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Co-curriculum seminar 2014

A critical feminist approach to social inclusion and citizenship in the context of the co-curriculum

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Abstract

Issues of social inclusion and difference within the co-curriculum are crucial. This article draws on themes central to a critical feminist framework of social inclusion and citizenship in HE to argue that the way in which co-curricular opportunities are traditionally structured at universities may exclude those students who are marginalised. It also suggests how we may minimise institutional, cultural and economic discrimination, thus giving most students an opportunity to flourish.

Keywords

Social inclusion, critical feminist citizenship, co-curriculum, higher education, first generation students.

Introduction

Social inclusion in higher education (HE) typically refers to enabling better access, participation and success of groups such as women, black people, working classes or people with disabilities who have been socially, historically and politically excluded (Tomlinson & Basit, 2012). This is also a conception of social inclusion adhered to in the recently published South African white paper on post-school education and training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). It is important though to engage with the notion of inclusion more comprehensively, incorporating issues of difference in pedagogical practices, curricula and institutional ethos as well. In this article I would like briefly to consider the notion of social inclusion through a critical lens and use an understanding of social inclusion that incorporates core notions of critical citizenship before focusing on feminist frameworks to discuss the co-curriculum in HE.

While such definitions of social inclusion may be helpful, it is important to recognise that the very notion of inclusion has attracted critique. Young (2002) argues that inclusion can maintain the status quo when marginalised groups are merely incorporated into established institutions without the hegemonic dominance of those institutions being challenged. An inclusive politics, therefore, is not assimilationist – it is one that engages in

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a "transversal politics of belonging" (Yuval Davis, 2011) that focuses on common values and political symbolism, rather than identification. This means that identifications will not be formed on the basis of similar socially constructed (and unitary identity) features such as gender or race *only*. For both of these theorists, social inclusion means that collective action is constructed from the perspective of common epistemologies and understandings rather than from identity politics. While the discourses surrounding inclusion can therefore be paradoxical in terms of its compelling moral imperative and political promise of institutional policy change, they have also been infused with strong undercurrents of critical citizenship (Spandler, 2007).

The South African HE policy context foregrounds citizenship as a desirable outcome of HE. Education white paper 3 aims that HE should socialise students to become "enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens" (Department of Education, 1997).

Bozalek and Carolissen (2012) construct a normative framework for analysing feminist critical citizenship in higher education that can be used to think about the co-curriculum in higher education. They argue that TH Marshall (1950) is commonly used as a historical reference point for discussions on citizenship. He suggests that work in public spaces determines citizenship. His ideas of citizenship rest on the patriarchal assumption that men were citizens as they worked outside the home, while women stayed at home. Women worked in the private space of the home so they were not considered full citizens because citizenship depended on the measure of how hard people could work in the public sphere. This view has been critiqued by feminist writers (Tronto, 1993, 2013). Bozalek and Carolissen (2012) highlight some of the shared themes in some feminist writers' work. This paper will focus on themes of the constructions of human beings as citizens, the politics of needs interpretation and the public–private binary in the context of the co-curriculum after briefly defining the co-curriculum.

What is the co-curriculum?

One view is that co-curricular activities refer to any non-academic activities in which students engage. These activities typically include sports, societies, part-time work, volunteering, participation in student government as well as other leadership initiatives, which focus on self-development as well as psychosocial development (Kuh, 1995; 2009). Co-curricular activities are usually external to the formal curriculum and are, mostly, viewed by universities as central to the students' development as they have to navigate pathways through an increasingly competitive and complex world as they prepare for future employment. Even though this is a common view, it is not as easy to assess the impact of co-curricular programmes and agreeing on outcomes and the human developmental value of participation as it is to assess academic outcomes (Kuh, 2009). However, issues of difference also added to this debate as the higher education student population has been changing from full-time, white, middle-class students to older, working students at a local and international level. This impacted on traditional understandings of co-curricular post-secondary settings and co-curricular student involvement. This field boasts a wide body of theory that aims to understand the co-curricular experience. These theories include ones

like Astin's involvement theory (1999) and the student development theory of Chickering (1996). I will not focus on these theories as I would like to focus on larger conceptual issues such as the themes identified earlier.

Constructions of human beings as citizens

Rights-based models dominate discourses on citizenship in HE. These models assume that people enter higher education as equals, that we are all the same, and ignore the reality that different students have varied access to resources. Exposure to the co-curriculum is well established in many middle-class high schools (and there are a handful of exceptions where the co-curriculum is established in poorer schools). High school learners can often choose from at least 40 clubs and societies and have the opportunity to occupy peer leadership roles. Kenway and Fahey (2014), in their research on Round Square schools across the world (including South Africa), write about how high school learners are socialised into middle-class liberal polite subjects of the British Empire, through strong encouragement for them to participate. Most students at poorer high schools do not have these opportunities and skills that are highly valued and privileged in applications for competitive programmes such as medicine and law. Secondly, these programmes at school level also privilege those who apply for scholarships, as a number of learners from advantaged high schools would have developed a discursive socialisation as to how to navigate and complete scholarship forms. At another level, the institutional bias at school and university level favours articulate students who may have had multiple and repeated opportunities to practise public speaking skills and develop confidence in speaking to those in authority through their exposure to the co-curriculum at *school level* already. Jehangir (2010a) suggests that the development of voice and confidence in one's views and ability to speak is a skill that is often underdeveloped in marginalised first-generation students. Furthermore, material access to resources may also impact on participation in co-curricular activities. Many societies at university are partially funded by fee-paying students who register and pay an annual fee to belong to the society. These fees often range from R400 to R700 (USD 40 to 70) per annum at local universities. This is just a brief example to highlight one aspect of the social and cultural inequality in school-based socialisation for the co-curriculum at university as students enter university. Institutions position all students in the same way and, when they do not succeed, the discourses of neo-liberalism that value individual effort, competition and discipline construct student failure individualistically; the common assumption is that the individual does not work hard enough.

The politics of needs interpretation

Most current views of citizenship emphasise the rights and obligations of individuals. However, Fraser (1989) argues that needs are political, that they are not absolute and should not be located privately but in the public sphere. She suggests that needs are constructed by discourses in society that are informed by markets and experts. In practice, neo-liberal discourses locate needs in the individual, which means that needs are relegated to homes and families.

The nature of co-curricular activities such as volunteering often construct those who are outside the university as poor and having needs, thus politically maintaining the façade of a middle-class, resource-laden student population. Yet, local studies exist that indicate that many students are poor and manage with very minimal resources, often disguising their poverty (Firferey & Carolissen, 2010). Students who perhaps cannot afford to volunteer, but have to hold down a job as well as study, may not benefit in the same way from co-curricular activities as those who have resources. Jehangir (2010a) suggests that many students who attend university as "non-traditional" students are enveloped in ambiguity as they could be earning an income to support families but are deferring this income by studying. Students in this position often bridge this dilemma by working to produce family income while studying. The practice of working to produce income while studying is not normally viewed in HE institutions as generating valuable skills that can be valued as a co-curricular activity.

The public–private binary

The denial of difference is likely to mask the inherent political skewing of relationships. Marshall's notions of citizenship still dominates current patriarchal discourses, suggesting that women and children are (or at least should be) dependent on men. Women and children are constructed as needy and obtain their status through their relationships with men in society (Tronto, 1993, 2013). In the context of the co-curriculum, it is important to ask if the way in which the co-curriculum is constructed benefits men and some middle-class women students who may not have any or many caring duties at home. Numerous women who have caring duties such as childcare, cooking and cleaning in addition to being students (Jehangir, 2010b) may not be able to participate in co-curricular activities because of the way in which co-curricular activities are generally structured. For example, in some prestigious leadership development programmes, fellows need to be available for two evenings per week from 6 to 8pm for training over a period of seven months, and be available to travel internationally for short periods as well. This is not possible for single parents who are students unless they have a strong support network.

What, then, given the way in which exclusion is unwittingly built into institutional structures, are the options for restructuring the co-curriculum so that it reduces or eliminates institutional exclusion?

The concept of life-wide learning and intercultural curriculum as a co-curricular change

It is important to develop a much broader conception of the co-curriculum that takes into account that students gain important personal and professional development from life experiences outside the curriculum. The life-wide curriculum (Jackson, 2010) and intercultural curriculum (Dunne, 2011) are such initiatives. I will briefly describe each in turn.

The idea of life-wide learning highlights the fact that at any point in time, for example while a learner is engaged in HE, an individual's life contains many tributaries that are

complex and interconnected. These also may contribute to the ongoing life experiences and potential professional development of the person. It is important to conceptualise differently that which is valued as learning (Jehangir, 2010b) and what counts as valued cultural capital and knowledge (Yosso, 2005) that extends beyond the formal curriculum.

The intercultural curriculum (Dunne, 2011) draws on a body of work embodied in critical pedagogies that aims to create learning communities. The lecturer acts as facilitator and creates meaning rather than positioning himself/herself as an expert. Dialogue and genuine student participation are encouraged where lecturers can draw on diverse students' perspectives in the curriculum. This enables students to reflect on their multiple identities and to help shape their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

This paper has therefore suggested, by using themes central to a critical feminist framework of social inclusion and citizenship in HE, that the way in which co-curricular opportunities are traditionally structured at universities may exclude those students who are in some way marginalised. However, there are programmes that are seemingly working well across universities collectively, that minimise institutional, cultural and economic discrimination, thus giving most students an opportunity to flourish via the co-curriculum in HE institutions.

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