



Society for Educational Studies

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Title: **Higher Education Seminars: Inclusivity strategies to enhance social
cohesion and academic outcomes**

Higher Education Seminars: Inclusivity strategies to enhance social cohesion and academic outcomes Theo Gilbert

July 2011, the Society generously allocated £420 for my research to help speed the production of transcripts from interview and focus group materials from 30 student and tutor participants. The report of the project follows. The research was to trial the rewarding of students, formatively and summatively, for compassionate, proactive inclusive practices during their seminar discussions – cross disciplinary, all student levels. In these discussions students were charged with contributing individual research they had done into the small group discussion. This was research on a target topic set earlier by the assessing tutor.

Preparatory support of students and tutors

First, work was undertaken to identify which practices during discussion seminars were thought the most undermining to a) student experience, b) spread of participation in small group discussion work and c) tutor-assessed quality of individual and group intellectual outputs from students in those discussions. This stage was carried out through survey questionnaires x 3 amongst students (n=197 respondents), and through literature searching and qualitative research with both students and tutors. Three examples of the 12 anti-group behaviours identified were:

- Talking a lot so that others do not get many chances to speak.
- Fixing eye contact with the tutor only or just one student and forgetting to look at all the other people in the group.
- Not listening carefully to other peoples' ideas
- Not helping other people when they are getting into difficulty while they are speaking. Instead taking control and their chance to speak away from them. Talking over them. Not speaking at all; becoming 'too shy' and so giving nothing to the group.
- Not even reading a little bit in order to bring something to the discussion.

Second, a new literature search revealed the availability of new understandings of affiliation processes (Depue and Morrinsky, 2005), and compassion giving processes (Immordino-Yang 2007, 2009; P. Gilbert, 2004, 2005, 2007) including cross-culturally (Goertz et al, 2010). These researchers and many others were found to have carried out important, relevant studies in the areas of neuropsychobiology and group psychotherapy, yet their findings did not yet appear to have been recruited into higher education teaching, learning and assessment practice yet. The findings were brought to the table by this project for discussions with tutors and students – inside as well as outside of their group seminars. They were invited to consider whether/how they might use these psychological models during their seminar discussions to address any of the negative behaviours listed above – as they arose - during seminars. In keeping with the group psychotherapy behavioural models, there were just two rules. The above behaviours should be addressed proactively (transparently within the seminar) and compassionately (including to monopolisers).

Outcomes of the study:

As predicted by the psychological models applied, academic output was seen to be enhanced though wider participation in all participant groups. These models had predicted that older brain flight/fight (withdraw/compete) behaviours would drain cognitive processing less as students attended as compassionately as they could to each other's affective states. This did appear to allow more students to better direct cognitive processes to task achievement. In this regard students reported that compassionate processes began to 'come naturally' as group interactional styles developed over the course of seminar meetings.

Noticing and reflecting on this a 3rd year history tutor, formerly teaching at Oxford University, focussed her attention on the potential for increased quality of critical thinking here. She offered 35% for inclusivity practice in the final assessed small group discussion seminar for 3rd years and found: "They gelled. The quieter ones were given room...space by the others." "Four or five who were 2:2s in their written work, were asking 2:1, if not 1st class questions – something that surprised me." She noted that in argument, stronger writers had to "concede" to these students.

Elsewhere, on a Literature MA: Quality of academic output was found in the assessed PG seminar where marks were allocated for inclusive behaviours, to be equal to academic standards expected for a good 3,000 word piece of researched MA level coursework. External Examiner: This is innovative and sensitive work by the literature team.

The work has been commended by three out of three external examiners (Humanities and Business). Overall, students report improved seminar experience despite some initial challenges to their thinking in the early phases of engagement which cause them discomfort. Participant tutors too are now continuing with this new assessment practice as they develop with students exactly what is being assessed and how in terms of inclusivity practices.

Limitations of the Study: Ideological opposition to the project has been met from an experienced and respected member of Business teaching staff and in this regard he is a valuable critical friend. Mainly, the issue is that employability concerns should not extend to modelling productive group behaviours to students. This is for students themselves, as adults, to address in their own time, if they so wish. This is a tutor transcript that might be found elsewhere and needs to be fully explored in further research for possible modification of the project or for its more effective means of engaging staff such as this.

Future research: That said, for Semester A 2012, other Business tutors interested in attempting what has been implemented in Humanities have proposed a further cycle of research with them and so further trials begin in Semester A, 2012. This will be amongst BME students and is an exciting endeavour.

Dissemination: The research has been cited by the HEA in its student retention briefing website. It has been nominated for the Vice Chancellor's award in the host HEI. It and its controversial outcomes have been presented at conferences and seminars at the host HEI and elsewhere. Also, it has so far been taken into the assessment practice of two other HEIs in the UK (Art and Design/Glasgow and Business/Bedford, respectively). I have been proud to state at every opportunity The Society's support which helped the research questions to be explored.

I want to thank the Society very much for the motivating help and encouragement they have given the study. It has been much, much appreciated.



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