study as being connected with an "Eastern notion of education" (line. 38) where knowledge was not questioned. Andre suggested his preparedness and first steps in criticality came from volunteering, travelling and conversing with people "from quite some different cultural, socio-economic backgrounds" (line. 66). Due to this, the master's presented a challenge to him in adapting and having to challenge his beliefs and himself.

Further related to undergraduate study, an emergent sub-theme was students' previous mode of learning and teaching, with an East/West divide apparent. UK, North and South American and European students largely noted their experience of active, inquiry-based learning which encouraged them to question, debate and discuss knowledge and theories. However, students from Eastern contexts including Eastern Europe, Russia and Asian countries reported experiencing rote-learning focussed on their recall and comprehension, with learning being exam oriented, arguably leaving these students less prepared for progression to master's study in the UK. Lin shared a similar experience in her undergraduate degree, explaining:

> *The teacher don't [sic] ask us to write some essays to express our own ideas, just memorise the content of the class and if you can get most of the content right you will get a higher score.* (line. 26)

Chun echoed this, stating her undergraduate education lacked critical thinking which she thought was emblematic of "most Chinese students" (line. 52) who are unable to challenge authoritative knowledge due to having been conditioned to think there is "only one answer for a question" (line. 54), along with the need to memorise presented knowledge. Chun then claimed, "this learning habit affects me a lot" (line. 82).

Participatory pedagogy

All students interviewed expressed a preference for tutorials and seminars over lectures. Students favoured tutorials firstly, and most notably, due to the opportunity they provided for discussion with their peers. Students also cited being presented with alternative viewpoints within tutorials/seminars, both by the experiences and views of their peers and the topic of learning or theories discussed therein. A third reason the interviewees preferred seminars/tutorials was the opportunity to practise and discuss content from their course reading and lectures whilst also being able to ask staff questions to clarify their understanding. Lectures were viewed negatively by

students when asked about their preference for teaching and learning activities that supported their development.

Tutorials were also favoured due to the small class sizes which allowed students' own contribution as well as a space to question themselves and what was taught, and to seek clarity. Genji explained her preference for tutorials:

> *Because you can probably answer some of the questions confusing me for a while and even sometimes one word or just a single sentence* [from the tutor] *and there is a moment of, 'Oh, wow, here's what I've been searching for'.* (line. 146)

Other students shared similar concerns, Peko details his view:

> *I sometimes struggle following along in lectures if it just repeats the readings you're told to do beforehand especially…I'd say lecturers often are more…they say you need to use these* [critical thinking skills] *and they remind you, if you don't know how to do it, to look it up more or less* [laughs]. (line. 80)

However, while some students noted that critical thinking was explained and modelled in tutorials, which was facilitative to their criticality development, others spoke of instances where critical thinking was cited by staff but neither explained or modelled to students, leaving those less familiar with the term or concept at a loss. Lin's comprehension and development of criticality, and resultant effective engagement within her master's learning and with her peers, was impacted by this:

> *It stops me when every people around you* [sic] *are saying that you must be critical thinking, but no-one tells you how to do it, it stops me.* (line. 185)

On the same course, Ying echoes this:

> *…the tutor advise us* [sic] *to write something critically but she didn't mention more about critical thinking.* (line. 75)

After experiencing similar difficulties negotiating his understanding of an elusive but much cited concept of critical thinking, Andre, similar to peers from Western contexts, revealed a connection between critical thinking and epistemological beliefs. He mentioned one course:

> [where] *there are also a lot of theories, like social and sociocultural theory and these I won't say they explicit* [sic] *the fact that you should take this for granted or not, like it's up to you but we discuss it a lot and we see the applicability, so maybe it's implicitly being stated, but for some people they might not...so I find the explicit more helpful, especially for those who come from backgrounds like me, like you know, I was not like taught how to be critical.* (line. 305)

Andre's statement suggests an association between epistemological beliefs or development and critical thinking, as Baxter-Magolda (1996) identifies. This reveals an implicit but important connection which may adversely impact students, such as those from Eastern contexts who previously experienced didactic, rote learning, from being effectively able to participate in the core academic practices of their master's study. Without an understanding or experience of the need to think critically in relation to knowledge, to see it as conditional and to develop competency in this

regard, they may experience challenges in being able to belong to their community of learners. For example, unable to recall any focus on critical thinking or mention of this in previous study, Andre observed other students in a similar position:

> *...one thing I also notice is that a lot of Asian students are also, let's say, kind of experiencing the things that I told about* [sic] *the...in their classes they were not really encouraged to think critically.* (line. 83)

As such, this delayed introduction to criticality could be seen to explain many of the difficulties these students may face in adapting and transitioning to their new academic environment and context, and culture of learning.

Cultural distance

Academic literacies appeared again where students' distance from the "culture of learning" (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) of UK HE was seen to hinder their development. As discussed above, the differing educational experiences of interviewees and their peers from different cultures were in places inhibitive, as Polly noted when suggesting international peers "haven't learned such precise rules [of writing]" (line. 52) as her. Other North American and European students noted they had encountered stylistic differences in writing and expected structural and bibliographical practices, though this did not significantly impact their learning or criticality.

Several international students reported a lack of familiarity, knowledge and experience of critical thinking as a concept and expected practice, skill and ability within HE. Genji stated shock at the critical thinking focus and expectation in master's study and her introduction to this, having "never heard of it" previously.

> *I never expected that the first thing I encountered in the university would be the terminology of critical thinking...I think it's probably quite important for the Western, maybe higher education system.* (line. 94)

Another Chinese student, Chynna, labelled her previous educational experiences and learning in a derogatory way as characterising "Asian education" (line. 321), where the focus was on knowledge reproduction, memorisation, didactic teaching and the need for a correct answer. Andre also spoke of a perceived cultural or regional difference in educational approaches which he termed "the Western model" ahead of his master's, emphasising the "huge comparison between what I expected to be here and what I had back in Russia" (line. 32).

This distance between "cultures of learning" (Jin & Cortazzi, 2008) and the expectations of master's study in the UK was a "radical shift" for some students who attested to their struggle adapting to this change in learning style which emphasised active, collaborative and often group-based learning. Chun explained the novelty of collaborative learning:

> *...when I was in China, I don't have many group study, usually we focus on our individual tasks and maybe we will talk about the work but it's not like the group study in Glasgow....in the tutorial asks* [sic] *us into five or six groups and we discuss and answer the questions together...I think it's the first time for me to have such a tutorial, such a class.* (line. 44)

Additionally, Lin highlighted that in group discussions "most of the Chinese students are quiet" (line. 153) while UK/US students talked and shared ideas. Both Lin's international peers and UK-based students shared this experience of Asian students' reluctance to speak, contribute and share their ideas in group discussion settings, as Chun explained above. Lack of experience, language, and relatedly, confidence are likely factors here. However, an interesting perception amongst some Asian respondents on this issue suggested deeper sociocultural factors may be at play (see Durkin, 2011). This highlighted a potential developmental tension between these students in assimilating to the target or foreign culture and academic context whilst maintaining their national, cultural identity and social harmony.

Such differences in experience and context-dependent expectations illuminate the cultural distance academic practice can present, creating an additional barrier for some international students in relation to their learning and establishing a sense of belonging within the community of students and their programme.

Development via dialogue

Following students' predominant preference for active, participatory pedagogy for their learning, dialogue became the key means through which students could overcome the barriers to learning detailed above. Students spoke of discussion allowing them to:

- hear the views of others,
- share and exchange ideas,
- learn from peers' experiences, knowledge and contexts,
- provide an opportunity to challenge their own views/opinions,
- practise and discuss learning from lectures and readings, and
- critically discuss issues and alternative perspectives in a safe space.

From these elements of dialogue, students spoke of the magnitude of its importance, where, for example, Polly stated this is "conducive to opening doors in your own mind" (line. 179). This "opening of doors" exemplifies the salience of discussion to students across the sample with Chinese students, though more challenged in keeping pace and contributing, finding discussion to be "an eye opener" (Chynna, line. 249) where expectations and confusion could be clarified. Significant to the importance of dialogue was the role of staff, where some were seen to explain and model critical thinking, provide enabling feedback and also used contrasting perspectives within their teaching to exemplify and support students' development of criticality. These accounts featured more strongly amongst the experiences of international students, specifically those from differing academic contexts who struggled to think, read and write critically.

However, not all interviewees shared this experience. Some students were less prepared, familiar with or able to benefit from such group dialogue and participation. This was notable amongst Chinese students who arguably are at greater distance culturally from the UK in previous educational experiences and the related pedagogies of active learning and group discussion or debate (Rear, 2017). This connects with epistemic concerns where these students still perceived the need for a correct answer within an academic context which views knowledge as conditional and fluid.

Rules of the game

> […] *I feel like I have this sort of unfair advantage that I learned the rule book really early and it's not that I'm like...smarter than them but I'm getting better grades because I know what the professors want...it feels a bit like a game actually.*

Polly refers to learning and assessment in HE as a game whereby she has a distinct advantage in being conversant with its rules following her undergraduate study, while peers from differing educational contexts may not share the same experience. What Polly is referring to here are the same 'rules of the game' Maton (2008, p. 58) cites, which he claims are "the underlying principles generating practices with the university field" which are unwritten and are generally internalised "through a protracted process of conditioning" where certain students can then "come to 'read' the future" based on their "on experience of past outcomes".

The rules of the game Polly cites can be seen to mirror those Maton describes as key academic practices literacies and expectations, of university learning, such as thinking and being critical. Polly said that she learned these rules in undergraduate study, which consequently provided her with an advantage over less experienced or knowledgeable peers (generally international students in this context) which was reflected in the differential between their grades. The interview data confirmed such unknowns and misunderstandings amongst some international students related to critical thinking and the accompanying academic literacies of reading, note-taking and writing practices.

While several students struggled to grasp what these rules were in relation to writing and attempted to adapt and conform to them, Polly was able to push the boundaries and operate most effectively within these rules, seeing this reflected in her assessment grades while others suffered. This issue reveals a need for students to conform with academic customs and conventions that are largely intangible, tacit and seldom discussed in class, with students – especially at master's level - expected to have developed this knowledge from previous study. This then leaves students within increasingly diverse cohorts, from disparate backgrounds and contexts and cultures of learning, at a deficit where they must adapt and conform with these elusive practices in order to belong and succeed through engaging effectively within these implicit practices, customs and conventions. While some students did experience explicit modelling of critical thinking and sessions dedicated to critical writing (or thinking), others clearly articulated that they felt this knowledge and competency was largely assumed of them, as identified in related research (Fakunle, et al. 2016; Zhang, 2020). Lin claimed "they [lecturers] assume we know the definition of critical thinking" (line. 179), while Ying, Chun and Chih, and Avery, all described being told to "be critical" or undertake "critical analysis" with Chun recalling that, "no teacher gave us a definition" (line. 126).

One student's particular story clearly documented the challenges faced by international students from China and other countries distant from the contexts of Western or UK higher education. Explaining her preparation for master's study in the UK, Lin said "I didn't take any training classes I learned myself, I teach myself at home and I took three exams to qualify to [IELTS] 6.5" before then attending a pre-master's preparation course at her new institution. Lin documented her struggles with English: "suddenly I need to pick up and to learn the academic phrase right, learn speaking, listening and in China all the students suffer from same difficult task of speaking, every time I was failed on speaking English". Largely confined to her bedroom in rented student accommodation, where reading in English took four times as long as in Mandarin and exhausted her, Lin highlighted another significant barrier to her learning: feeling of a sense of belonging that

related to understanding and comprehending critical thinking and its related academic practices (reading, analysis, writing etc.):

> *The process is slow because you know actually you have a learning experience for your whole academic study experience and suddenly you need to change it, you need to change to another thinking style, so that's why I think most of the foreigner students do better than Asian students.* (line. 55)

The gulf in knowledge, experience and confidence of critical thinking as an academic practice is evident from the gap highlighted between Polly's quote, opening this section, and the quote from Lin above. This dichotomy between certain groups of students was acknowledged by one of Lin's course peers, Orla, a UK student who observed the transition to master's study in the UK as "a very radical shift in a way of learning" (line. 46) for her international peers such as Lin.

The programme leader for the course studied by both Lin and Orla was aware of this distance and the ensuing struggle certain students faced in transitioning to their study in the context of the UK's academic expectations. The programme leader noted this context, the education discipline and course required a "completely different way of thinking" for many international students. He described having to introduce students to critical thinking and give them "permission to do it" and "tell them this is what we do here". While suggesting students have to adapt to the context of their study, he recognised this as "quiet destabilising", stating that for a lot of students:

> [they] *move from an education system from which you are given credit for knowing knowledge, for correctly understanding and reproducing knowledge, to one which there is uncertainty and multiple perspectives.* (line. 35)

I propose that a salient part of this distance from the academic culture and/or context is linked to epistemological positioning and development, in which the pedagogies that students experience influenced how they view knowledge and their position in relation to it. I suggest that, through rote learning, students come to adopt a habit of mind (Bailin, et al., 1999) whereby knowledge is seen as largely positivistic pertaining to finding, identifying or sharing the correct answer. Meanwhile, active, inquiry-based learning could be seen to encourage a more interpretivist habit of mind that views knowledge as challengeable and malleable. The findings of Pu and Evans (2019, p. 60), who investigated critical thinking in the context of Chinese master's students' writing, appear to support this contention:

> […] our analysis revealed that the students' use of CT [critical thinking] skills was not exclusively a demonstration of competence, but was also a consequence of positioning. Each positioning revealed perceived rights and duties about knowledge and was directed by particular goals for personal development.
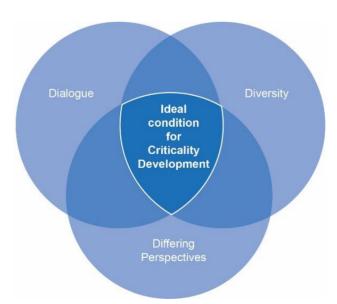
Discussion

Being critical to belong: contexts of difference

Given these documented difficulties of some international students to know and be able engage in the academic practices expected of them, such as being critical and embracing active participatory pedagogic approaches that centre on interaction, I suggest that dialogic learning which allows for the sharing of differing perspectives, experiences and backgrounds amongst a diverse cohort of peers provides a means to alleviate these difficulties.

Of specific significance across all interviewee accounts was an intercultural, international dimension, seen as seminal to negotiating belonging for some and the development of critical being for others. This intercultural dimension consisted of: dialogue, diversity and differing perspectives. I termed these sub-themes which overlapped with one another in an evolving flux within students' accounts and the dimension they form as 'contexts of difference'. Dialogue and differing perspectives were salient within interviews, as was cohort diversity. However, it is the united and evolving nature of each of the subthemes interplaying and interacting with one another in a generative social phenomenon which appeared facilitative of students' engagement in their novel context of learning and criticality development. Key to this live, interactive, tripartite relationship is diversity, diversity of the student corpus within which this phenomenon takes place and comes to life, and within this, I contend, it is the contexts of difference as they interact and engage with one another through dialogue. It is at this point when these three elements interact in equivalence that I believe criticality development is most likely to occur.

Figure 1

Contexts of Difference

Differing perspectives included theories, perspectives and understandings from readings provided by staff, challenge from diverse peers with differing experiences, views and values, as well as challenge from tutors in tutorial discussions. Moreover, adaptation to the UK academic context

and its pedagogy and expectations was for many international students itself a challenge and means for critical development through engaging with a context of difference on a macro scale.

Consequently, I suggest that a relational pedagogy that adopts these means and methods, in embracing contexts of difference, can provide a solution to unveil the tacit practices of HE and include all students in their learning, thereby supporting their feeling of belonging and subsequent development as learners and, potentially, critical persons. In this sense, comprehension and conversance with core academic practices may be seen for some students as a precursor or threshold to belong – through knowledge of the rules of game. As Allen et al. (2021, p. 88) suggest:

> Belonging is facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences involving the social milieu, which dynamically interact with the individual's character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions.

Converging with the argument of Maton (2008) presented earlier, this presents a particular challenge relevant to international and non-traditional students. Moreover, Allen et al. (2021) highlight that struggles to belong "are particularly evident in minorities and other groups that have been historically marginalised by mainstream cultures". In this regard, Western academia can be viewed as a site of mainstream, or dominant, culture that is now being disrupted by the growing diversity of students now present in HE (Read et al., 2003; Thomas, 2015). As Thomas (2002, p. 431) contends "educational institutions favour knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups (e.g. white, middleclass men) to the detriment of other groups", which then negates certain groups of students' experiences of belonging where this relates "to broader, underlying systems in our society that position certain groups, behaviors, and ways of being as superior or as the default along the lines of race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, language, class, indigeneity, or ability" (Healey & Stroman, 2021, p. 2).

Such factors of exclusion or privilege are arguably reinforced or present in HE (and learning and teaching) in its traditional form, specifically as "some educational practice and policies send conspicuous signals that certain students do not belong" (Healey & Stroman, 2021, p. 3). In the context of this research, this could be seen as the expected yet assumed knowledge to know how to think, write and read critically, and cite correctly. Considering such practices and the related skills to practice these, Allen et al.'s (2021, p. 91) integrated framework of belonging encapsulates four components, the first being "competencies for belonging (skills and abilities)". These competencies include skills that allow individuals to relate to others, identify with their cultural background and develop a sense of identity. Allen et al. (2021, p. 92) contend that:

> […] the display and use of skills may be socially reinforced through acceptance and inclusion. In turn, feeling a sense of belonging may also assist in using socially appropriate skills.

Returning to the focus of the paper, such socially appropriate skills and competencies which students are expected to exercise in UK HE can be seen as the ability to think and be critical, and engage in the related practices of academic study, where an impairment or difficulty in exercising these skills can act to exclude students as legitimate learners within their cohort and course.

Conclusion

In challenging the commonly held notions of student belonging as problematic for contemporary higher education, I outlined the significant shift in the demographic of UK HE highlighting the seismic shift from a previously exclusive system to one with near-universal access due to initiatives in widening participation and internationalisation. This emphasised the multiplicity of individuals now constituting the cohorts of UK HE who can experience barriers in their efforts to belong and where academic literacies literature provides a helpful lens to consider the challenges many diverse students now face in seeking to engage and belong within their studies in unfamiliar contexts. Findings from interviews showed students' overwhelming preference for dialogue as the learning and teaching activity facilitating their belonging and development, over passive pedagogies such as lectures. 'Contexts of difference' were identified, comprising dialogue, differing perspectives and diversity, suggesting that where these intersect and coalesce provides ideal conditions to support students' criticality development. I propose that these contexts of difference inherently accommodate the interculturalism seen in contemporary HE and maybe realised through practicing a relational pedagogy where learners are valued for who they are as individuals, where unfamiliar, implied practices and expectations are unveiled and shared. Such an approach promises much for improving belonging and subsequent students' development as critical beings.

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