Developing relationality and student belonging: The need for building cosmopolitan engagement in undergraduate communities

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Abstract

This paper addresses evidence that developing a sense of belonging for students from different ethnic groups impacts on their engagement. It notes previous findings that in universities habits of coexistence may present barriers to the development of relationships and the sense of student belonging. The paper proposes that cosmopolitan engagement offers a frame for considering the experience of cultural difference in the classroom. It stresses the importance of relationality and communication. The research, involving students undertaking business and science programmes in two culturally similar universities, has sought to develop a better understanding of how students in London engage with higher education, with their learning and with cultural others, and the impact on their learning of differing communication patterns. The study finds that students often feel distant from their tutors and afraid to ask for further explanation. Instead, they rely on a circle of friends to provide support and clarification. Students have identified the development of agency through engaging with others from different cultures. Engagement in practical collective tasks such as forensic lab work seems to have the potential to encourage communication across cultures, but observation have suggested that students tend to self-segregate. The article concludes that there cannot be a presumption of cosmopolitan engagement. Rather universities need to develop strategies for improving communication between students and staff and between students of different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: cultural plurality; cosmopolitan engagement; relationality; student belonging; commuter students

Introduction

Student belonging has become a defining term in higher education (Tinto, 1975; Pokorny *et al.*, 2016) that develops nuance through the differing cultural backgrounds of students and the importance of relationships. This paper explores the context of the relational experience and the potential for the development of belonging for communities of culturally diverse commuter students (those who live in the family home and commute to a city-based university to attend lectures; see Cashmore, 2017) in urban universities. The concern around the diversity of the student body in urban classrooms and the potentially differing performance outcomes for ethnic minority groups is not new. However, the current discourse demands further exploration in the context of how relationships develop and influence student belonging and the student experience, and where cultural difference might be regarded as a key aspect of those relationships. The work of Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2015) identifies that for students

from different ethnic groups developing a sense of belonging impacts on performance. The literature suggests that there are habits of coexistence in evidence in the higher education classroom, which present barriers to the development of relationships and the sense of student belonging (Pokorny *et al.*, 2016). This research allowed for an exploration of the parameters encountered by individual students in higher education that involved potential contact with 'others' from different backgrounds and the development of an understanding of the barriers to learning.

This paper aims to further explore students' responses to uncertainty, responsibility and relations with others in a context of the potential impact of differing communication patterns. Welikala and Watkins (2008), Trahar (2011) and Killick (2015) all point to a need for higher education institutions to refocus their approach to curriculum delivery in order to create a cosmopolitan engagement (Delanty and He, 2008; Bamford *et al.*, 2015) that enables the building of relationships within a culturally diverse student body and facilitates the bridging of potential cultural barriers. Khan (2014) identifies relations with others as a factor in understanding engagement. The focus on a cosmopolitan engagement offers a frame for considering the experience of cultural difference in the classroom, the importance of relationality and communication. Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*'s (2015) research on differential outcomes for students from differing ethnic backgrounds may be linked to the literature on understanding the impact of cultural difference in higher education.

The intention is to develop an understanding of the impact, if any, of the students' differing cultural backgrounds and their communication patterns. These communication patterns can be seen to influence students' relationships with each other; Welikala and Watkins (2008) talk of differing cultural scripts in the classroom, which influence individuals' communication and learning patterns. In order to understand the communication between students from different cultural backgrounds, we have drawn on Geertz's (2000) view of culture as being the 'fabric of meaning' for individuals (Geertz, 2000), and the way they make sense of their lives. This includes the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that may influence students' communication and learning in the classroom. It is acknowledged that the definition of culture and its relationship with ethnic identities is a necessarily complex and contested field, and we have focused here on the difference in communication patterns that affect students' learning in a culturally heterogeneous environment. The classroom experience was the particular focus for this study, due to the commuter element of the urban campus, although it is acknowledged that relationships are built and communication across cultures within the student body takes place in many other fora.

The higher education context as framed by culture

Although there has been a substantial amount of research in relation to the international student experience of higher education in the UK (Bamford, 2008; Bamford *et al.*, 2006; Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; De Vita, 2001; Haigh, 2009; Jin and Cortazzi, 2017, to name a few), there has been little work undertaken that looks at the culturally diverse classroom. Phakiti *et al.* (2013) and Wright and Schartner (2013) have found that international students engage less, not simply because of language barriers but also because of cultural nuances that affected motivation and independent learning. This suggests that for a significant group of students the transmutation of the 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007) into a positive educational outcome is in doubt.

This research draws on such work with international students with regard to strategies and approaches to facilitate cultural interactions, applying the approaches

for international students to those defined as 'home' students, who in the institutions in this study are identified as second- and third-generation migrants. In other words, there is a need for a similar approach to the one advocated for internationally culturally diverse classrooms by Arkoudis *et al.* (2013); that is, the establishment of a common ground for communication within the student group even if the student group is not defined as international.

Thus, while there has been considerable focus on the international student experience, little work has been carried out on the implications of the changing demographics of 'home' students. While the potential artificiality of the term 'home' is acknowledged (Holliday, 2017), the notion of 'home' is used here to identify the difference between those students already resident in the UK, including many European students, and those who entered the UK for the purposes of pursuing their education.

The diversity of this home undergraduate population reflects the changing demographics of urban communities, particularly in London (BBC News, 2015). The implications of the growing migrant population are certainly subject to much debate, but the impact of differing communication patterns in the classroom still needs further analysis. The cultural shaping of the self has been argued – by Mathews (2000), for example – to take place at a number of levels and the cognition of the cultural self might be perceived as challenging. For Mathews (2000), rules and norms of behaviour are defined from cultural codes. These codes may be tacit and level of cultural knowledge that has the greatest effect is unknowable for many, because we think in the language of our culture. We therefore cannot easily be reflexive with regard to how that language shapes our thinking. For example, to reflect on nuances of our own behaviour and intonations of our own language is a challenge: our *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) is largely taken for granted and steeped in our social and cultural practice. Does an increasingly diverse 'home' population have the implicit skills to negotiate its culturally plural learning environment and engage in active participation in its education?

It could be argued that dissonance can arise in culturally diverse classrooms (Bamford, 2014; Bickel and Jensen, 2012), which can result in an unequal educational experience and low achievement rates for some (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015). Yet the importance of the classroom environment to intercultural development is acknowledged by Lee *et al.* (2014), and the diverse classroom provides opportunities for the lived experience of cultural difference. Lee *et al.*'s (2014) study evidences that well-managed classroom interactions can increase students' confidence in their intercultural interactions. The documented unevenness of achievement rates between student groups (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015) points to a need for universities to understand better the complexities involved in improving student outcomes for culturally diverse student bodies, and perhaps to engage in a more dialogic approach to cultural difference (Trahar, 2011; Bamford, 2014). Those institutions that adopt a learning approach that draws on students' differing cultural backgrounds to enhance the learning experience and the development of transferable skills position themselves to lead the way in teaching excellence (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015).

What is cosmopolitan engagement?

A construct of cosmopolitanism as an ethos and a value embedded in the curriculum might be viewed as an appropriate approach to dissonance and lack of belonging. This dissonance may arise as a result of differences in language and communication patterns that are culturally determined, and where the space for developing understanding is limited by time and the environment. Appiah (2006) emphasizes that cosmopolitanism

is not a new concept, with its origins and etymology stemming from the Stoics and the Greek word *cosmopolites* – the idea of being a citizen of the world or cosmos. This emphasis on our common humanity refocuses the potential for cultural difference to create opportunities for additional learning and the development of belonging. The higher education environment should provide a natural forum for addressing differences in communication patterns and incorporate these into the learning construct. In theory, then, it could be argued that an opportunity for communication between cultural others is presented, because the culturally diverse classroom offers a learning community that bridges potential barriers. In other words, it offers a sense of 'being' in relation to accepting and understanding others' differing cultural values – and a relational context that is underpinned by a notion of being a citizen of the world, a value of common humanity.

An emphasis on the need for a human community and for developing 'habits of coexistence' (Appiah, 2006: xvii) is acknowledged by researchers such as Rizvi (2009) as central to the learning environment. However, there appears to be insufficient discussion or acknowledgement of how cultural capital and cultural knowledge are developed as part of the higher education process.

Through an acknowledgement and understanding of the influences on students' active participation in culturally diverse classrooms we can move the debate forward. Kahn (2014) and Trowler (2015) recognize that there is variation in engagement at the level of the individual, and the globalized education environment brings multiple layers of identity for individuals at the forefront of the learning experience (Rizvi, 2009).

The question posed, in relation to student engagement and cultural diversity, was whether universities need to do more to encourage engagement in culturally diverse contexts, and across culturally different groups in urban environments.

Methodology

The research, funded by the Higher Education Academy, sought to develop a better understanding of how students in London engage with higher education, their learning and cultural others, and the impact on their learning of differing communication patterns. The research was carried out at two culturally similar post-92 universities (i.e. former polytechnics that were awarded university status in 1992) in London, and sampled students undertaking business and science programmes. The cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional nature of the project built on existing work on cultural diversity in the classroom.

The demographics of the students at the two institutions were similar, with 58 per cent considering themselves as white; the next largest ethnic group comprised the 12 per cent who identified themselves as black British. In terms of a self-identification of ethnicity, 44 per cent identified themselves as international or European, and only 30 per cent of respondents had a parent born in the UK.

We collected data via participant observations, gathering visual data and field notes over a period of a month at each institution and convening ten focus group interviews with a total of 92 participants across the two research sites. The sample was representative, consisting of students, including European students, from all academic levels and across all undergraduate courses at both institutions. The focus group interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview approach, with students encouraged to engage in a dialogue about their experiences to allow for a rich and in-depth picture to unfold. The analysis of the data focused on understanding the students' experiences of difference and non-difference in the classroom, their relationality and

the development of their communication with each other. The data were examined through a thematic analysis framework (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003), with categories and themes being drawn from the literature, and analysis involving the reading and rereading of transcripts. This approach permitted the researchers to distil the substantive themes and develop a matrix grid for analysis. Through this thematic analysis approach an understanding of students' challenges with and experience of diversity and differing communication patterns and similarities was developed. A picture of the students' perspectives on their learning and the relationships that framed that learning emerged.

In addition to focus group interviews, observations of classroom engagement were undertaken by both researchers at each research site over a period of a month. A broad range of classes was observed at each degree level and across different degree subjects. Field notes were taken, drawings made of classrooms and photographic evidence taken of classroom dynamics and interactions. The data were shared and themes drawn up by each member of the research team, then compared and refined. The themes that emerged from the data centred on cultural difference, community, social space, group communication, the bridging of cultural barriers and barriers to participation. Ethics approval followed standard BERA guidelines, and the anonymity of participants was maintained.

Discussion

The data provided evidence of potential barriers to relationality, a lack of participation in social groups and a frustration with others. These barriers and boundaries were not always culturally defined, as the findings suggest that the higher education culture can carry expectations that are often not clearly expressed by institutions and are hence difficult to adjust to. This echoes Thomas's (2002) notion of the persistence of an institutional habitus that many students find it difficult to transition to. The somewhat rarefied language of higher education also resulted in a distancing effect.

This is evidenced in the following first-year student's response to questions about lecturers' communication styles:

> If I've got to be really honest some tutors are really friendly and I like this, because I need it … So I can express more and more. I can ask more questions, more explanations. And there were some tutors, they take you really professionally … and they always keep that distance between me and them and sometimes when I'm stuck I just can't ask them, I just shake my head: Yes, yes, I understand (focus group 2).

These barriers to communication were evidenced in the learning environment between staff and students – there was an acknowledgement that points being made were not understood, and the failure to express this lack of understanding was recognized. Observations confirmed the existence of these barriers. The focus groups affirmed that students often felt distant from their tutors and afraid to ask them either to repeat a point made in class or to provide further explanation. For the students it was their circle of friends, and those with whom they developed a close relationship, that provided support and clarification.

The barriers to learning thus appeared particularly impactful if relationships with others were not developed. Relationships appeared to be formed early in the students' studies, which highlighted the importance of Induction Week or early social activities that enable a community to develop. The following excerpts provide insights into the importance of community for the students in this study:

> I have the feeling, when you go to a lecture everyone is sitting in the same place, talking to the same people and they don't really talk to people beyond that group, they seem not interested because they are not their friends (student A, focus group 10).

> For me it is important to get to know people … what should I do, should I go and ask everyone and ask them which degree they are doing … So I did that, I did that all by myself, I didn't even know who my tutor was. I had to run behind these things and there was no one and no space for interaction (student B, focus group 10).

> For lab work … I chose some people and I work with the same people (student C, focus group 10).

These informal networks and communities were a common feature and were evidenced throughout the interviews and reinforced the distancing effect in terms of the wider learning community: for these students the immediate community was the only one of importance. The data evidenced that the formation of and reliance on early relationships can be seen as a feature of the commuter student's experience. Some commented that they felt that fellow students only cared about themselves; where these relationships had not formed, they found it difficult to cope with.

A relational dynamic, distributed agency and a sense of belonging

Two common themes that emerged from the focus groups were relationships and the development of agency through engaging with others from different cultures. Learning together with students from different cultures was a very positive experience that brought students closer together.

> Mm, I love it! It is one of the reasons I am in London! Because I love diversity, I love to interact with other group! Saying that, I see some people, you know: they don't like to interact with another group. So, you see, for example, one ethnicity group with another, one group with another and then … the odd ones [laughing]. I'm the odd one – the Latino group, you know. You move from one group to another. But, honestly, Germans, they stick with the Germans. And if you do an assignment with the German people they will speak with you in German [laughing]. Because I remember, I did an assignment with the Germans and they would only speak German. And I would speak German by the end of the assignment [laughing], you know, because … 'Yeah, yeah, I agree with you, – Ja, ja!' Because some people, you know, but I think … Because me, I believe you have to mix, interact with everyone, because otherwise you miss out! So I try to get involved with everyone. I don't care. You know, sometime I just come to the group, they sit there … You know. But, saying that, it is quite divided. People would only stick to their own ethnicity I found out … which I don't like. I like people mixing with each other. Because we would learn more from each other. If we actually spent more time talking with each other. We can resolve so many issues just by talking with each other (focus group 4).

This excerpt demonstrates how one particular student recognized the importance of communication and differing communication patterns, and the potential disruption to learning as a consequence of cultural barriers – this student perceived that cooperation with others can be a facet of the learning environment and that cultural barriers needed

to be crossed. There is a reflexive tone with regard to traversing cultural boundaries. This also demonstrates that knowledge acquisition could take place through a relational paradigm – that other students are a source of learning. This acknowledgement of others as a source of learning was threaded throughout the interviews, with this excerpt offering the clearest example of what appears to be an acceptance of the common humanity that forms the basis for cosmopolitan engagement. The respondent refers to herself as the 'odd one', underlining her separation from the German students to whom she makes reference. There is also recognition that the cosmopolitan environment of London generates the potential for cultural fluencies, which this student views as part of her education, expressing the view that not mixing with others would result in a lack of engagement for her.

Bridging barriers and listening to the student voice

Awareness of the complexity of the human condition that may arise from contemporary pluralities can, as Nixon (2013) asserts, lead to a sense of powerlessness and a loss of agency. Nixon asks what relational conditions are necessary for the development of human understanding in pluralistic societies. This focus on building understanding is important in the context of encouraging a will to learn (Barnett, 2007), in an environment where there are challenges to the communication with others: overcoming these challenges is part of becoming a student within a diverse classroom. The will to learn is a fundamental dynamic within the learning process, and yet some students in their first year of study alluded to the dissonance that arises and expressed this challenge in a negative way:

> Yeah, I have such a problem … with the culture … It terrifies me, to be honest. I don't know, if it's me like my … perception of this (focus group 6).

This excerpt demonstrates a common theme arising from the focus groups, that many students felt they were not equipped to deal with or address the cultural differences that they encountered. The powerlessness and loss of agency to which Nixon (2013) alludes was also a theme of the classroom observations. Nixon refers to higher education as playing an important role in securing the future of cosmopolitanism, but this study's data demonstrates that there cannot be a presumption of cosmopolitan engagement. The ability to understand difference and the tools needed to develop relationality between groups point to the need for institutions to consider focusing on building the undergraduate community in a more concrete way, thus permitting the development of agency.

The need for cosmopolitan engagement is promulgated around a notion that students need to develop the skills to bridge barriers that separate different cultural groupings in order to negotiate the classroom environment. Echoing Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*'s work (2015), enhancing communication, together with cultivating social and cultural cohesion between peer groups, would appear to enhance student belonging and thus student outcomes.

Adding further weight to the proposition that there is a need to contextualize engagement in a frame of cosmopolitanism is the link between engagement and outcomes for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*'s (2015) report highlights the potential for differing higher education outcomes for black and ethnic minority students.

Kezar (2014) supports a focus on the development of social networks, which are taking on a stronger role within higher education. She argues that these social networks enable the flow of knowledge across the rigid boundaries often imposed by

the curriculum and that this 'crossing' allows students to collectively take the 'risk' of changing their academic behaviours. Recognition of the benefits of such risk-taking is provided in the following excerpt:

> But on the other hand, especially for us, I would say, it's better to have actually bigger class with more diversity, more different backgrounds, because it's not only working in a class, but also your network, which is probably the most important thing you gonna get from university (focus group 10).

The importance of the social network is evidenced here, and there is recognition that learning is participative and communicative and extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) have carried out an empirical review of the literature on boundary crossing and found that it enriched knowledge. However, they have also found that it can leave people isolated on the periphery, risking not being accepted by the new community. Others (Handley *et al.*, 2006) have also shown that while it is possible to encourage boundary crossing, it is difficult to sustain it, as people are quick to revert to their culturally familiar groupings. Both the benefit of taking a risk with communication and some reflection on reverting to culturally familiar groups are illustrated in the excerpt below:

> And it's important to be different. So I try to stick to [name of friend from Egypt], never changed, even when I went to live in France. Stick with my background, take these ideas, get in my head … Yes sometimes we need to be open-minded and this is what being in a different country push me to do … accept others' ideas and even if I disagree with them … just accept it and yes we are still friends. In the old days when I was in Egypt – no way! If you don't believe in the way I am thinking – no way I am gonna listen to you! (focus group 1).

Again the potential for development and knowledge acquisition is demonstrated here in cultural terms. Lehmann (2007) has shown that first-generation students, and particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, are more likely to leave university because they don't 'feel university'. Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2015) note the importance of institutional interventions in boosting students' sense of belonging and building social and cultural capital, thus enabling them to engage in higher education. For them, such positive interventions are important to address the differential outcomes of groups, particularly black and ethnic minority students; however, they require buy-in from professional services, students and academics.

Students in the focus group interviews commented on the necessity of being part of a group. We asked students about the extent to which they felt they belonged and how they worked with other students:

> that definitely changes how you work in groups, and whether you are in a group with people you know or you don't know. So, even if you have, say, like high social skills, during the group with people you don't know, you feel uncomfortable with … and probably you are not gonna ask a lot of questions, try not to have a lot impact. It depends on surroundings, people you are working with and how comfortable you feel (focus group 10).

Students tended to form groups around their shared experiences, which were often defined by their culture or their course, and the engagement they had with others at the very start of their course. The excerpt below illustrates how groups were formed:

I mean, we are from the same school, we are friends, we hang out outside this course and stuff like that and you discuss this very matter many-many times (student A, focus group 6).

[I think] The people I work with, yeah, they are, and there is only one Scandinavian in my course, so it's always her and then the Central European ones and then the few British girls. Cos but then again, it's kind of neutral because we worked together on our first year (student B, focus group 6).

Where a student sits on the edge of the group, we witnessed that on occasions his or her group membership can be transient – but the student still benefits from the shared learning.

The institutional role

The observational data evidenced clear differences in classroom communication patterns, together with patterns of behaviour that demonstrated distinct levels of engagement. High levels of engagement were observed in classes where the subjects studied employed a strong experiential element. This was most evident in laboratory work for those students studying forensic science: a classroom was converted into a crime scene with yellow danger tape and evidence of a crime which students had to solve collaboratively. These students were dressed as they would be for a 'real' crime scene (Figure 1) and exhibited visible relationality, with a focus on the group task rather than their differences. The importance of real-world experience as a high-impact pedagogical approach has been highlighted by Evans *et al.* (2015). In our observations we witnessed that separation based on the social dynamics of each group was not as palpable here as in other classes. This was evidenced by the visual data:

Figure 1: Forensic science students working on a collaborative task, February 2013 – photograph by the authors

This type of learning activity demonstrated the most engaged students: although groups were mixed both in terms of gender and cultural background, dressing in the same way appeared to dissolve the differences. Such an activity can be seen as offering a learning environment that encourages cosmopolitanism and high levels of engagement, as well as evidencing the bridging of cultural barriers. These barriers appeared more easily overcome when there was a strong experiential element to the learning environment.

The pedagogical approach in both institutions and across all subjects revealed attempts by tutors to engage students by posing questions in class; however, at neither institution was an attempt made to engage with the cultural plurality of the groups. In the business subjects the group work evidenced cultural challenges and potential stereotyping:

> for me putting lots of foreign people together is my worst nightmare because I am afraid of getting a panic attack because foreign people at a presentation together … just doesn't happen/work (focus group 6).

This was not an isolated comment and offers evidence of the challenges that students have in understanding cultural others' communication patterns. It was one of the challenges to the learning environment that can be seen as culturally framed and that suggests the need for more involved management by tutors in order to breach the barriers that are presented.

There was little variation in pedagogy or evidence of culturally responsive approaches to culturally plural classrooms in either institution, even though the tutors themselves were from different cultural backgrounds. While tutors demonstrated awareness of the cultural plurality of the classroom, they expressed concern that too little was known about the effects of students' differing cultural backgrounds on the classroom experience. It appeared that some tutors recognized that institutions were facing many challenges to improve equal opportunities for students and that higher education was due a cultural change.

Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using cultural knowledge, prior experiences and the performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. The data from this study did not evidence culturally responsive teaching approaches. However, it did evidence students' awareness of the need to traverse cultural boundaries as well as how they question the lack of support from their institutions in enabling such boundary crossing.

When asked about cultural differences in focus groups, the students admitted to forming friendships very early on in their courses and that these initial groupings changed little during the course of their studies.

> We take care of her [a friend] but they [the university and staff] don't … they don't consider ethnic or religious backgrounds (focus group 10).

The statement here reinforces the notion placed by students on the importance of friendships and care towards their fellow students. Generally, focus groups clearly expressed the view that the university should be aware of and consider the differences in students' backgrounds; this was a theme of the interviews. Students felt little was done to help them in traversing the barriers that they identified, other than universities offering a few activities at the start of their courses. Some of those initial activities led students to form groups or communities that lasted throughout their courses.

Conclusion

Our study has found that students from different cultural backgrounds appear motivated to engage at university but there is a lack of relationality among different groups, which we suggest affects their sense of belonging. Our findings have evidenced how students' habits of co-existence may prevent them from developing relationships in culturally plural environments, which in turn affects their engagement. We suggest that institutions need to do more to understand the ways in which the cultural make-up of their student bodies affects engagement and the need to facilitate students' relationality in order to enhance learning. The impact of culturally plural classrooms on engagement was, according to students, a widespread concern where a lack of communication with others in the classroom was apparent. Rather than being imbued with an institutional or course identity, which facilitates active participation, some felt 'othered' and displayed a sense of separation.

This echoes the work of Holley *et al.* (2014) and Pokorny *et al.* (2016), who both discuss the difficulties that students from ethnic minority backgrounds have in developing a sense of belonging in a university environment where commuter students compose the majority of the student body. Those who communicate across cultural barriers employ traversing skills, and our findings here suggest that institutions do not facilitate their navigation of different cultural groupings or their communication across these cultural groups.

The data from this study have confirmed that students are unlikely to express their lack of understanding in class and that cultural difference increases the potential for non-engagement with the institution and potentially with peers. Others have also observed that students are placed at risk of not engaging when educators are careless in their approach to the issue of engagement (Quaye and Harper, 2015). The importance of high-impact pedagogies that use 'real-world' examples and simulations enables stronger communication between students in this study, and has been highlighted by Evans *et al.* (2015) as an effective approach to engaging students. Cosmopolitan engagement might therefore be viewed as a high-impact pedagogical approach to the learning environment. It is suggested that institutions need to look at ways of establishing a sense of community among students both inside and outside the classroom. In order to encourage cosmopolitan engagement, communication across diverse groups of students needs to be encouraged and activities that facilitate such communication embedded in the curriculum.

Field notes and visual data have demonstrated that students tend to self-segregate into cultural and gender groups, particularly in science laboratories. Students themselves have commented on this in interviews. In business subjects we have witnessed how group work can provide cultural learning; however, this rarely appears to be intentional and has the potential to result in negative as well as positive experiences and, in some cases, a potential for cultural stereotyping. The data suggests a 'distancing' effect between students rather than an educational environment that encourages relationality: an environment where the cultural plurality of the classroom reinforces potential dissonance rather than promoting the exploitation of learning opportunities. The findings suggest that a lack of cultural engagement among students is prevalent and that this affects their engagement with their studies.

The data have provided evidence of the need to focus on the existential parameters of higher education, recognizing the potential of the heterogeneity of engagement for individuals while also acknowledging the challenges the same phenomenon presents. These challenges can be met if attention is shifted to facilitate

the relationality between students from different backgrounds, bridging barriers and building resilience. This then encourages the will to learn, rather than the dissonance that may arise from a lack of understanding of different communication patterns. In essence, the ability to communicate with others, irrespective of cultural background and native language, can be seen as cosmopolitan engagement. It is argued that universities should attempt to address students' differing communication patterns as part of the curriculum and recognize the impact on learning the cultural plurality of their student cohorts. The opportunities for enriching the learning experience, building on students' cultural differences and developing a cosmopolitan ethos appear to be too easily overlooked.

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