Research Note

Political and Ethical Implications of Institutional Practices and Internationalisation in UK Higher Education

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Abstract: *Conflicts can arise within UK higher education institutions, as widening participation and an encouragement of internationalisation brings a range of different expectations and backgrounds into the scene of postgraduate study. Factors such as cultural differences, market-oriented education and different reasons for enrolling on courses can mean that tutors, staff members and students find themselves unsure about what their priorities should be, how they should conceptualise their role or position, or what they should most usefully be doing during their involvement with postgraduate study. In this context, assumptions may be made about 'best practice' which may alternatively be viewed as social defence mechanisms defending against uncertainty and anxiety. This psychoanalytically informed qualitative study investigates the political and ethical implications of institutional practices and internationalisation in UK higher education. Data from group discussions involving staff and students respectively, and documentary evidence, will be analysed and compared to reveal issues which may otherwise go unnoticed, particularly in terms of positioning of students and staff. One assumption behind this project is that in making things visible rather than making truth claims, the researcher and the audience may gain self knowledge in a way which ultimately brings more transformative potential than would be brought by presenting finished statements. This is considered to be a more ethical, or at least less unethical, way of being.*

Introduction

This is a qualitative research project informed by psychoanalytic theory (Lapping, 2011). The research is located around university writing centres, where 'international' and 'non-traditional' students receive support in UK higher education (cf. Kapp & Bangeni 2009; Lillis & Scott, 2007). The task of teaching international students, or of being a student in UK higher education, raises questions, not only of how and what to teach (*ibid*), but also issues around cultural and educational practices and market-oriented education (Hides, 2005), as well as to what extent the task of teaching represents an educational endeavour or customer service (cf. Liesner, 2006). Factors such as these mean that tutors, staff members and students can find themselves unsure about what their priorities should be, how they should conceptualise their role or position, or what they should most usefully be doing during their involvement with postgraduate study. A psychoanalytic understanding of institutions can help investigate some of the consequences of these uncertainties.

Menzies Lyth (1988) provides a useful model. Using a psychoanalytic approach to study a hospital nursing service, she set out an understanding of institutional practices as social defences against anxieties. An instance of this kind of mechanism in an educational context is the way the syllabus can cover over-anxieties relating to uncertainty about what should 'most usefully' be taught. However, if a teacher deviates from the syllabus, they may worry they are teaching the 'wrong thing', or fear they might be discovered going off track. This depends on the person and their working environment, but illustrates how 'plastering over' an anxiety (by relying on the dual assumptions that we know what should be taught, and that the syllabus is a definitive representation of this), rather than acknowledging the uncertainty, can end up creating further anxiety. Additionally, such uncertainties can give rise to decisions and behaviour with political and ethical implications.

Rationale and Research Questions

The proposed study is based on the assumption that investigating this kind of issue can provide insights into institutional and educational practices that can otherwise remain hidden, denied, or described as an inevitable and uninteresting part of the job (Britzman 2006:128). In attempting to make some of these issues visible, I intend to provoke a shift in fantasy/discourse both in the audience and in those involved in the research, allowing new knowledge to emerge. To investigate these issues, I formulated the following research questions:

(1) How and to what extent do social defence mechanisms act in the university?

(2) How and to what extent might institutional practices carry political and ethical implications, through the eyes of staff and students?

(3) To what extent might involvement with or exposure to the present research projects contribute to the emergence of new knowledge in the audience and participants.

Orientation towards 'knowledge'

The present project, while located in an academic institution, is not solely intended to contribute to a field of knowledge in the sense of making new claims or re-evaluating existing claims. Instead, one of the project's aims is to allow psychoanalytic knowledge to emerge in the audience of the research. The intention is to provide some kind of prompt, in response to which people may loosen their attachment to strict or fixed ideas about the pedagogic scene, rearticulate certain beliefs, and experience more self-knowledge, and a response to events which is less evaluative and more contextualized. Another way of expressing this is to state that the aim of this research is to make certain things visible. I intend to provide an account in a way that makes available knowledges visible, which were perhaps not visible before. Different knowledge is available to different people, and I intend to highlight different aspects in a way that will allow knowledge to become available to the audience(s) of the research.

Data production and analysis

In terms of data production, I am taking a psychoanalytically informed approach to qualitative data production and analysis (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Here, the data is seen as co-produced (*ibid*) or co-constructed (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009), and the human subject (whether the researcher or the researched) is understood as 'defended'; that is, defending themselves against anxieties, often unconsciously (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), and also as both psychic and social (*ibid*). A psychoanalytic approach can be useful when investigating issues such as those outlined above, as the fact that the unconscious is taken into account allows human behaviour to be described in ways that are not limited to rational explanations (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In practice this can provide the researcher with a language to interpret inconsistencies or disruptions that might reveal, for example, when a participant is intellectualising or generalising in order to protect themselves from uncomfortable feelings (*ibid*).

Data collection will take place via various channels: a student discussion forum, a staff discussion forum, interviews with programme directors, and analysis of institutional documents such as the university website pages, policy and strategy documents, and course documents. Staff and students will articulate their own interest in the topic through discussion forums. My data will take the form of recordings of the discussions, and observational notes. These recordings, the transcriptions, and the observational notes, will first be analysed to detect themes, and then subsequently to notice links to political and ethical implications. The

analysis will be conducted through a psychoanalytically informed discourse analysis, drawing on methods developed by Lapping (2011).

Preliminary analysis to identify potential issues will be conducted on an ongoing basis, soon after each forum meeting. Initial observations will be reported at the following meeting, and the other attendees will be invited to do the same. This will allow the attendees to take part in considering the observations, which may prompt further discussion or insights. This step will also act as a check, helping to identify if I, as the researcher, might be imposing my own preoccupations onto the data (Lapping, 2011:106).

Institutional data will be collected and analysed as follows. Following the approach taken by Menzies Lyth (1988), I will interview programme directors, as they have a distinctive role in relation to both curriculum and staff. Documentary analysis will also be carried out, to examine different conceptions of the primary task (Bibby, 2011; Menzies Lyth, 1988) and reveal some of the discourses and ideologies which circulate in this area. Definitions of the primary task can be found in mission-statement type documents, strategy documents, or websites. Guidelines for teachers and course syllabuses can also provide illustrations of how the students and teachers are positioned in these documents. The interpretations will explore the way institutional practices might function as social defences against anxieties and 'unwanted' knowledge or feelings (Bibby, 2011; Menzies Lyth, 1988).

Finally, the different sections of the data analysis will be looked at together. I am unable to say much about this stage at present, but will be able to do so after having carried out the other stages of analysis. In brief, as I do not know what will emerge from the data, I cannot describe how they may or may not interrelate. I will look for potential interrelations within the data, and attempt to present it so that the audience will also be able to find potentially useful patterns of meaning. I may, for example, observe and describe any intersections or areas of disjunction between the institutional findings and the accounts from the tutors and students, with a focus on examining to what extent, and how, the institutional practices might intensify, deny or defend against anxieties (Bibby, 2011; Menzies Lyth, 1988), and what might be the political and ethical implications.

Ethical issues

It terms of research ethics, asking staff and students about the implications of practices within their own university raises various ethical issues. First, their accounts may be considered "discreditable or incriminating" (Lee & Renzetti, 1993:ix), and so confidentiality will be central. In addition, the topic may provoke uncomfortable feelings both for the participants and audience. Overall, the research may be considered to involve a "sensitive topic", or might "induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation" (ESRC *Framework for Research Ethics,* 2010:8-9). There is a body of literature about researching sensitive topics, to which I will refer (e.g. Lee & Renzetti, 1993). I will work within the British Sociological Association's (2002) Statement of Ethical Practice, and adhere to the ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics* (2010).

This project is also concerned with identifying 'ethical' implications of certain practices. This project uses a conception of ethics which takes being or acting ethically to be an orientation or way of being rather than anything involving a calculation, with self-knowledge as central. Along with a movement towards self-knowledge, two further aspects are to allow conditions whereby others might reach self-knowledge, rather than restricting it, and to avoid causing harm.

Contribution of the study

Overall, this research constitutes a way of opening up the question of what some political and ethical implications of internationalisation may be. The project will allow conversations to take place that would not have happened otherwise.

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