Identity and (Dis)empowerment in Team-Based Learning

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Abstract

Over one academic year the author and a post-doctoral researcher observed the discussions which are part of the Team-Based Learning teaching methodology. Students who participated in the TBL activities were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews at the end of the academic year. The research finds that there is a disparity between what the author and researcher observed and how the students described their experiences. The semi-structured interviews revealed that students had different ideas as to whose knowledge counts and how their identity positions them in relation to knowledge. These positions of power or disempowerment correlate with race and, to a lesser extent, gender.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, working identities, knowledge.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a case study of Team-Based Learning (TBL). TBL is being piloted at the case-study institution and the purpose of this research is to assess whether TBL has an impact on the issues of race, identified by Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP), and gender.

1.1 The Attainment Gap

In common with Critical Race Theory CRP has its roots in the experiences of Black Americans. Whilst this history of Black education in the U.S.A. is disturbing, what is more disturbing is the claim that the institutional racism of the education system persists today[1]. Black and minority ethnic (BME) students in British HE institutions experience the same disproportionate representation in statistics charting engagement[2], retention and achievement[3], as was reported in the U.S.A. in the 1990s.

In 2012 research published by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) showed that 69.5% of white, UK domiciled, graduates achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree, compared to 51.1% of BME, UK domiciled, graduates and 40.3% of Black, UK domiciled, students[4], that's an attainment gap of 18.4% and 29.2% respectively. By 2014 the gap between white and BME students had reduced to 16.1% and with Black students to 23.4%[5].

At the University of Northampton, which is the case-study institution, in 2012/13 68.9% of white and 51.5% of BME students achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree, equating to an attainment gap of 17.4%, and in the 2013/14 academic year 70.8% of white and 54.8% of BME students achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree, equating to an attainment gap of 16%, no separate data was available for Black students. For the purposes of this paper it is therefore accepted that Northampton is performing consistently with the sector averages reported by ECU.

1.2 Team-Based Learning

Team-Based Learning (TBL) is an innovative teaching methodology. It is not necessary nor practicable here to do more than outline the methodology. The methodology begins by placing students in groups of 5-7, recognising that: "groups must be properly formed and managed"[6]. Students then do preparatory activities prior to the taught session and then do diagnostic tests, called Readiness Assurance Tests (RATs), first indivdually then again as groups. This ensures that students are: "made accountable for their individual and group work"[7]. Group exercises based on application of understanding are designed to promote both knowledge and understanding, and team development. Finally, the methodology requires that students receive frequent and timely diagnostic feedback.

Michaelson claims that TBL as a pedagogy is inclusive and closes the attainment gap[8]. This paper challenges this claim based on a case-study of TBL.

I trialled TBL in an 'Introduction to Public Law' module. The module is taught at level 4 to students on the bachelors of law (LLB) and the joint honours degree. I collected data from my own observations and from a post-doctoral researcher who has observed my teaching, analysed statistical data on

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achievement and analysed the transcripts of semi-structured interviews which were carried out by the post-doctoral research assistant.

The TBL students were divided into teams based on their answers to a short quiz, there were 9 teams of 6-8 students as 3 seminars were each divided into 3 groups. 2 other seminars ran for the same module and were taught in a more traditional, didactic style. There were 72 students who were supposed to attend my 3 TBL seminars and 36 who were supposed to attend the 2 non-TBL seminars.

2. The Case-Study

2.1 Observations

The TBL students scored on average 4.24% lower than the non-TBL students, however the same students scored 1.72% marks lower in another first-year module so overall TBL has had a slight detrimental effect (2.52%), however given that the numbers were so small and it impossible to mitigate for other variables this is statistically negligible so my tentative conclusion from the quantitative data would be that TBL has no discernible effect on attainment. Of more interest is the qualitative data.

The observation data identifies similar behaviours across all 9 groups, the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews reveal patterns of attitudes and behaviours on grounds of race and gender. To illustrate the findings this paper focuses on two students from the same team. The methodology is focused and narrative in approach but appropriate for this study, it is the approach described by Apple who charges the critical scholar with the task of "describing reality critically" by "acting as secretaries" to those groups who are experiencing the existing relationships of unequal power. This paper will give "thick descriptions", as Apple calls them, of the lived experiences of my students, it is "research that says 'here is life'."[9]

The first student is Hersha (not her real name), she is a British Asian student who came to University straight from concluding her 'A' levels and is 19 years old. The second student is Cezar (not his real name), he is a white Romanian student, this is his second degree and he is in his mid-twenties.

Space makes it impossible to share all the observation data herein, the examples chosen are however indicative of the observations made over a whole academic year.

Hersha and Cezar work in the same team; Hersha and Cezar are the two team members with the best attendance. Their team was first observed during a team readiness assurance test (T-RAT). In discussions it was the male members of the group that were dominant, the most dominant being Cezar. When Cezar discussed the answers he directed his discussions at the other white male student. Hersha joined in rarely and another female student didn't contribute at all. In other observations Hersha tried to offer responses but she was interrupted by Cezar and he contradicted her, instead offering what he thought was the right answer.

Approximately half-way through the module another T-RAT as observed, in this session attendance was low and the three teams had to be combined. Present were Hersha and Cezar as well as a white British male, a Black British male who had not attended any previous sessions, and two white females. One of the white females and Cezar start the process in terms of reading out the questions and the white female took charge of the scratch card. The discussion started with these 2 and the other white male offering their opinion in terms of the answers. On every question all the white students offer their answers without prompting whilst Hersha and the Black male don't offer their answers until asked. Cezar is always the one to ask other students what they think and he and the other white male dominate in terms of providing the explanations for the answers. The Black male says nothing and Hersha only offers her view when she is asked. On one question the Black male did offer his answer, however he got no response from other group members.

According to Michaelson the discussions draw out knowledge with the teams generally scoring more highly than their best individual score, however in this T-RAT the team didn't do better than some of the individual members of the team. On one difficult question Hersha and the Black male student both had the correct answer, however Cezar and the other white male took over and talked the group into the wrong answer, then repeated this. According to Michaelson it is at these moments that the group dynamic changes and teams value the contributions of previously ignored members[10]. He argues this is why TBL is inclusive, however this did not change the dynamic of the group, rather when Cezar felt unsure he shared responsibility by taking soundings but when he was sure he railroaded discussion. On the more difficult questions there was lots of discussion but as the team were unsure of the correct answer the discussion did not seem to equate to learning.

After the module was concluded semi-structured interviews were carried out by a post-doctoral researcher. The participants were selected using purposive sampling and Hersha and Cezar were included in the sample.

2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Hersha's interview contains a lot of description in her early answers and it is apparent that she doesn't feel her perceptions or opinions have much value. When Hersha is asked about the TBL exercises she unquestioningly relates dominance to expertise, despite the fact that the observations outlined above demonstrate that the dominant members sometimes got it wrong and the team suffered because the views of the less dominant members were not respected. At one point she says of Cezar and the other white male student: "Well there's two candidates in our like team that are quite, they understand a lot". She later conflates confidence in expressing an opinion with knowledge, saying: "And [Cezar], like he's comfortable with public speaking, whereas I, like I don't know enough information, like I don't mind, you know, like doing public speaking and whatever but I don't know enough information". When asked to explain her role in the group she explains that she takes a less active role, but explains this in the language of personal choice then justifies this through a narrative of self-blame because of a mis-perception about the value of her own opinions.

Cezar claims to benefit from TBL in the ways that Michaelson claims *all* students do[10]. It is interesting to read how Cezar perceives the group discussion: "usually when the answer is clear most of us have the same answer and we realise it so we just tick the answer most of us have chosen." Where Cezar perceives a lack of interaction he blames the student, not the fact that they have been ignored or interrupted: "The members who are, you know, less, are quiet, they usually rely on those who talk and seem to know more, to give the proper answers without trying to figure out the answers for themselves and I think this is certainly not a good thing."

3. Conclusions

The observations of Vanessa Hunn[11] of black American students having negative experiences of TBL in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the US are echoed in this research.

Hersha blames herself for her subordination accepting the disempowerment imposed on her because of a belief based on a lack of self-confidence in her academic abilities which may, in part, be rooted in the lack of recognition her opinions are given. This lack of self-belief is demonstrated when towards the end of the interview she says: "I just feel like I don't know as much as other people know."

Cezar's perception is also contradicted by the observation data. When Cezar talks of the whole group coming to concensus he is talking of him and the other white male student, where they agree he perceives a democratic consensus of the whole group, apparently unaware that other members of the group haven't contributed.

Students adopted their "working identities"[12] of dominant white/male and subservient Black/female, in Hersha's case she was expected to fulfil the role of subservient BME female, surrendering to Cezar's white male dominance, and did so justifying it to herself with a narrative of differing academic abilities and valuing their opinions over her own.

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