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Investigating students' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars using a Bourdieuan perspective

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Research Article

Investigating student teachers' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine how Vygotsky's and Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives contributed to the insights I gained about student teachers' perceptions of seminars and my role as a seminar tutor. The paper is based on the findings from a doctoral study into students' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars. Using a constructive grounded theory approach, I interviewed five 2nd year teacher education students and consulted relevant institutional documents. From a Vygotskian perspective, the data highlighted the complexity and dynamic nature of seminars where relationships, pedagogical tools and artefacts played an important meditational role. By highlighting the significance of the wider context, however, Bourdieu's theory of practice and in particular his concept of symbolic violence gave a richer perspective of participants' perspectives of seminars. In particular, by drawing attention to the impact of dominant discourses on individuals' practices, it provided a more nuanced view about the meanings they attached to their seminar experiences, and enabled a deeper reflection about my own practice and values as a tutor/lecturer in higher education.

Introduction

The view of seminars as a place for learning through interaction and dialogue is part of the tradition of higher education in the UK (Fry *et al.*, 2009). Effective seminars may have many

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benefits; they can open students to alternative perspectives, increase tolerance of ambiguity, strengthen engagement, and develop the ability to communicate ideas (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005).

Seminars can be defined as classes where a group of students and a tutor discuss a particular topic (Oxford Dictionary, 1989). However, there are variations in terms of how individual tutors, courses and universities interpret the purposes and practice of seminars. In some cases, they are the main teaching and learning contexts where students are actively involved in leading seminars. In others, they are mainly tutor-led and involve group activities and/or are discussion based (Gunn, 2007).

Seminars can be a challenging learning context. On one level, effective participation assumes that students know how to be and how to learn through dialogue and discussion (Knights, 1995). On another level, it assumes that students are able to manage the social and emotional dimensions that effective seminar participation involves. For instance, the literature on group dynamics highlights how the fear of being wrong or ridiculed by peers can be a powerful deterrent to effective seminar participation (Jacques, 2000; Fry *et al.*, 2009).

My reasons for undertaking a study into students' perspectives of seminars were both professional and personal. Professionally, in my work as lecturer in primary teacher education, I promote the provision of learning environments that enhance dialogue and talk (Mercer and Littleton, 2007). Consequently, the apparent lack of students' engagement in seminars was concerning and at the same time, I felt I had limited insight about how they conceptualised their role in seminars. Additionally, there seemed to be little in the research learning literature that addressed this aspect of student learning.

Personally, I was also inspired by the 'communities of enquiry' approach which provides a simple methodology for promoting enquiry based learning in a collaborative context (Lipman *et al.*, 1980). Indeed, when I used this approach in my teaching, it had a noticeable impact on the seminar learning context. In contrast to other seminars, the students seemed more confident and willing to participate, and by listening to others' perspectives had begun to question and challenge their own views.

Research methodology

The paper is based on a small scale in-depth study of five BA 2nd year teacher education students. As I was interested in their views and perceptions, I used interviews rather than observations. I conducted three in-depth qualitative interviews over a period of a year, and a final brief meeting to share my findings and interpretations with the participants. I also obtained participants' informed consents and ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms throughout the research process. Additionally, I discussed with the participants the potential benefits of taking part in the study in relation to opportunities it offered for in-depth reflection on their learning experiences. To obtain some insights into how seminars are conceptualised at institutional levels I also consulted related documentary evidence such as student staff meeting agendas and module evaluation forms.

Using a grounded theory research strategy enabled a focus on a small number of unique cases to generate complex data and fulfilled the study's pragmatic aim to 'systematise insight' to gain practical understanding (Flick, 2009). The resulting data also enabled me to articulate important questions about my practice and the nature of my 'living educational theory'. According to McNiff and Whitehead's perspective of action research, engaging with our living educational theories is an important starting point for action and reflection (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). Thus, not only does grounded theory provide insights that are student centred, it also provides a useful starting point for action research. Consequently, it is a useful methodology for enquiring into and making informed conclusions about student engagement.

Vygotskian theoretical perspectives

Socio-cultural perspectives are primarily concerned with how social contexts influence and shape the meanings individuals attach to events in the social world. These perspectives are based on Vygotsky's attempt to describe and explain the unique patterns of learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Although his focus was mainly on children's cognitive development and schooling, his underlying ideas about the historical and developmental nature of culture, the social context as precursor to individual learning and development, and the role of tools and signs in mediating human action (Wertsch, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) have made important contributions to understandings about culture and cultural development.

Vygotskian perspective illuminated many aspects of the data. By paying attention to the role and significance of mediating tools in seminars such as teaching approaches and artefacts, I was able to get insights into the kinds of meanings participants attached to their experiences. It seemed that relationships with tutors, between peers and family members were important because of their mediational role. Equally, pedagogic tools and practices also appeared to mediate participants' actions (Vygotsky, 1978). This is illustrated in the following example in which Natalie reflects on a practice that most tutors' might take for granted. The tutor is on a 'walk about' during a group work activity in a seminar.

The walkabout

Natalie: every time she came and stood, we all seemed to go quiet, I don't think it is intentional, you just go oooh!! and you don't realise and then it is hard to go back on track.

Fufy: right, what does it make you feel like when, you might be saying the wrong thing or is it automatic?

Natalie: I think it is just automatic don't think it is the wrong thing kind of thing kind of fear...: I just think you sense that they are coming over, and everyone clams up or the person who is speaking is really conscious of what they are saying and then they are like, and they are like 'um, I am going to start winding down.'

Natalie's reaction and interpretation of the events vividly illustrates how taken for granted practices can be meaningful to students in surprising ways. Similarly, in Daisy's account of the 'ideal seminar' below, the mediational role of seminar tools and practices such as assignments and their potential uses seemed highly meaningful.

The ideal seminar

Daisy: ...oh I do make sense, this links to every thing I said ... it was highly interactive... and we actually got to do the task so we can remember them and then I put that we were given thinking time and it created a bit of suspense... xxxx is so good at it...It is like 'what do you think it is going to happen?' and everyone was like 'oh' and then it is like 'wow' ... and oh my God ... we know how to adapt the task to suit the classroom... and that's what I mean, it is good to be able to apply it.

Fufy: and how does that feel ...coming out of that? how does it feel?

Daisy: in xxxx?... oh it is brilliant, you come out and you think...oh I am going to use that, I am going to use this ...got so many ideas and the assignment for that is actually creating a xxxx pack, which is going to be full of facts and ideas ... it's all in a topic, so if you are doing xxxx, you go back to xxxx and you are going to use it.

Fufy: so it ticks that box...of direct relevance?

Daisy: yes, definitely.

The significance of a Vygotskian interpretation is in the way it highlights the significance of cultural tools such as the 'pack' and how these meanings affect individuals practices and perceptions of phenomena. In the extract above, the meanings Daisy attached to the cultural tools seemed to reinforce certain ideas about effective teaching and learning that influenced her practices in the way she shared her experiences with her family.

A closer analysis of the data, however, suggests the possible influence of the wider context on how the participants conceptualised their experiences. For instance, Natalie's use of the phrase '*it is automatic*', Daisy's reflections on the features of the ideal seminar and Natalie's reflections on tutors' knowledge below hint at the possible influences of dominant educational discourses:

'...if they were telling you about... language development, and things that where they were telling you stuff, where you don't think they are wrong obviously, they have looked at the research, I imagine they would look at the research, I would be surprised if they didn't... so they have obviously backed it up with stuff they have read.. Things they know about, so I wouldn't challenge that...'

Discourses, according to Ferguson, are the ways in which we organise our ideas about the social world and can be a significant part of our meaning making processes because discourses:

'... connect together quite powerfully, they make themselves into themes; they are often institutionalised, they define the ways in which things can be understood; they tend to cut out other ways of explaining and understanding, and they are quite powerful ways of constructing meanings and understanding '(Ferguson, 1998, 14).

Recognising the possible influence of discourse therefore meant that Vygotskian perspectives focus on individual cultural meanings, may not, on their own, provide the in-depth insights I sought about seminars.

Indeed, both Ashwin and Wertsch argue that a Vygotskian approaches may have limited explanatory powers because they does not consider the significance of the wider

political and historical context such as class struggle and alienation (Ashwin, 2008; Wertsch, 1991). Thus, together with insights I gained about the implications of reflexive methodologies (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009), it seemed that to obtain in-depth insights I needed a perspective that considered the influence of events and practices outside the immediate context of the seminar (Bourdieu, 1977). In the next section I outline the key concepts of the Bourdieu's theory of practice, and how it contributed to insights about student teachers' perceptions of seminars.

Bourdieu's theory of practice

At the heart of Bourdieu's intellectual project was a search for a cultural theory of human behaviour that can 'uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the mechanisms which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation' (Bourdieu, 1992, 7). By field, Bourdieu is referring to a relational space, such as a seminar, where individuals' habitus or dispositions influence behaviour due to the unequal access to educational and cultural capital, in this case, between tutors and students (Bourdieu, 1998). Habitus is highly significant because it is enduring and generates practices, which Bourdieu defines as '...the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations... that produce practice...' (Bourdieu, 1992, 78). In this case, a student habitus, for example, could be seen to enable some practices, such as deference to tutors but not questioning or challenging tutors. By highlighting the relationality between field (seminars), capital (educational status) and habitus (practice), Bourdieu articulates how people are involved in cultural production through their actions and interactions with the objective world (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence in relation to cultural production is particularly relevant to educational contexts. Symbolic violence refers to the hidden ways in which dominant cultures influence practices because individuals often fail to recognise the influence of these dominant cultures. Thus, it is '...the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, xiii). Moreover, through 'pedagogic action', the way in which '...every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those in power relations' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, xv), peers, families, tutors, and the curriculum also help to reproduce arbitrary cultural values that are seen as meaningful and valued only because they are sanctioned by the ruling class (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In the current study, examining the meanings participants attach to their experiences in seminars provided an opportunity to examine what types of cultures are reproduced and how they may be reproduced.

Findings from a Bourdieuan perspective

Bourdieu's conceptual tools enabled a different way of interrogating the data. For example, I was able to examine the extent to which participants' constructions of seminars reflected the influence of dominant discourses such as 'education as transmission'. This is a powerful

discourse that emanates from educational perspectives that see teachers as infallible experts and learners as 'empty vessels' (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009), and can cut out alternative ways of conceptualising the student teacher relationship.

The influence of powerful discourses is further illustrated through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. Thus, Daisy's reflections on the 'ideal seminar', Natalie's expectations of tutors, and Jess's reflections below on self-directed learning suggest that the participants saw certain practices as legitimate and therefore seem to accept and seek pedagogical practices that sustained rather than challenged dominant discourses:

'...and then I think, like how, we got told to go and do a risk assessment, that was it; risk assessment... we didn't really go over.. I thought it would have been better if we did it as a group, and could have picked up bits as a group like this is how you would do it with children rather than we go out to do it ourselves, because we didn't actually learn anything... from us trying to do it ourselves.. I don't know if that makes sense... like we didn't really learn ourselves, we are just finding our way round kind of thing...'

From alternative discourses such as learner autonomy, however, Daisy's apparent tutor dependent practices in the 'ideal seminar' and Jess's resistance to independent learning could be seen to be detrimental to students' success in HE. For Bourdieu, it is participants' habitus and the way habitus interacts with the seminar field that leads them to misrecognise how practices can sustain powerful discourse that are ultimately disadvantageous to participants own interests.

Finally, considering the role and influence of discourse also encouraged me to take into account institutional practices such as module evaluation forms and staff student meeting agenda to explore how individuals' perspectives of seminars related to the wider context. In both cases, the emphasise on the quality of teaching at the expense of the quality of learning suggested that aspects of institutional practices play a part in sustaining particular discourses about teaching and learning. Using Bourdieu perspective highlighted some of the implicit overlaps and contradictions between students' expectations and perceptions, the accountability measures that rely on student perceptions and some of the discourses of higher education. It also raised questions about the way ideas of student engagement are conceptualised and addressed in the context of dominant discourse about teaching and learning.

Challenges of using theory or practice

In the previous section I argued that analysing the possibilities of symbolic violence in participants' reflections enabled me to get more nuanced and deeper insights into participants' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars. However, there are limitations in Bourdieu's conception of the social world that could impact on the significance of the interpretations so far. For instance, Bourdieu argues that through their habitus and associated practices, individuals actively construct culture. However, some have argued that because Bourdieu also sees habitus as limiting the possibilities for agency, the extent to which cultural production is constructive is questionable. Thus, his conclusion from his

study of French universities that working class students' practices are restricted by their social positions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), in fact suggests a form of determinism (Jenkins, 1992). Similarly, Margolis argues that seeing individuals as unreflecting beings who are not able to escape their destiny reduce human beings capacity for reflection and transformation (Margolis, 1999).

There was some evidence from the findings in this study that alternative ways of being are possible, as illustrated in Linzi's case below:

Linzi: ...it was unusual, but it was nice, because it makes you feel like an adult rather than a... I think that is the difference between 6th form and school and the university, cause she said, I don't understand that, can you explain it? That was quite nice

Fufy: and is that rare?

Linzi: yeah,, quite a lot of it, I don't know... but because physics and the maths background, I am quite confident with that...yes, it is quite nice...

In contrast to Bourdieu's expectations that students act in student-like ways, Linzi seems to show that she has a dispositions to act outside her 'designated' habitus. She appears to relish a rare seminar dynamic where she was more knowledgeable and powerful than the tutor as a result of her confidence in Maths and Physics. In this case, it meant that she could be a different kind of student, suggesting a more varied repertoire than would be normally expected from similar contexts.

Indeed, Bourdieu's later work suggests a more flexible view of habitus that acknowledges variations between group members who share a similar student 'history'. Thus, habitus is not necessarily a fixed choice of behaviours, but, '...depending on the stimuli, the very same habitus will generate different even opposite outcomes (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 135). Whilst this perspective goes some way to addressing the criticisms, its reductivist tendencies are still significant; it seems to ascribe all that is significant and meaningful in terms of the struggle for capital, and gives limited room for diversity of individual experiences and the social and emotional dimensions of practice (Jenkins, 1992).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine how Vygotskian and Bourdieuan perspectives contributed to insights about participants' experiences of seminars. Vygotskian perspectives highlighted the significance and meaning of culturally valued tools and practices for individuals' cultural development. On the other hand, by prioritising the role of the wider context in terms of the influence of dominant cultural meanings, a Bourdieuan perspective, despite its limitations, gave more in-depth insights about the seminar context and participants' perception of this learning context.

Bourdieu's ideas also enabled deeper reflections about my own practice. Generally, they increased my sensitivity towards and awareness of the influence of dominant discourses on the meanings of everyday taken-for-granted seminar tools and practices. The concept of

symbolic violence in particular, raised important questions about how my everyday practice might inadvertently 'shut the gate' for those students who may be open to different ways of being in seminars. Thus, whilst a Vygotskian perspective also offers important insights into practice, Bourdieu's concepts posed more searching questions about my practices in relation to how far they sustain or challenge dominant discourses and cultures.

The argument in this paper is situated in the particular context of teacher education students. Nonetheless, using Bourdieu's concepts has wider implications for some of the ways in which students' engagement in seminars is conceptualised. If the relevance of the wider context such as discourse can indeed influence perceptions, then an important step to engagement might be to encourage students to reflect on the assumptions and implications of contrasting discourses. In relation to tutor practices, awareness of the role and impact of dominant discourse on students' perspectives of seminars could provide opportunities for reflection and action that leads to genuine student engagement and participation in seminars.

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